Here There Be Dragons: The Korean War and American Military Response in the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

Starting in June 1950, the Korean War marked the beginning of a new era of warfare. The first limited war to take place in the nuclear age amid increasing Cold War tensions, Korea raised numerous questions of how the U.S. would interact with the Soviet Union in the new international climate. In this climate, both sides strove to maintain the world’s balance of power. Small shifts in that balance, such as in Korea, assumed great importance, forcing the U.S. to act in areas not previously considered vital.

Despite the need for a firm response, U.S. actions in Korea were tempered by influences such as atomic weapons, diminished military force, communist expansion, and containment. All of these factors were amplified by the pervasive Cold War mentality of mutual fear and distrust. The course of the Korean War further intensified these suspicions, setting a precedent for U.S. actions throughout the Cold War.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my fiancé Phillip. His unfailing love and encouragement are such a blessing. I also dedicate it to my parents, Marla and John, and my church family. Their support has been invaluable. This is for them.
“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

I could never have accomplished this on my own, and am deeply indebted to the many people who have helped me reach this point. I would like to thank my committee at Clemson University, Dr. Edwin Moïse, Dr. Alan Grubb, and Dr. Donald McKale. I greatly enjoyed the time in their classes, and appreciate all their guidance on this thesis. I am also very grateful for their flexibility in working with me this semester. I would also like to thank my undergraduate history professors at Erskine College, particularly Dr. Jim Gettys, Dr. Sandra Chaney, and Dr. David Grier. They helped me realize the joy of both the discovery and the recounting of history, and for that I am forever grateful. Most of all I would like to thank my Savior Jesus Christ. It is only through His grace and mercy that I am here. To Him be all the glory.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF MAPS</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I: FORMULA FOR A CRISIS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II: FIRE ON THE SNOW</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III: THE INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Atomic Question</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communist Influence on the Korean Conflict</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV: THE UNOFFICIAL LIMITED WAR</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: ESTABLISHING A PRECEDENT</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF MAPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maps</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Balance of Power in East Central Asia, 1950</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. MacArthur’s Areas of Defense</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a. Pusan Perimeter, August 1950</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b. Pusan Perimeter, September 1950</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. U.N. Advance to the Yalu, 24 November 1950</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chinese Communist Advance, 26 November to 15 December 1950</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION
LOOKING BACK AND LOOKING FORWARD

We didn't have any [advance] information on this at all. It was a complete surprise to me as it was to nearly everybody else even all over the world. Nobody thought any such thing would take place. I didn't think so. [The Commander in the Far East General Douglas] MacArthur didn't think so. I didn't know of anybody else who did. Then we had to meet the situation when it came up… Keep your minds open and be ready for whatever comes to meet it in the proper manner at that time and don't try to live in the past. Look to the future but use the past as a basis on which to figure out what you want to do in the future.

-- Harry S Truman, December 1961

It has been called the forgotten war. In the late twentieth century, it was overshadowed by such events as the Vietnam War, the space and arms races, and the continuing threat of nuclear war. However, the war that began in 1950 would have long lasting implications on warfare in general, and particularly on interactions during the early years of the Cold War. The Korean War highlighted many of the changes in the international picture and mentality that had taken place since the end of World War II five years earlier. These changes were, on the whole, indicative of the mounting tensions between the Soviet Union and the non-communist world, tensions which would establish a manner of interaction that would be seen for the next forty years.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of the Korean War was the way the mentalities of those involved with its execution differed from World War II. Part of the difference in mindset stemmed from the new issues in question. One

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1 Harry S Truman, Talent Associates Fort Leavenworth Interview (15 December 1961), Papers of Merle Miller, available online <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/korea62550.htm#hst1.1>. Brackets in original text.
of the most obvious concerned atomic weapons. It was not until the last months of World War II that policymakers had such weapons to incorporate into battle plans. By the time the Korean War began, on the other hand, the U.S. had embarked upon a program of developing a hydrogen bomb, and the Soviet Union had successfully exploded its first atomic weapon. Each side was also clearly continuing development.

Another difference concerned the extent to which the U.S. would intervene in Korea. In World War II, the U.S. joined other Allies whose goal was to force the unconditional surrender of Germany and Japan. With Korea, however, unconditional surrender ceased to be an option. Much of the mounting tensions centered on the question of the balance of power between the communist and non-communist worlds. This balance extended into peripheral areas of influence, such as Korea. Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union were determined at least to maintain, if not increase, their areas of influence. The common belief at the time was that the Soviet Union had this goal as part of its fundamental makeup. The U.S. therefore was acting to defend non-communist areas of the world from that inherent threat.2

In addition to the concern over the balance of power, another issue restricting U.S. action in Korea was that neither the U.S. nor the Soviet Union wanted to embark upon another war similar to the one that had just ended. Along with the magnified threat that came with mutual development of increasingly sophisticated nuclear weapons, there was considerable belief that they would be

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2 See George F. Kennan’s writings for this perspective, among many others. Also see Chapter II for more information on this perspective, as connected to the policy of containment.
used in any large-scale conflict. Even though policymakers in the late 1940s did not attribute to the weapons the same kind of destructive power as was seen a decade later,\(^3\) it was still clear that using these weapons would represent a fundamental—and dangerous—shift in international diplomacy.

These and other considerations prevented the Korean War from unfolding as World War II had done. Also for political and strategic reasons, the U.S. limited its involvement in Korea. This in itself was significant. Although wars on a limited scale were not unheard of before 1950, Korea marked the first time such a conflict was carried out among nations whose military strategies were largely centered on the use of atomic weapons. Even after it became apparent that using nuclear weapons in an environment such as Korea would be less practical than policymakers originally assumed, the threat posed by nuclear weapons nonetheless remained a primary concern of international communication.\(^4\)

The U.S. also restricted its involvement for practical reasons. As will be seen, the U.S. military had gone through fairly drastic demobilization following World War II. This was compounded by the severe budget cuts President Harry Truman and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson imposed on the services. One of the challenges in Korea was thus how to respond effectively, but at a level the U.S. could maintain. Part of the challenge came from the limited nature of the war itself. Policymakers believed the U.S. could remobilize. This was only likely, however, if the U.S. became involved in a long-term war: the extended period

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\(^4\) For some of the complexities of using the atomic bomb, see Chapters III and IV.
would provide the necessary time for remobilization. Since Korea was a limited war, both in duration and location, it required new strategy. It was a strategy that was tested when Communist Chinese forces entered the war en masse in November 1950. The U.S. did not want to become embroiled in a war with Communist China, but international pressures raised the question of whether the U.S. needed to respond to push back the new forces.

In the years leading up to the war, the U.S. had developed a relatively comprehensive policy of containment to deal with the potentially expanding communist threat. Although this policy was fluid, and did not have strict guidelines even at the height of its influence, it nonetheless had a very significant impact on U.S. international relations. Korea became one of the key examples of the United States’ use of containment.

Korea also became particularly significant because of its implications for future warfare, in which the potential use of atomic weapons was balanced with a need to respond to international developments in a measured way. Although many policymakers understood the underlying desire of containment—to prevent communist expansion and the resulting shift in the balance of power—the developing Cold War environment and question of new weapons made it clear

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6 Throughout this paper, Communist China is referred to as both “Communist China” and “China.” Nationalist China is always identified as such.

7 Containment was not limited to a single version, either. For a full discussion of the complexities and challenges of containment, see Chapter II.
that any new conflict would be substantially different from previous ones. As
historian John Lewis Gaddis explained,

Korea determined how hot wars, during the Cold War, were to be fought. The rule quickly became that neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would confront the other directly or use all available force; each would seek instead to confine such confrontations within the theaters in which they had originated. This pattern of cooperation among bitter antagonists could hardly have emerged had it not been for the existence, on both sides, of nuclear weapons. …

The taboo on the use of nuclear weapons in limited wars—indeed the very notion of a ‘limited’ war itself—had not yet taken root: the Korean War defined these principles, but there was little reason to expect, when it broke out, that its conduct would reflect them. That it did so stemmed from what the world’s most experienced nuclear power learned about the kind of warfare its new weapons had now made possible.8

Thus policymakers, many of whom were familiar with the mentality behind wars like World War II, had to adapt to an entirely new set of guidelines and assumptions in the new era.

One additional consideration for any examination of Korea—indeed almost any Cold War interaction—was the prevalent mentality of the time. The degree to which fears and assumptions about the Soviet Union and its intentions affected U.S. policymakers can hardly be overemphasized. There were many times when these fears were not grounded in—and in some cases were directly contradicted by—available evidence. Nonetheless, that did not stop those underlying ideas from affecting policy decisions. One of the most common anxieties was the association policymakers made between communism in general and Soviet communism in particular. Such an association had distinct implications when determining permissible or necessary actions. In Korea, this was evident in the way policymakers made decisions about American

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8 Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 104-105.
involvement: more often than not, such decisions were made on the basis of their relationship to Soviet, and not North Korean, actions and intentions.

Korea thus proved to be the first true “hot” battlefield of the Cold War. The decisions and assumptions shaping U.S. entry into and involvement in the war had lasting impacts. These beliefs illustrated a remarkably rapid shift from the mentality that had existed in World War II. The events, people, and ideas that influenced the U.S. prior to the war’s outbreak greatly impacted how the U.S. became involved in the war, and in many ways how the U.S. interacted with the Soviet Union through much of the next forty years.
In the hours and days after North Korea invaded South Korea, the United States became involved in a conflict that would distinctly change the shape of the U.S. position in the Cold War. In World War II, the U.S. did not officially enter the fighting until two years after the war began. In contrast, the U.S. began acting in Korea a matter of days after the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel. The speed with which the U.S. became involved in the Korean War demonstrated some of the effects of the growing tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. Despite its position on the periphery of the United States’ defensive perimeter, Korea quickly became a focal point of Cold War tension and the U.S. struggle to keep Soviet communism from expanding. Though by 1950 the U.S. was in a recognized position of military and economic strength, its involvement in the Korean conflict was not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, though the U.S. decision to act in Korea conformed with its emerging policies toward the Soviet Union, it was nonetheless a distinct shift from patterns of U.S. foreign involvement in the first few years after World War II.

The United States’ decision to support South Korea militarily was brought about by a variety of changes throughout the world in the months before June

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9 The U.S. had divided areas of the Far East into vital and non-vital areas. The vital areas were generally considered to be Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines; though the U.S. supported South Korea, it was not generally considered part of the U.S. defensive perimeter.
1950. In the years immediately following the end of World War II, a fragile balance had developed between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Each country had areas of influence it sought to maintain. The growth of tension with the Soviet Union manifested itself through much of the world and created an environment in which each side felt compelled to act against the other. In many cases, influence became an end itself, which, along with the growing enmity between the U.S. and Soviet Union, gave importance to areas of the world not previously considered crucial to national security. This impact was critical, since in this new context, any shift in power or influence represented a potentially major change in the international picture.

American actions in the days immediately following North Korea’s attacks were taken largely to demonstrate America’s unwillingness to allow Soviet influence and power to extend beyond its then-current borders. Within hours of North Korean aggression, the U.S. was setting in motion procedures and policies that demonstrated its resolve to hold Soviet power in place. The speed and decisiveness of American action represented more a willingness to consider Korea’s significance in terms of the potential impact on Cold War relations if the Republic of Korea (ROK) fell to the communist Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and less a conviction of Korea’s importance to the U.S. defensive perimeter.
Shattering the Land of the Morning Calm

Border skirmishes and the threat of further violence were not uncommon in Korea in the late 1940s. These clashes across the 38th parallel increased throughout 1949, especially after the U.S. withdrew its forces at the end of June that year. However, the North Korean attack still came as a surprise to the United States. The U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, John Muccio, described in a 1971 interview the challenges when trying to interpret North Korean threats.

[T]here had been constant posturing, bluffing, of one kind of another… particularly from the north, during this whole period from the end of ’47 until the spring of 1950. We knew of the military material build-up in the north, but it was hard to determine whether this was additional posturing or whether they actually had some action in mind… That’s where the uncertainty was.10

Additionally, many of the top officials were out of Washington on the weekend of 24-25 June, including President Harry Truman. The attacks began in the pre-dawn hours of 25 June 1950 (Korean time), and Muccio reported the invasion to Secretary of State Dean Acheson soon after. Muccio, who had been aware of the many skirmishes in the past year, described the early-morning North Korean attack as an unmistakable act of aggression against South Korea. He reported North Korean attacks at multiple points across the 38th parallel, including an amphibious landing on the east coast. Muccio believed the scope and nature of the North Korean attack “constitute[d] an all-out offensive against the Republic of Korea.”11


11 John Muccio, “The American Ambassador in Korea to the Secretary of State,” (Received in Department of State 24 June 1950, 9:26 p.m. [EDT]), in United States, Department of State Publication 3922, United States
Muccio’s cable reached former Senator Warren Austin, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. Austin discussed the situation with Acheson and recommended the United Nations Security Council be called for an emergency meeting. Authorized by Acheson, Austin’s deputy Ernest Gross contacted the U.N., calling for an emergency meeting of the Security Council. He first read Muccio’s original cable to U.N. Secretary General Trygve Lie in the early morning hours of 25 June and cabled him the text of the report, plus the call for the emergency meeting, later that morning.

Around the same time, the Security Council received a cable from the United Nations Commission on Korea (UNCOK). This cable gave a more extensive overview of the North Korean attack locations, explaining that the situation was “assuming character of full-scale war and may endanger the maintenance of international peace and security.” Despite the appearance of an all-out war, there was no official declaration from North Korea. A teletype conference between the Far East Command (under General Douglas MacArthur) and the Pentagon drew attention to the rumor of war from Pyongyang, though they had not been able to substantiate it. Additionally, UNCO’s cable stated that no confirmation had yet been found, and the President (presumably ROK

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President Syngman Rhee, although this is not made clear) was “not treating the broadcast as official notice.”

Acheson sent a draft resolution to the U.N., which adopted it with little change. Acheson explained that “[a]n early draft of our resolution determined that the ‘armed attack on the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea’ constituted an ‘unprovoked act of aggression.’” Since there was as yet no conclusive evidence of this, the Security Council believed it would be better to change the wording to a “‘breach of the peace.’” This was the language adopted in the final U.N. resolution of 25 June 1950 which called for North Korea to withdraw its forces to the 38th parallel and to cease hostilities. The only action from member nations the U.N. called for at this time was “to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution and to refrain from giving assistance to the North Korean authorities.”

The U.S. had been directly involved with South Korea since the Japanese were defeated in 1945, mostly providing economic, organizational, and some defensive aid. Although U.S. troops had been withdrawn by the middle of 1949, Korea still fell under the protection of the U.S.-initiated Mutual Defense Assistance Program. This program was established to “promote the foreign policy and provide for the defense and general welfare of the United States by furnishing military assistance to foreign nations.” The program authorized the U.S. to help

15 “United Nations Commission on Korea to the Secretary General,” in U.S., Department of State, United States Policy in the Korean Crisis, 12; “The Deputy Representative of the United States to the United Nations (Gross) to the Secretary-General,” [UN doc. S/1495], (New York, 25 June 1950), in U.S., Department of State, United States Policy in the Korean Crisis, 11-12.
16 Acheson, Korean War, 18.
17 Ibid.
countries, in this case the Republic of Korea, become self-sufficient in their defense. Further, the U.S. President, “whenever the furnishing of such assistance will further the purposes and policies of this Act, is authorized to furnish military assistance as provided in this Act to…the Republic of Korea…”

President Truman returned from Missouri on 25 June, and that evening met at the Blair House with Acheson, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson (who had recently returned from Tokyo), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and other senior advisors. The discussion at the meeting demonstrated the importance of Korea to U.S. Cold War policy as a whole. General Omar N. Bradley, the Chairman of the JCS (CJCS), said that a line needed to be drawn, and that “[t]he Korean situation offered as good an occasion for action in drawing the line as anywhere else…” Truman agreed with that conclusion. Admiral Forrest P. Sherman, Chief of Naval Operations, pointed out that “[t]he present situation in Korea offers a valuable opportunity for us to act.”

Secretary of the Army Frank Pace recounted his opinion in a 1972 interview. “I told [Truman] that I felt that this was more than just a matter of Korea, that the Russians were testing, and if we allowed this test to go unchecked that they would undoubtedly take bigger steps and this would involve us again in

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20 Ibid., 959.
21 “Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador at Large (Jessup),” Top Secret, Limited Distribution [795.00/6-2550], “Subject: Korean Situation,” (Washington, 25 June 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 158.
bigger problems. If we were going to stop this thrust, now was the time to do it and that we ought to undertake to do so.”

Truman ordered measures to be taken that established a U.S. military response in Korea. Among these were orders for supplies to be sent to the Koreans, for MacArthur to send a survey group to Korea, and for certain elements of the U.S. Pacific fleet to be sent to Japan. In Truman’s statement of 26 June about the conclusions of the previous night’s meeting, he acknowledged that the U.S. would continue its previous programs, and make sure aid was expedited where possible. Significantly, he ended his statement: “Those responsible for this act of aggression must realize how seriously the Government of the United States views such threats to the peace of the world. Willful disregard of the obligation to keep the peace cannot be tolerated by nations that support the United Nations Charter.”

The U.S. was clearly unwilling to tolerate any kind of Soviet (or any communist) advances, in Korea or elsewhere. However, the need for a clear response was tempered by a necessary measure of caution, so as not to provoke the Soviet Union. Even before Truman met with officials on 25 June, it is clear that many in Washington were convinced of the importance of a firm U.S. stance. One major reason for this was the balance of power. Acheson explained the importance the President and others placed on maintaining that balance and the United States’ place in it.

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24 “Statement by the President, June 26, 1950,” in U.S., Department of State, United States Policy in the Korean Crisis, 16-17 (quote from 17).
Plainly, this attack did not amount to a *casus belli* against the Soviet Union. Equally plainly, it was an open, undisguised challenge to our internationally accepted position as the protector of South Korea, an area of great importance to the security of American-occupied Japan. To back away from this challenge, in view of our capacity for meeting it, would be highly destructive of the power and prestige of the United States. By prestige I mean the shadow cast by power, which is of great deterrent importance. Therefore, we could not accept the conquest of this important area by a Soviet puppet under the very guns of our defensive perimeter with no more resistance than words and gestures in the Security Council. It looked as though we must steel ourselves for the use of force. That did not mean, in words used later by General Mark Clark, that we must be prepared ‘to shoot the works for victory,’ but rather to see that the attack failed.  

Acheson’s statement reflected his opinion after meeting with Truman on 25 June. Truman, however, had already reached many of the same conclusions.

I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors. If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war. It was also clear to me that the foundations and the principles of the United Nations were at stake unless this unprovoked attack on Korea could be stopped.

Part of the balance of power question centered on the geography of the Far East. Once China became communist in late 1949, it appeared there was an even greater threat to U.S.-influenced areas such as Korea and Japan. In 1946 the Soviet Union had reconfirmed its commitment to “maintaining and improving Armed Forces…on [the] ground that forces of ‘Fascism and reaction’ are still alive in [the] world, in ‘bourgeois democracies’ and elsewhere.”  

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27 “The Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State,” Confidential [861.00/2-1246: Telegram], (Moscow, 12 February 1946, 3 p.m.), in *FRUS: 1946, Volume VI: Eastern Europe; the Soviet Union*, Department of State Publication 8470 (Washington, U.S. GPO, 1969), 695.
Nitze, the Director of the Policy Planning Staff, explained that the Soviet threat had not diminished since 1946. Moreover, “particularly…in the present international situation great stakes are involved in any USSR move, and any move directly or indirectly affects the U.S. and risks counter action.”28 This was crucial in East Asia, since its geography seemed to aid the communist pressures. (See Map 1.) Officials believed communism was on the move in Asia, with areas including Korea and Japan as its targets.29 In light of these threats, holding Korea, and particularly uniting it under U.N. authority, became extremely important, both to Asia and the world as a whole.30

It was in this climate that Truman met with advisors to determine the U.S. response. Most believed North Korea would not comply with the U.N. call for ceasefire and withdrawal. However, the prospect of North Korean aggression was nothing new. The U.S. had considered an attack by North Korea a threat ever since the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops in the summer of 1949. Although it knew the Soviet Union and North Korea had the capability to launch an attack, the U.S. had not believed the skirmishes throughout late 1949 and early 1950 indicated such an attack was imminent.31

29 “The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom,” Top Secret [795.00/7-1050], (Washington, 10 July 1950, 5 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 349.
30 “Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of Defense for National Security Council Staff Consideration Only,” Top Secret [795.00/8-750], “U.S. Courses of Action in Korea,” (Washington, 7 August 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 532; the global benefits to holding back communism have been well documented elsewhere.

“It was known that the prospective enemy (in this instance, the Soviet Union and its satellites) was quite capable of launching an attack in Korea (as in many other parts of the world). But evidences of an intention to attack at a specific time and place, however clear they looked when illuminated by hindsight, were difficult, at the time, to separate from mere ‘noise.’”  

Nevertheless, once the attack happened, it was clear the U.S. had to respond. In his memoirs, Truman

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33 Schnabel and Watson, 23. References to Soviet satellites (plural) from this time seem to be including China: many sources refer to the Soviet Union exerting its influence over China, or China’s obligations to the Soviet Union.
stated that during his discussions with State and Defense officials one thing that
stood out to him was “the complete, almost unspoken acceptance on the part of
everyone that whatever had to be done to meet this aggression had to be done.
There was no suggestion from anyone that either the United Nations or the United
States could back away from it.”34 In order for the U.S. to maintain its position in
relation to the Soviet Union, it had to respond to the growing conflict quickly and
decisively. Since the end of World War II, the U.S. had built both its image and
foreign policy on a basis of resisting potential communist threats. The decision to
act was, as Truman understood it, a “test of all the talk of the last five years of
collective security.”35

The Crucial Decisions

Beginning with the decision to call on the United Nations to speak out
against the North Korean invasion, the Truman administration made a number of
key decisions that would distinctly shape the United States’ involvement in Korea
in the coming three years. As has been pointed out, the U.N. resolution of 25 June
called for a ceasefire and a withdrawal of North Korea’s forces to the 38th parallel.
It quickly became clear over the next two days that this resolution was not going
to be sufficient. Not only did North Korea not respond, it continued pressing its
attacks. In the growing instability, Truman made it clear that the U.S. would not
stand for the continued aggression, either by itself, or as a member of the United
Nations. In a statement on 27 June, Truman explained the significance of the

35 Ibid.
North Korean attack and why it necessitated an American response. “The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. It has defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security.”

Such a call for active response was not limited to President Truman or his administration alone. As Truman reported in his memoirs, John Foster Dulles, then in Tokyo, had the same impression. Dulles had sent a memo back to the U.S. and it was shown to President Truman after the 25 June meeting. Dulles believed there was a chance

‘that the South Koreans may themselves contain and repulse attack, and, if so, this is the best way. If, however, it appears they cannot do so then we believe that US force should be used even though this risks Russian counter moves. To sit by while Korea is overrun by unprovoked armed attack would start disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war.’

The memo then recommended the U.N. Security Council call its five powers, “‘or such of them as are willing to respond,’” to action against North Korea.

On 27 June, the United Nations carried out this recommendation, issuing a resolution calling for the members of the U.N. to “furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore

37 “Mr. John Foster Dulles and Mr. John Allison to the Secretary of State and Assistant Secretary Rusk,” (Tokyo, 25 June 1950), discussed in Truman, Memoirs, Vol. 2, 336 (an image of the telegram can be found online at TPML, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/week1/elsy_3_1.htm>.)
international peace and security in the area.”\textsuperscript{38} This was a significant decision, and it dovetailed with the overall tenor of Western opinion toward the communist invasion.

Strictly speaking, U.S. military actions in Korea were initiated before the 27 June U.N. resolution. At the 25 June Blair House meeting, Acheson presented Truman with a list of recommendations for action in Korea. One conclusion recommended General MacArthur “supply South Korea with such arms and other equipment as is available to him and which in his judgment is important to support the South Korean defense effort.”\textsuperscript{39} Another authorized MacArthur to use air and naval forces at his discretion to protect airfields and port cities used for evacuation.\textsuperscript{40} Some of these areas included the ROK capital Seoul, Kimpo Air Base, and the port of Inchon. According to the JCS history, Truman communicated these authorizations to MacArthur on 25 June.\textsuperscript{41} These areas, along with the southeast port city of Pusan, which Truman soon authorized MacArthur to protect, were crucial for evacuating Americans (which took place shortly after the fighting began), and remained vital throughout the war. (See Map 2.)

\textsuperscript{39} “Points Requiring Presidential Decision,” (25 June 1950), summarized by Secretary of State Acheson at 25 June Blair House meeting, Papers of George M. Elsey, available online at TPML, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/week1/elsy_5_1.htm>.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Schnabel and Watson, 35.
On 26 June Truman announced the U.S. decision to support the U.N. resolution. Though the initial response would fall under the auspices of the Mutual Defense Assistance Program, the U.S. would eventually become fully militarily committed. On 29 June the JCS sent a telegram to MacArthur, authorizing him to use U.S. air and naval forces to “support South Korean forces by attack on military targets so as to permit these forces to clear South Korea of North Korean forces.” MacArthur was also authorized to use limited army forces

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43 “Statement by the President,” (26 June 1950), Papers of Harry S Truman, President’s Secretary’s Files, available online at TPML, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/week1/kw_11_1.htm>.
to protect the southern port of Pusan. Although the directive allowed MacArthur to extend some of his air and naval operations into North Korea—and then only if it “became essential”—he was instructed to “stay well clear” of the borders of Manchuria and the Soviet Union.

MacArthur sent a reply to Acheson the next day. In his telegram, MacArthur explained the severe deficiencies in ROK armed forces, which suffered from fewer supplies and less training than their northern counterparts. Combined with such inadequacies, the forces Truman had thus far authorized were insufficient. MacArthur explained, “[t]he only assurance for the holding of the present line, and the ability to regain later the lost ground, is through the introduction of U.S. ground combat forces into the Korean battle area. To continue to utilize the forces of our air and navy without an effective ground element cannot be decisive.”

After meeting with officials, including Acheson and the JCS, Truman authorized MacArthur to use ground forces under his command in combat. Members of the 24th Infantry Division were thus “rushed to the front lines to slow down the Communist advance…”

Truman’s decision for direct military action illustrated the broader Cold War aspect of the fighting in Korea. In addition to the Cold War context for protecting Korea, U.S. military action on the peninsula was directly related to commitments elsewhere in the Far East. The JCS telegram to MacArthur, for

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44 “The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur),” Top Secret, Emergency [795.00/6-2950: Telegram], (Washington, 29 June 1950, 6:59 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 240.
46 “The Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur), to the Secretary of State,” Top Secret, Priority [795.00/6-3050: Telegram], (Tokyo, 30 June 1950, 12:50 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 248-249 (quote from 249).
example, authorized the use of ground forces “subject only to requirements for safety of Japan in the present situation…”48 Truman also stationed the Seventh Fleet off Taiwan (Formosa) where the Chinese Nationalists were located. This was a preventive measure against potential action from mainland (Communist) China, and was taken solely as a U.S. action, separate from U.N.-associated actions in Korea.49 Truman also authorized increased military aid in the Philippines and French Indochina.50 Such extensive involvement in these areas was necessitated, many in Washington felt, because anything less than a strong, very solid response would invite Soviet actions in other peripheral nations both in Europe and Asia.

Communications with the Soviet Union complicated interactions in the early days of the war. On 27 June the U.S. requested that the Soviet Union “use its influence with the North Koreans to have them withdraw. The Soviet Union refused.”51 In a 29 June telegram to Acheson, Ambassador Alan Kirk detailed his meeting with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. According to Gromyko, the Soviet Union claimed the attacks had been instigated by South Korea, and that the Soviet Union would “[adhere] to the principle of the impermissibility of interference by foreign powers in the internal affairs of

48 “The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur),” Top Secret, Emergency [795.00/6-3050; Telegram], (Washington, 30 June 1950, 1:22 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 263.
49 Truman, Memoirs, Vol. 2, 337-338. The threat from Communist China and the strategic value of Formosa will be discussed later in this chapter.
51 “Address by the President, July 19, 1950,” in United States, Department of State Publication 4263, United States Policy in the Korean Conflict: July 1950-February 1951, Far Eastern Series 44 (Division of Publications, Office of Public Affairs, 1951), 10. The reference to 27 June comes from the footnote of “The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State,” Top Secret [795.00/6-2750; Telegram], (Moscow, 27 June 1950, 6 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 204.
Korea.”52 By removing the responsibility for the attack from the North Koreans, the Soviet Union dissociated itself from the fighting, and therefore from any responsibility it might bear for trying to end the conflict. Such a response also allowed the Soviet Union remarkable leeway in determining its future actions in Korea, and in deciding how it would publicly interpret events on the peninsula. As Kirk explained, “[The] [l]anguage [in the] Soviet statement seem[ed] to us carefully drafted to include numerous ambiguities which [the] Soviets could utilize in [the] future as [a] basis either for strong Soviet reaction to support [of] North Korea or to eschew any direct involvement.”53 Such ambiguity made the U.S. task of interpretation much more difficult.

Instead of indicating a strong stance, some historians believe the U.S. request for Soviet action actually undermined the U.S. position on communist expansion. One such account explained that the Soviet Union may actually have been tempted to withdraw from the conflict in Korea, but was able to avoid this for a number of reasons, one of which was the U.S. request for the Soviet Union to renounce any involvement. The request “relieved the Soviets of any apprehension of an immediate confrontation,” and allowed the Soviets to refuse any request for attempts to convince North Korea to stop. “Moscow gravely declared this was beyond its powers and would constitute meddling in the affairs of a sovereign state.”54 Similarly, some believe the Soviet Union’s consequent

52 “The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State,” Confidential [795.00/6-2950: Telegram], (Moscow, 29 June 1950, 6 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 229.
53 “The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State,” Top Secret [795.00/6-3050: Telegram], (Moscow, 30 June 1950, noon), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 253.
ability to remove itself from responsibility actually increased the United States’ eventual level of involvement.

The policy of not implicating the USSR directly may have been motivated by more than an estimate of the importance of the prestige factor in Soviet policy. … The nonhostile and ‘correct’ American approach to the USSR might, indeed, have been exaggerated by a conscious or unconscious desire not to provoke the Politburo into further aggressions. And, consequently, American cooperation in Soviet face-saving may have taken an exaggerated form which inadvertently undermined the objective of securing an immediate Communist withdrawal in Korea.55

It is therefore likely that instead of demonstrating a firm stance against communist aggression (a stance which, at its base, was concerned with Soviet, not North Korean, actions), the U.S. request indirectly encouraged the Soviets to continue acting in Korea. This makes sense if Stalin was concerned the U.S. might initiate attacks against the Soviet Union or Soviet-held territory.56 Some historians believe the request was viewed as a relatively clear indication that the U.S. would not necessarily pursue war: the North Koreans had invaded, and the U.S. had not immediately responded with force. It is unclear to what extent this affected the fighting itself, since the Soviet Union was extending aid to the North Koreans both before and during the war, and had clearly committed to helping the North Korean effort. Considering such involvement, it is doubtful the U.S. would have remained out of the conflict even if the Soviet Union had complied with the original request. The Soviet Union also calculated its movements, however, and there is no doubt its decision to place responsibility on the ROK was made with

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56 As will be seen in Chapter III, part of Stalin’s hesitation in supporting North Korean leader Kim Il Sung’s attack came from fear of American aggression.
discussion of potential U.S. response. Such a situation is indicative of the complex relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union on the eve of the war. Virtually no U.S. action was taken without consideration of its effect—real or perceived—on Soviet actions. This intricate relationship between the two centers of power and their areas of influence in the world would prove extremely influential in U.S. actions in Korea.

Perhaps the most significant decision made in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, however, dealt with overall U.S. strategy. Military defense of Korea and Taiwan was not initially part of the U.S. Far East defense strategy, and such a notable departure had distinct implications. The way the U.S. was unprepared for the North Korean attack, combined with the overall tensions of the late 1940s, helped lead to this departure. One account, based in part on Senate hearings conducted in 1951, explained:

Employment of US forces in the defense of South Korea had been ruled out on the grounds of its low strategic importance to American military security. Evidently no thought was given to the possibility that other considerations might require such a commitment. And yet it was precisely these other considerations which became paramount in the days following June 25.  

The decisions to involve the U.S. military actively in Korea and the expansion of forces, in scope and level of involvement, reflected both the urgency of the international situation, and also the overarching concerns of the U.S. about its place and that of the Soviet Union in the growing tensions of the Cold War.

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57 George, 218. Emphasis in original.
The Military’s Response

As has already been seen, the initial reaction among most officials in Washington to the U.S. involvement in the war was one of resounding support. One group that recognized some of the potential limitations, however, was the military establishment. Throughout the late 1940s the size and capabilities of the military were reduced significantly from wartime levels. This was particularly the case after Louis Johnson became Secretary of Defense. Along with Truman, Johnson pushed for a substantial reduction in military size and spending.\(^{58}\) This reduction, which was part of a general fiscally conservative attitude, would significantly affect the U.S. response when war broke out in Korea. Many sources have cited military officials’ statements about the disadvantages of U.S. military forces in Korea and the fact that, unless something drastically changed, the presence of those forces would become a liability if conflict broke out. The withdrawal of U.S. troops in mid-1949 resulted at least partially from such considerations.\(^{59}\)

The JCS history indicated some of the ways the deficiencies in the military manifested themselves once the conflict started.

President Truman had laid down this economy objective [minimizing military spending] in 1948 and had held to it in the preparation of the budgets for fiscal years 1950 and 1951. Its effect was to force the Services to abandon the plans that they had drawn, following the hasty and ill-considered demobilization at the end of World War II, to expand their forces to levels judged necessary for the ‘cold war.’\(^{60}\)

\(^{58}\) For more information about the military reduction, see Chapter IV.

\(^{59}\) This withdrawal was also in response to the agreement with the Soviet Union the previous year to withdraw American and Soviet troops. The Soviet troops were withdrawn by the end of 1948, and the U.S. withdrew by the end of June 1949.

\(^{60}\) Schnabel and Watson, 20-21.
One of the primary ways this deficiency was evident after the Korean War started was in the lack of plans for military involvement. This meant more than just a need to improvise strategically; it dealt as well with basic questions of how best to use troops amid shifting objectives. The type of war that would be waged in Korea was essentially unlike any the U.S. had seriously contemplated up to this point. In a 1972 interview, Secretary of the Army Frank Pace explained his impression of the prevailing mentality. “I think that frankly the only wars that America had engaged in [in] the recent memory of man had been total wars, World War I and World War II. Smaller wars had never been a part of our history. I don’t think that any one thought that another world war was likely and I don’t think people really thought in terms of small wars at that time.”61 As the first small-scale war of the nuclear age, Korea did indeed represent a shift in how the country thought of warfare. “American strategic planning not only had not foreseen military involvement of US forces, but it had, up to this time, not really considered the general question of viable military strategies for limited, local wars.”62

In general, plans for potential conflict in Korea had relied on the ROK army to bear the brunt of the fighting. Even after the U.S. withdrew its troops in mid-1949 military advisors remained in the country, training the ROK army. However, General J. Lawton Collins, the Army Chief of Staff and a member of the JCS, acknowledged later that the evaluations of the readiness of the ROK army for combat had been overly optimistic, particularly when compared with the

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62 George, 225.
preparation of the North Korean army. He was not the only one who reached that opinion, however; Ambassador Muccio submitted a warning at the time that ROK armies would not be able to withstand the equipment and technique of North Korean armies, should the latter attack.\textsuperscript{63} Collins added that once the war started, the situation quickly proved to be more serious than the U.S. had anticipated.

“There seems to be little question from the evidence now available that prior to 1950 the JCS, along with the State Department, counted on the ROK Army forces to check and delay any attack by the North Koreans long enough to allow pressure from the United Nations to force a halt.”\textsuperscript{64} However, as many sources have since shown, it quickly became evident that North Korea would neither cease fire nor withdraw under pressure from the United Nations. Collins believed this was the case especially since early North Korean advances indicated they very well might have a rapid victory, as long as no new forces entered the picture. Interestingly, Collins pointed out that despite the United States’ depleted military situation, the “United States was the only member country with forces immediately available for intervention. If we did not interpose at once, South Korea would be overrun.”\textsuperscript{65}

Thus the U.N. resolution and associated decisions by the U.S. committed American forces to the rapidly growing conflict in Korea. The conflict developed in a world climate very different from the one existing five years before, and would further change the climate by the war’s end three years later. The Korean

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 44.
War also brought about changes in conventional military thought and ushered in
the type of limited warfare that would be seen throughout the rest of the Cold
War.

**The Cold War Climate Shift**

The environment in which the Korean War developed, and the ideas from
which the U.S. operated, resulted directly from the post-World War II tensions
between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The type of isolationist mentality that had
been prevalent after the First World War no longer existed. On the contrary, after
World War II the U.S. found its decisions influenced to a much greater degree
than before by international relations. It has already been established that the U.S.
perception of what it believed was a growing Communist threat was a major
factor in its policy-making. In 1948 and 1949, the U.S. established some of its key
policies for the Far East. The U.S. defined certain areas that merited more
attention and were more important to national security. By default, such a
decision meant other areas were given secondary importance. Korea was one of
these areas, as was Taiwan. That did not mean, however, that those areas could
be—or were—overlooked. One of the characteristics that made the North Korean
attack so significant was that though it occurred in an area not included in this
defense perimeter, the U.S. could not afford to ignore the aggression or the
aggressor. As the JCS history pointed out:

The conflict in Korea also was an important milestone in the ‘cold war’
relations between the Communist and non-Communist nations. By
launching an unprovoked attack on a militarily insignificant country
located in an area where none of their vital interests were involved, the
Communists appeared to leaders of the non-Communist states to be giving proof of their aggressive designs for world domination.66

The U.S. had been concerned about communist expansion since the end of World War II, but that apprehension had increased significantly between 1947 and 1949. During this time, the Berlin crisis had occurred and the potential was growing in other areas of the world for Soviet expansion and confrontation. The U.S. established policies designed specifically to evaluate and counter the Soviet threat and adapted them in response to other world changes. Many of these policies originated in the National Security Council (NSC). One of the most significant policy papers regarding overall national security was NSC 20/4, approved by Truman in November 1948.67 It “remained the definitive statement of United States policy toward the Soviet Union until April 1950, when NSC 68 appeared.”68

NSC 20/4 concluded that the Soviet Union would seek to exert its influence over many areas in the world, and that it would do so in a variety of ways, using political, economic, and psychological means. It defined the areas in which U.S. security would most likely be threatened by Soviet activity, and outlined the ways the U.S. could best interact with the non-Soviet world, in order to prevent Soviet influence from spreading. The basic task, according to this document, was to establish firmly Western values in non-Communist nations, to maintain the U.S. at a militarily ready level, and to bolster “those nations as are

66 Schnabel and Watson, vii.
68 Ibid., editor’s note, 203.
able and willing to make an important contribution to U.S. security, to increase their economic and political stability and their military capability.”69 The considerations of this document are obviously seen in U.S. interactions with nations in the Far East and Eastern Europe in the late 1940s.

Another defining policy statement dealt with the Far East: the two-part NSC 48 series. NSC 48/1 and NSC 48/2, approved on 23 and 30 December 1949, respectively, established summary U.S. policies on interacting with the Far East, specifically as those interactions related to preventing Soviet expansion. NSC 48/1 explained Asia’s strategic value to the U.S. For the U.S., it defined three goals: (1) keeping currently non-communist areas out of Soviet influence, which limited the resources on which the Soviet Union could draw in a time of war; (2) encouraging indigenous Asian forces with views unfavorable to the Soviet Union to help the U.S. “in containing Soviet control and influence in the area”; and (3) providing the U.S. with potential access to numerous raw materials, which would be valuable in the event of war.70

NSC 48/2 was a slightly modified version of NSC 48/1, approved by Truman at the end of December 1949. According to the JCS history, the basic purpose of NSC 48/2 was to apply the doctrine of ‘containment’ to the Far East. The US objectives, as defined in NSC 48/2, were to strengthen non-Communist Asia and to reduce the power of the USSR in the Far East. … Political support, as well as economic and military aid, would be provided to the Republic of Korea. But it was recognized that the United States would have to ‘develop and strengthen the security of the area from Communist external aggression or

69 Ibid., 203-211 (quote from 210).
internal subversion.’ Therefore, the United States should ‘improve’ its position with respect to ‘Japan, the Ryukyus and the Philippines.’\textsuperscript{71}

NSC 48/2 defined the necessary focal points for the U.S. to ensure its security. Specifically, it used the defensive perimeter components that had originated in NSC 48/1: Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines. NSC 48/2 also stated the need for the U.S. to continue providing aid to South Korea, as had been approved in NSC 8/2 in March 1949, but did not designate the ROK as a defensive commitment for the U.S.\textsuperscript{72}

The fact that neither Korea nor Taiwan was mentioned as part of the Far East defensive perimeter (despite U.S. plans to continue aid) led to problems in early 1950. In a speech to the Press Club in January 1950, Acheson defined the U.S. defensive perimeter as it had been established in NSC 48/1 and NSC 48/2. In May 1950, \textit{U.S. News and World Report} ran an article in which Senator Tom Connally reiterated the established defensive perimeter and questioned whether the U.S. was abandoning the ROK. In a memo to Under Secretary of State James Webb regarding Senator Connally’s comments, Dean Rusk explained the potential discord that had been initiated with Acheson’s January speech.

\begin{quote}
Inasmuch as this Government is not in a position to provide the Korean Government with such a commitment [extending the defensive perimeter to include Korea], any public reference to the Japan-Ryukyus-Philippine line can serve only to undermine the confidence of the Korean Government and people, and consequently their will to resist the ever-present threat of Communist aggression.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{71} Schnabel and Watson, 16-17.
\textsuperscript{73} “Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk) to the Under Secretary of State (Webb),” Confidential [611.95/5-250], “Statements by Senator Connally Regarding U.S. Policy in Korea,” (Washington, 2 May 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950, VII}, 65.
The rapid shift to support Korea once the war started, despite its position outside the defense perimeter, indicated the extreme importance placed on preventing any potential communist advance.

By the fall of 1949, however, Korea and the islands of the defensive perimeter did not make up the whole story. On 1 October 1949, the People’s Republic of China was established, forcing the Nationalist Chinese under Chiang Kai-shek to flee to Taiwan (Formosa). Even though some Far East observers thought China might prove to be another place that would split with the Soviet Union (following Yugoslavia’s example), “the United States chose to take President Mao Tse-tung’s statements at face value, [and] insisted that Chinese Communism was cut directly from Moscow’s cloth…”74 Though it was still unclear exactly what China’s international position would be, this was a common mindset that many believed was proven by the North Korean invasion in June 1950. “Thus the world balance of power seemed likely to tip in favor of the Communist bloc.”75 With this added concern, it became even more critical that the U.S. maintain its strategic foothold in the Far East.

**Formula for a Crisis**

Once the North Koreans breached the 38th parallel on the morning of 25 June 1950, there was virtually no way the U.S. would have been able to escape involvement. By 1950 the Cold War had come to influence nearly every aspect of

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75 Schnabel and Watson, 13.
international relations, and certainly every aspect dealing with the Soviet Union. One particular concept applied throughout U.S.-Soviet interactions: containment. It could be—and was—broken down in different ways, as will be seen, and those different interpretations had distinct impacts on how it was applied. The general idea of containment, however, was present even from earliest Cold War interactions. Its influence can be seen in the Far East NSC documents from 1949, in which the U.S. plainly stated that its overall policy was to hold the Soviet Union to the space and influence it currently occupied. Additionally, containment is clearly seen in early U.S. actions in Korea. Policymakers frequently spoke of a desire to at least hold the Soviet Union to its current area of influence in the north. By acting in Korea, the U.S. also “wished…to deter the Soviet Union from launching other local aggressions elsewhere.”76

The notion that the Soviet Union would take the opportunity of the confusion generated by Korea to launch other attacks, or that the Soviet-sponsored attack in Korea was a signal of or testing ground for other expansion, fit with many of the conclusions the U.S. made in the immediate post-World War II years. The important consideration was that when faced with a threat of Soviet aggression at worst, or expansion at best, the U.S. believed the balance of power became even more critical. It could easily be argued that containment was necessary simply for maintaining that balance. Some historians have recognized this significance, explaining the increasingly global nature of containment as a response to “the notion that practically all pieces of territory now had significant, if not decisive, weight in the power balance, that the reputation for being willing

76 George, 226.
to defend each piece was a critical ingredient of our maintenance of allies and deterrence of enemies.”

It makes sense that the U.S. would feel compelled to become involved in Korea. This is particularly true since Korea itself had its own balance of power—or at least balance of influence—the U.S. wished to maintain. The northern half was under Soviet influence, and the southern half under U.S. influence. At the very least, the U.S. wished to maintain this balance, though there was some pressure for unification under U.N. direction once the war started. Additionally, though it was set apart from the official U.S. defensive perimeter, developments on this remote peninsula had distinct consequences. By the end of World War II, it was becoming increasingly clear that each area of development in the world potentially affected each other one. The advent of the atomic age further raised the stakes in international relations. In a statement prepared for the U.N. Atomic Energy Commission, Bernard Baruch explained in 1946: “The basis of a sound foreign policy, in this new age, for all the nations here gathered, is that: anything that happens, no matter where or how, which menaces the peace of the world, or the economic stability, concerns each and all of us.”

It is undeniable that both North and South Korea wanted unification. Each side simply wanted it on its own terms. Some have seen this incompatibility as an underlying factor for conflict. The mere fact that the U.S. on one side and the

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77 Seyom Brown, *Korea and the Balance of Power* [from Brown, *The Faces of Power: Constancy and Change in United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Johnson* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), pp. 47-62], in Guttmann, 255. Additional perspectives of the threat to the balance of power are discussed throughout all four chapters of this paper.

Soviet Union on the other were pulling Korea in opposite directions significantly lessened its chances for a peaceful solution. “Unity was what the Koreans on both sides wanted. Yet it could hardly be expected that the Koreans themselves could find the way to unity so long as the line which divided their country also divided the Soviet from the non-Soviet world.”\textsuperscript{79} A fundamental ideological difference existed between the U.S. and Soviet Union as well, and it greatly impacted how each side interacted with the other. As will be seen, that difference, in many cases, generated conflict at a very basic level, which then played out on the international stage.

The U.S. entry into the Korean War marked a significant change in the execution of U.S. foreign and military policy. The Soviet Union and its actions now took on new light, and became more significant than ever. The speed of U.S. involvement demonstrated its determination to stop any kind of communist—and certainly Soviet—expansion. New technological developments and new international situations meant the U.S. had to reevaluate its foreign stance, but throughout the crisis, the U.S. did not abandon its basic adherence to containment as the appropriate way to deal with the Soviet Union. Different implementations and implications of that policy will be discussed in upcoming chapters, but it is clear that without such a far-reaching concept as containment, the U.S. would likely not have had the basis for acting as decisively as it did. Additionally, containment provided both a justification and a solution for many of the concerns relating to further Soviet threats, whether those were direct threats to a particular

country or region, or the general expansionist tendencies the U.S. believed were
inherent to Soviet policy. Just as containment provided the framework for the
formula that entered the U.S. into the Korean conflict, it would provide the
framework by which the U.S. orchestrated its actions throughout the war.
CHAPTER II
FIRE ON THE SNOW:
THE POLICY THAT SET THE COLD WAR ALIGHT

At the conclusion of World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union began to emerge as clear power centers in the world. Despite their cooperation during the war, the fundamental differences in their ideologies and mindsets virtually ensured their systems would come into conflict. The major question for policymakers was how to interact with such a fundamentally different system in a way that would prove most beneficial to the U.S and international stability.

In the years immediately following World War II, the American-Soviet relationship was a growing international concern. Tensions had been increasing since the end of World War II and the more the U.S. and Soviet Union interacted the more it became obvious there would be no easy solution to those tensions. The immediate roots of conflict stemmed from the uneasy alliance between the two countries during World War II. There had been ideological conflict between the two nations in the 1930s, and many found an alliance increasingly difficult to justify as the war drew to a close. Moreover, many were also sure the alliance would not hold after the Axis threats were removed from the equation.

It is impossible to study the Cold War without addressing the difficult concept of containment. It began impacting U.S. foreign policy shortly after World War II, and became the central doctrine dictating early interactions with the Soviet Union. As fundamental as this policy was, however, it was very fluid,
changing in response to world influences, perceived and actual, and forming the basis of U.S. commitments in the immediate postwar years.

The major problem many historians have faced when dealing with containment is that it was neither clearly defined nor stable from its origin in 1947 through its use as justification for American actions in the early 1950s. Developed by George F. Kennan in 1947, by the time the concept was formally established as policy in the late 1940s, it had evolved substantially from Kennan’s original formula. In many ways the new version retained Kennan’s main concepts, but it differed dramatically in its tone and specific requirements. Because the second version provided most of the justification for American actions not only in Korea but also around the world in the early 1950s, a distinction must be made between the intent and implications of the first version and those of the second. This variation was not due merely to semantic differences or the different implications that can be interpreted once an idea is committed to paper. It was also due to fundamental shifts in the way the U.S. understood (or believed it understood) the Soviet Union and its actions, and the increasingly strained relations throughout the world.

George F. Kennan and the Birth of Containment

George Kennan’s name has become closely associated with containment in studies of the Cold War. Late in World War II, Kennan began to consider the best way to approach interaction with the Soviet Union. Central to Kennan’s ideas on this subject was the belief that, regardless of the specific concerns of the
current Soviet regime, the basic principles of Soviet (Marxist-Leninist) ideology remained in effect. A diplomat at the American embassy in Moscow in the late war and early postwar period, Kennan became dissatisfied with the manner in which the U.S. was dealing with the Soviet Union.

Over the eighteen months I had now spent on this assignment in Moscow, I had experienced unhappiness not only about the naïveté of our underlying ideas as to what it was we were hoping to achieve in our relations with the Soviet government but also about the methods and devices with which we went about achieving it. The two aspects of our diplomacy were, of course, closely related.80

Over the winter of 1945-1946, Kennan set about producing a concrete theory defining Soviet intentions and behavior, which could then be expanded as the basis for recommended U.S. action. Though this document was never finished, in it Kennan developed ideas central to his later explanations. Among his conclusions was the theory that the Soviet Union mostly made its decisions based on what would best benefit the Soviet regime.81 In later writings, Kennan expanded this idea, concluding the Soviet Union specifically was focused on consolidating the power it had gained in November 1917. He also believed there was an integral link between Soviet ideology and its actions.82 Although Kennan’s 1946 paper dealt only with the Soviet regime under Stalin,83 he developed this theory more thoroughly in subsequent writings, drawing a clear connection between the character of the Soviet system and the country’s actions.

Kennan’s direct influence on American policy did not truly exert itself until the end of February 1946. During that month, officials in the State and

81 Kennan, “The United States and Russia,” Excerpt (Winter 1946), in ibid., 561.
Treasury Departments responded to Soviet refusals to cooperate in international relations by asking Kennan for information about the basis of Soviet decision-making and behavior. Kennan seized this opportunity and composed what could arguably be called the first significant document on containment: the long telegram. This early document had a significant impact on the way the U.S. perceived itself and the Soviet Union. Historian John Lewis Gaddis explained:

The thesis of Kennan’s ‘long telegram’ was nothing less than that the whole basis of American policy toward the Soviet Union during and after World War II had been wrong. That policy…assumed the existence of no structural impediments to normal relations within the Soviet Union itself; the hostility Stalin had shown toward the West, rather, had been the result of insecurities bred by external threats.84

Kennan believed U.S. policymakers placed too much emphasis on the apparent common interests generated between the U.S. and Soviet Union during World War II. The “outmoded assumptions” meant the U.S. was not “cop[ing] effectively with the basic problem of Russian and communist expansionism.”85

Kennan initially proposed this connection in the rules he outlined in his unfinished 1946 work.86 He expanded the idea in the long telegram, explaining the Soviet Union was a “political force committed fanatically to the belief that with [the] US there can be no permanent modus vivendi, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our own traditional way of life be destroyed, [and] the international authority of our state

be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure.”87 Although Kennan’s conclusions were based on attitudes the Soviet Union demonstrated before World War II, and although the U.S. and Soviet Union had maintained a relatively stable alliance during that war, Kennan believed such attitudes still formed the basis for Soviet actions and policies.

Nevertheless, all these theses…are being boldly put forward again today. What does this indicate? It indicates that the Soviet party line is not based on any objective analysis of the situation beyond Russia’s borders; that it has, indeed, little to do with the conditions outside of Russia; that it arises mainly from basic inner-Russian necessities which existed before [the] recent war and exist today.88

The Appearance of Mr. “X” and the Accidental Establishment of Containment

The primary influence of Kennan’s long telegram was to begin the shift in American thinking to a perspective much more attuned to the significant differences existing between U.S. and Soviet policy. The document for which Kennan became much more famous—or infamous, depending on the particular point of view—was an article written under the pseudonym of Mr. “X,” published in Foreign Affairs in July 1947. The article was quickly revealed to be a product of Kennan’s pen. Because Kennan was closely associated with policy making, many people came to believe this article represented the official U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union.

88 Ibid., 549.
Kennan originally wrote the Mr. “X” article as a personal favor for Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal. Forrestal asked Kennan to review a paper on the Soviet Union, and in response, Kennan asked if he could submit his own ideas (he found it difficult to critique another’s analysis of a subject to which he was so close). During his extensive experience in the Soviet Union, Kennan had formulated specific opinions and theories of the nature of the Soviet Union as related to American policy-making, and he described these in his article. As Kennan pointed out in his memoirs, however, this paper was neither a new concept, nor was it meant for any official purpose. “It was a literary extrapolation of the thoughts which had been maturing in my mind, and which I had been expressing in private communications and speeches, for at least two years into the past. Even the term ‘containment’ which appeared in the course of the argument was…not new.”

As a favor to the journal’s editor, Kennan submitted his paper for publication, after clearing it with the State Department. Though it was meant as nothing more than a clarification of his own personal ideas, the close association of Foreign Affairs with the Council of Foreign Relations, and the latter’s association with the State Department, led many to believe the article represented the basic U.S. ideas toward the Soviet Union.

The swift reception of Kennan’s article as an indication of the official U.S. position was likely due in part to a desire for a definitive set of policy guidelines for interacting with the Soviet Union, particularly in light of the ever-increasing

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90 Ibid., 354-355.
tension between the two countries. Based on the degree of its impact, it also seems clear that Kennan’s article was influential because of the underlying aspects of Soviet relations it addressed. Kennan examined the Soviet Union’s history, and the impact history and the country’s underlying mentality had on forming its foreign policy and general attitude. His was a very persuasive explanation, and his use of historical and ideological factors helped make his article extremely influential.

Kennan’s tendency to view the Soviet Union with a longer lens is one of the marked characteristics of his version of containment (though not exclusive to his interpretation, as will be seen). He was continually focused on more than simply the immediate post-war nature of the Soviet state. In Kennan’s opinion, the roots of the Soviet state’s actions, and certainly of the tensions with the West, lay more in Soviet ideology than in any specific characteristic of its leadership or decision-making. He stated this idea at the outset of the article: “The political personality of Soviet power as we know it today is the product of ideology and circumstances: ideology inherited by the present Soviet leaders from the movement in which they had their political origin, and circumstances of the power which they now have exercised for nearly three decades in Russia.”91

Kennan was also concerned with the impact of Soviet and Russian history on the current regime’s actions. He spent the first several pages of his article discussing the basic history of Soviet Russia, examining some of the underlying ideas and beliefs that had shaped Soviet thought since the country’s inception in 1917. In addition to the Soviet concern for combating capitalism outside its

91 X, 566.
borders, Kennan saw the Soviet Union’s need to justify itself domestically as another inherent factor in Soviet policy. He believed this became more important once Soviet leadership established complete control and eliminated any vestiges of capitalism remaining in the country.

And this fact created one of the most basic of the compulsions which came to act upon the Soviet régime: since capitalism no longer existed in Russia and since it could not be admitted that there could be serious or widespread opposition to the Kremlin springing spontaneously from the liberated masses under its authority, it became necessary to justify the retention of the dictatorship by stressing the menace of capitalism abroad.92

He further specified:

[T]remendous emphasis has been placed on the original Communist thesis of a basic antagonism between the capitalist and Socialist worlds. It is clear, from many indications, that this emphasis is not founded in reality. … But there is ample evidence that the stress laid in Moscow on the menace confronting Soviet society from the world outside its borders is founded not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away the maintenance of dictatorial authority at home.93

Part of the challenge for the U.S. when dealing with the Soviet Union was that the latter did not strictly follow a single line of reasoning or methodology when dealing with the West. One of Kennan’s basic arguments throughout his years of discussion about containment was that the Soviet Union tended to alter its responses and the justifications behind them depending on the particular situation in order to accomplish what it wanted. Kennan’s point was not that this was a remarkable practice, but that the Soviet Union was willing to do it to further justify and maintain the dictatorship of its leader. Despite any appearance of

92 Ibid., 570.
93 Ibid.
flexibility in its responses, the Soviet Union was still committed to fundamentally opposing the West.

Basically, the antagonism remains. It is postulated. And from it flow many of the phenomena which we find disturbing in the Kremlin’s conduct of foreign policy: the secretiveness, the lack of frankness, the duplicity, the wary suspiciousness, and the basic unfriendliness of purpose. … These characteristics of Soviet policy, like the postulate from which they flow, are basic to the internal nature of Soviet power, and will be with us, whether in the foreground or the background, until the internal nature of Soviet power is changed.94

Kennan believed this underlying dimension was one of the most crucial factors in understanding the Soviet Union’s motivations. Without fully appreciating the impact of Soviet ideology, and the history that reinforced it, Kennan believed it would be impossible to effectively interact with them.

This led to another of Kennan’s basic conclusions: there was—or would be, in the not too distant future—potential for the U.S. to interact with the Soviet Union on a level of mutual interest and respect, if not trust. This would only be possible, however, if the U.S. was willing to view the Soviet Union as something other than a monolith seeking only world domination. In his Mr. “X” article, Kennan explained that, like many nations, the Soviet Union was susceptible to pressures of prestige, and had shown a willingness to measure its actions in response to the particular demand or threat. Moreover, Kennan said, any country dealing with Russia must issue its demands “in such a manner as to leave the way open for a compliance not too detrimental to Russian prestige.”95 This consideration was less a result of any affinity for the Soviet Union and more a realistic concern over Russia’s potential reaction if it felt itself backed into a

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94 Ibid., 572. Emphasis added.
95 Ibid., 575-576, quote from 576.
corner. As many historians have pointed out, Kennan (and others) believed the Soviet Union would not resort to war as a means to expand its influence if any other realistic options were open to accomplish the same goal. Kennan believed one of the best ways to avoid war was through diplomacy, and to this end promoted communication with the Soviet Union. “Kennan never thought the Soviet Union desired or was capable of world conquest; he never eschewed diplomacy and was not tempted to resign himself (or his countrymen) to an inevitable global U.S.-Soviet war.”

**Controversy and Kennan’s Efforts to Explain His Concepts**

In language he later acknowledged as “careless and indiscriminate,” Kennan described the type of American response warranted by Soviet actions. He believed the U.S. could most successfully exert pressure, which would potentially seriously weaken the Soviet system, by “entering…upon a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.” Along with the now-famous statement that American policy should be “long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies,” these conclusions illustrated a basic part of Kennan’s ideas, but one that was frequently misunderstood: the role of military force in containment.

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98 X, 581.
99 Ibid., 575.
Though Kennan did not exclude a military buildup to support containment, he stressed that the Soviet Union was not likely to risk war with the U.S. to expand its influence. An effective policy of containment could further minimize the risk. “[F]or Kennan himself, a war with the Soviets was the very thing that containment was meant to avoid.”\(^{100}\) Kennan believed a “middle ground” could be reached, from which the U.S. could successfully resist Soviet advances without resorting to military action.\(^{101}\) One of the best ways to promote the necessary stability for such an approach was to improve the economic situation of countries threatened by communism. This would demonstrate to the Soviet Union and its people that capitalism provided the better way of life.

Kennan believed the Soviet Union placed such an emphasis on justifying its dictatorship because without such justification, the internal structure of the Soviet state would soon be unable to support itself. If the U.S. could consistently provide economic pressure, and demonstrate to potentially threatened countries that the American democratic system was the most prosperous and stable, it would nurture the seeds of collapse he believed were already present in the Soviet system.\(^{102}\)

Kennan’s economic emphasis was fundamental to his position on containment throughout the late 1940s. This went hand in hand with his desire for diplomacy over strict military might. He was deeply involved in the setup and initiation of the Marshall Plan for Europe, and strongly supported continuing U.S. aid to areas needing economic recovery. One of the reasons Kennan advocated economic development was his belief that indiscriminate military commitments

\(^{100}\) Rearden, 8.
\(^{102}\) X, 580.
would jeopardize the U.S., potentially involving it in a conflict from which it
could not easily extract itself. The U.S. was not facing a purely military threat,
and therefore its response should not be purely—or even primarily—military in
nature.

As a basic response to the Soviet threat, and as a way to deal with the
Soviets in general, Kennan advocated a multi-focused approach. The main aspects
of this approach included firmly establishing and maintaining the balance of
power in the world; increasing economic influence and strengthening nations
against any potential Communist threat; and potentially, by those actions,
encouraging a fundamental shift in the Soviet mindset. In light of such a sweeping
approach, it soon became evident the U.S. was going to have to define its primary
areas of interest, since in reality the U.S. could hardly afford to extend its physical
resources to meet every potential need.\textsuperscript{103} This entailed making priorities among
U.S. interests, which Kennan believed should be done on the basis of which areas
had the greatest potential to resist the Soviet threat, and which ones the U.S. could
lend aid to with the most successful outcomes.\textsuperscript{104}

Kennan identified five areas as crucial to American strategy: the U.S.,
Great Britain, Central Europe (particularly Germany), the Soviet Union, and
Japan.\textsuperscript{105} Kennan did not believe these regions were, by any means, the sole areas
for U.S. concern. Other areas could—and should, he believed—be analyzed

\textsuperscript{103} The limitations of U.S. military power were magnified by the increasing budget cuts of the Truman
administration. The effect of these cuts, and their place in the years leading to the Korean War, will be
discussed in Chapters III and IV.

\textsuperscript{104} “Talk given to the board of governors of the Federal Reserve System, December 1, 1947, and to the
Secretary of the Navy’s Council, December 3, 1947, Kennan Papers, Box 17,” cited in Gaddis, \textit{Strategies of
Containment}, 40-41.

\textsuperscript{105} George Kennan, \textit{Realities of American Foreign Policy} (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1954), 64.
according to a system of priorities. Setting priorities was merely a “recognition of the fact that ‘no global policy which has reality in deeds as well as in words can fail to be primarily a policy of priorities—a policy of wise economy in the use of our own strength.’”\textsuperscript{106}

Kennan understood that possessing a substantial military force to back up the U.S. diplomatic stance was imperative. He also believed, however, that military power should not be used as a primary means of influence, but should instead provide effective backup to diplomatic efforts, particularly as they were partitioned out over the U.S. list of priorities. A U.S. international presence supported by military force would be a more effective deterrent to potential Soviet aggression than if the U.S. engaged in negotiation alone.

Kennan’s emphasis on the appropriate use of military power was also supported by his assessment of the Soviet Union’s willingness to risk confrontation. Kennan argued repeatedly throughout the 1940s that the Soviet Union would be unwilling to jeopardize its precarious position by risking war with the West before it felt it had a sufficient advantage. If the U.S. based its international relations too much on the use—or threat of use—of military power, the Soviet Union could potentially be backed into a corner from which it would have little room to maneuver.\textsuperscript{107} As Kennan’s Mr. “X” article pointed out, a policy of holding back Soviet expansion “ha[d] nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward

\textsuperscript{106} “Address to the Academy of Political Science, New York, November 10, 1949, Kennan Papers, Box 1,” cited in Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 31.

\textsuperscript{107} X, 575-576.
'toughness.' 108 Effective use of military strength meant both making it known in the most appropriate way, and maintaining the willingness to use that force, if necessary. "It was better, instead, to regard one’s military might along the lines preached by Kennan’s intellectual-political hero, Theodore Roosevelt: ‘All we really have to do is be strong and ready to use that strength. We don’t have to broadcast it.’ "109

Numerous books, articles, and studies have examined the precise elements of Kennan’s containment thesis. Some have criticized it; as many have praised it. Some have seen its emphasis on economic measures as unwisely overlooking the military perspective, and others have criticized Kennan’s call for military strength as incompatible with his general thesis. The point is that, though numerous analyses and evaluations have surfaced since the 1940s, there were as many, if not more, interpretations of Kennan’s hypothesis at the time of its greatest impact.

In an article in Foreign Affairs, thirty years after Kennan’s Mr. “X” article was published, historian John Lewis Gaddis explained that one of the main problems of Kennan’s article was that it was taken as prescriptive, instead of descriptive. 110 If viewed this way, it is clear why Kennan’s article would be given such importance. It was an encompassing, if not fully thought-out, examination of the fundamental nature of Soviet behavior, and it was put forth at a time when understanding such a complex situation was becoming increasingly important to the U.S. Even though the primary documents did not generally explain outright the influence of Kennan’s thesis, the shift in predominant thinking about the

108 Ibid., 575.
109 Mayers, 150.
Soviet nature coincided with the growing influence of Kennan’s theories. Kennan’s ideas about the philosophy underlying Soviet behavior also seemed to fit with U.S. experiences. Because of this, many elements of Kennan’s thesis became part of the basic assumptions on which the later, more “official” containment policy was based.

**Additional Concepts of Containment**

It is important to remember that when Kennan’s containment thesis was making headlines he was not the only one concerned with this aspect of American-Soviet relations, nor was he the only one advocating some kind of clear, firm stance. It may seem easy to ascribe Kennan’s fame primarily to his theory, but in reality he never strictly defined containment as a policy. The effect of his writings and his influence as the Director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, however, meant his ideas were disseminated among government and defense officials with remarkable thoroughness.

The concept of developing a firm stance against the Soviet Union had been reflected in key policy decisions and discussions since the end of World War II. One landmark policy decision was made in 1947 and directly impacted the official development of containment. The Truman Doctrine was adopted in March 1947, in response to the crisis in Greece and Turkey.\(^\text{111}\) The timing meant the doctrine was in development after Kennan submitted his Mr. “X” article to Forrestal, but before it was published that July. The Truman Doctrine was significant because it specifically established containment as a valid (and far-
reaching, though that realization would come later) policy framework. With the British withdrawal from Greece and Turkey, the prospect arose that communism might advance and become the dominant force in those countries. Though there was some debate, the U.S. decided to act, and thus established one of the first concrete examples of the containment doctrine. When he examined the paper describing the doctrine, however, Kennan did not fully agree with some of the basic ideas. He recognized the need for a U.S. presence in Greece, and in Turkey to a lesser extent, though he did not believe the communist threat was necessarily imminent.112

Kennan found major problems, however, with the wording at the core of the doctrine, which stated that it was “‘the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.’”113 The problem Kennan saw with such a statement was its apparent universal application. He believed that making such a statement implied that what we had decided to do in the case of Greece was something we would be prepared to do in the case of any other country, provided only that it was faced with the threat of ‘subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.’ It seemed to me highly uncertain that we would invariably find it in our interests or within our means to extend assistance to countries that found themselves in this extremity.114

Kennan’s objection tied back to both his concern over the U.S. inability to extend its forces to an indefinite number of locations, and his hesitation to put into print any of his doctrinal ideas. As he saw it, the doctrine committed the U.S. to a single response, regardless of whether the threat was to a vital area or not. He

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113 Cited in ibid., 320, among many other sources.
114 Ibid., 320.
believed the root of this overextension was the language: when policymakers wrote down the policy for Greece and Turkey, the language they chose was imprecise. When read as part of the doctrine as a whole (instead of specifically as part of the Greece and Turkey crisis), the language was applicable to any number of areas, in many of which the U.S. might otherwise not act.

Interestingly, on 29 April 1947, the Joint Strategic Survey Committee (JSSC), a senior planning group under the JCS, submitted a report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff that discussed the limits necessary for American policy, in order to best use available force. The report, *United States Assistance to Other Countries from the Standpoint of National Security*, illustrated that Kennan was not alone in his idea of limiting and prioritizing areas of interest. The report pointed out that the mere extension of American aid did not guarantee an increase in national security. Instead, the key factor was the results of such aid. The JSSC stated that the goal was to establish “firm friends located in areas which will be of strategic importance to the United States in the event of war with our ideological enemies, and with economies strong enough to support the military establishments necessary for the maintenance of their own independence and national security.” The editors’ note commented that the timing of this report, coming shortly after Truman’s declaration of his doctrine, “suggests that the Truman Doctrine was more a rhetorical flourish designed to persuade a parsimonious

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Congress to approve aid to Greece and Turkey than the blueprint for globalism it appeared to be on the surface."\textsuperscript{116}

\textbf{Containment in Flux}

Regardless of their original intent, the Truman Doctrine and Kennan’s article combined to present a fairly solid, if not fully formed, idea of containment. One impact of establishing this policy was that, as new events and potential threats arose, the U.S. reevaluated its response policies in terms of containment. Though the threats changed, the U.S. remained committed to containment as a general basis for responding to Soviet actions. A number of factors converged throughout 1948 and 1949 to bring new concerns to light, and in doing so began a fundamental shift of the containment policy that would have far-reaching consequences. Many of these new factors were significant events in the developing Cold War, and in general, returned people’s attention to the idea of military support for U.S. foreign policy. The result was that by the time the Korean War broke out there were a number of new assumptions and potential plans in place for U.S. response. Not only did this shift signify an entirely new approach to the concept of containing communism, it also fundamentally reshaped U.S. foreign policy, which in turn greatly affected the course of the Cold War.

One aspect of original containment that became prominent between 1948 and 1950 was the balance of power. During these years, Soviet capabilities grew much closer to understood Soviet intentions, leading many U.S. policymakers to

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
believe the Soviet Union would soon embark on a more aggressive foreign policy. One example of this impact was in the Far East. Although the Far East as a whole was not considered vital to American security, the significant U.S. interests in Japan, the Philippines, and the Ryukyus meant that any Soviet encroachment in that direction would likely be seen as a very real threat to U.S. security.

Policymakers began reexamining U.S. security in light of the new threats. Two of the key new decisions were NSC 48/1 and NSC 48/2, approved in December 1949. These two papers explained that American policy in the Far East would seek to contain any potential communist movement. The primary means by which the U.S. would accomplish this goal was by building up non-communist countries so they would be better able to resist any potential communist threat. As NSC 48/1 established:

For the foreseeable future, therefore, our immediate objective must be to contain and where feasible to reduce the power and influence of the USSR in Asia to such a degree that the Soviet Union is not capable of threatening the security of the United States from that area and that the Soviet Union would encounter serious obstacles should it attempt to threaten the peace, national independence or stability of the Asiatic nations.117

In their discussion of actively reducing Soviet influence “where feasible,” NSC 48/1 and NSC 48/2 illustrated the growing influence of the idea of rollback. The concept had been seen as early as NSC 20/4 in November 1948,118 but most of the focus remained on containment. International changes by the end of the 1940s, however, made rollback’s appeal greater than it had been in previous years. The greater military focus of later policy papers, such as NSC 68,

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118 See the sections on NSC 68 later in this chapter for information on NSC 20/4.
reinforced this shift. The question of rollback, particularly as it relates to U.S. actions in the Korean War, is discussed in Chapter IV.

NSC 48/2 (a slightly modified form, approved by Truman 30 December 1949) came to the same conclusions as NSC 48/1, and added that the U.S. should continue its assistance to the Republic of Korea, in accordance with a previous NSC decision, made March 1949.119 This commitment to Korea and to the Far East as a whole is important because it helps explain some of the considerations that led to President Truman’s request in early 1950 for the Secretaries of State and Defense to reevaluate the basic U.S. strategic policy. This evaluation, the report of which would become NSC 68, marked a fundamental change in U.S. containment policy. Even though the paper reflected many of the same attitudes, conclusions, and goals as recent policy papers, the means and methods by which NSC 68 called for them to be carried out differed dramatically from the containment doctrine Kennan promoted in the early years after World War II. One of the most prominent beliefs prompting this reevaluation was that the overall international threat to the U.S. was growing. This threat was magnified by the communist victory in China, the Soviet atomic bomb, and domestic pressures for the U.S. to develop a hydrogen bomb.120 When viewed together, these factors seemed to indicate the communist threat was approaching dangerous levels.

Another issue complicating the threat was the significant budget reduction Truman and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson imposed on the military. One of


120 The impact of the Soviet bomb, Communist China, and the development of the hydrogen bomb will be examined in Chapter III.
the biggest impacts of NSC 68 was its call for responses that were beyond current budgetary allowances. However, the document, as many have since pointed out, was careful not to discuss financial requirements outright. Its intention was to make clear to the government the need for a heightened American response to what many believed was a greatly increased national security threat.\footnote{Dean Acheson, \textit{Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 374.} In fact, the JCS history indicated that a reconsideration of these budgetary limitations was one reason Truman commissioned the reexamination in the first place.\footnote{James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, \textit{The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, Vol. III, 1950-1951: The Korean War, Part One}, History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Washington, D.C.: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1998), 21.}

By the time discussions for NSC 68 began, a new situation existed in the world, demonstrating what many believed to be the emergence of a much greater threat to U.S. national security. An emphasis that almost exclusively relied on economic responses was no longer adequate; however, the new study did not exclude that approach from its recommendations. The end result was a policy proposal that, while retaining many of the same fundamental ideas as Kennan’s original concept, committed the U.S. to a firm response to Soviet advances throughout the world. When combined with the outbreak of the Korean War, NSC 68’s influence had far-reaching consequences.

**NSC 68 Takes Shape**

It is important to remember that NSC 68, though already written by April 1950, was not yet officially approved when the Korean War began. As numerous historians and officials have concluded, the North Korean invasion provided a
major impetus for the adoption of NSC 68 and its policies. “In proving for most Americans the reality of the increased Soviet threat, the war led to the adoption of the broad programs and assumptions of NSC 68.”

Even before the war began, however, there was an increasing general perception of an increased need for force to back up U.S. commitments. Much of this was in response to an apparent increase in the threat of Soviet military action. Up to this point, many believed the Soviet Union would not risk a war with the United States, because of the former’s decidedly weaker position. This idea was central to Kennan’s thesis, and as he saw it, should have been an understood fact when evaluating necessary U.S. responses. In 1949, however, the U.S. believed the Soviet Union’s attitude was changing, becoming more conducive to military conflict. Policymakers seemed to derive this belief from a number of factors that appeared in 1949, improving the Soviet Union’s international position. The Soviet atomic bomb and the communist victory in China combined to place the Soviet Union at an apparent advantage. Though this advantage was later found to be less than policymakers had assumed, there is no doubt this belief sharply affected U.S. policy. Particularly when viewed alongside the idea that Soviet international actions were growing in importance, the combination of an increase in Soviet

capability and movements represented a significant shift in the international situation.

In early February 1950, Paul Nitze, the new director of the Policy Planning Staff, completed a study titled “Recent Soviet Moves.” The study was indicative of many of the fears and assumptions that were becoming prevalent in late 1949 and early 1950. One of Nitze’s conclusions was that the Soviet Union’s capacity for action was finally approaching a level that would allow the leadership to implement its goals in a much shorter time than the U.S. had believed. Looking back to Stalin’s 1946 speech that demonstrated outright hostility, Nitze explained that the mentality had not really changed, and was, in fact, still informing Soviet policy.

For this reason there appears no reason to assume that the USSR will in the future necessarily make a sharp distinction between ‘military aggression’ and measures short of military aggression. … As the USSR has already committed itself to the defeat of the US, Soviet policy is guided by the simple consideration of weakening the world power position of the US. This approach, on the one hand, holds out for the USSR the possibility that it can achieve success over the US without ever resorting to an all-out military assault. On the other hand, it leaves open the possibility of a quick Soviet decision to resort to military action, locally or generally.¹²⁵

Furthermore, even though he did not think the Soviet Union was actively seeking military confrontation, Nitze “was alarmed by the existence of soft spots that afforded the Soviets opportunity to seek gains in such areas as Indochina, Berlin, Austria, and Korea.”¹²⁶ He believed recent Soviet actions, when taken together, “suggest[ed] a greater willingness than in the past to undertake a course of action,

¹²⁶ Rearden, 525.
including a possible use of force in local areas, which might lead to an accidental outbreak of general military conflict. Thus the chance of war through miscalculation increased.\textsuperscript{127}

Aside from the obvious implications for military changes, part of NSC 68’s impact was its definition of the Soviet threat and Soviet intentions, in light of the new developments. Though the document maintained that ideology was still a very influential factor in deciding Soviet policy, it pointed out that future Soviet actions could not be determined by looking at ideology alone.

The Kremlin’s policy toward areas not under its control is the elimination of resistance to its will and the extension of its influence and control. … The means employed by the Kremlin in pursuit of this policy are limited only by considerations of expediency. Doctrine is not a limiting factor; rather it dictates the employment of violence, subversion and deceit, and rejects moral considerations. In any event, the Kremlin’s conviction of its own infallibility has made its devotion to theory so subjective that past or present pronouncements as to doctrine offer no reliable guide to future actions. The only apparent restraints on resort to war are, therefore, calculations of practicality.\textsuperscript{128}

Since new events and actions demonstrated that the Soviet Union was developing a greater capacity to act, it was natural that the U.S. would perceive such advances as increasing the probability of Soviet expansion.

The U.S. believed the Far East was particularly vulnerable, especially after the communist victory in China in 1949. NSC 68 reexamined Kennan’s thesis on this threat. Kennan had promoted a policy of prioritizing interests and exercising U.S. power only in those areas whose loss would truly represent a threat to U.S.

security. NSC 68, though not renouncing Kennan’s ideas, explained that, since the Soviet threat had increased, the response necessary to hold Soviet expansion had also increased. As the document explained, though people in general were seeking a reduction of threats, particularly that of atomic war, “any substantial further extension of the area under the domination of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled. It is in this context that this Republic and its citizens in the ascendancy of their strength stand in their deepest peril.”¹²⁹ The U.S. also felt the Soviet threat was no longer restricted primarily to Western Europe. “The assault on free institutions is world-wide now, and in the context of the present polarization of power a defeat of free institutions anywhere is a defeat everywhere.”¹³⁰

Many historians (and policymakers at the time) recognized the implications of such a statement. Gaddis pointed out, “Kennan’s strategy of defending selected strongpoints would no longer suffice; the emphasis rather would have to be on perimeter defense, with all points along the perimeter considered of equal importance.”¹³¹ Despite the fact that NSC 68 did not call for strict perimeter defense—an equal response to every place the Soviet Union may advance—its discussion demonstrated the U.S. understanding of the global nature of the Soviet threat. Like Kennan, NSC 68 held that the consolidation of power was fundamental to Soviet ideology, and thus provided the basis for Soviet

¹²⁹ Ibid., 237-238.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 240.
¹³¹ Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 91.
foreign policy. NSC 68 believed the threat extended further, however, explaining that for the Soviet Union,

achievement of this design [consolidating its power] requires the dynamic extension of their authority and the ultimate elimination of any effective opposition to their authority. The design, therefore, calls for the complete subversion or forcible destruction of the machinery of government and structure of society in the countries of the non-Soviet world and their replacement by an apparatus and structure subservient to and controlled from the Kremlin.¹³²

In order to combat such a widespread threat, one of the primary responses NSC 68 recommended was the buildup of political and economic systems throughout the free world, in order to “preserve our own integrity, in which lies the real frustration of the Kremlin design.”¹³³ This recommendation is one example of how NSC 68 retained Kennan’s idea of the importance of reinforcing non-communist systems. Along with this economic and political development, however, NSC 68 clearly reiterated the need for the U.S. to build up its military. This would both support national security and be a backup for containment.¹³⁴ In its final recommended course of action, NSC 68 called for a balanced buildup, designed to frustrate Soviet intentions. One of the clearest indicators of the increased threat level was the policy’s recommendation for the military aspect of this buildup. The U.S. needed to “have the military power to deter, if possible, Soviet expansion, and to defeat, if necessary, aggressive Soviet or Soviet-directed actions of a limited or total character.”¹³⁵ NSC 68’s view that Soviet actions by

¹³² NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 238.
¹³³ Ibid., 241.
¹³⁴ Ibid., 253.
¹³⁵ Ibid., 282.
proxy required the same response as outright Soviet action helps explain why policymakers felt so compelled to respond in Korea in June 1950.

Though NSC 68 did not call for actual perimeter defense, it is clear the document represented a change in mentality from earlier post-war ideas. NSC 68 came to many of the same conclusions as NSC 20/4 had in 1948, particularly as regarded the nature of the Soviet threat. According to NSC 68, “[t]he Soviet Union remained an enemy whose goals and ambitions posed a grave menace to U.S. security and world stability. The situation had become different and, indeed, more dangerous because of the Soviet Union’s acquisition of a nuclear capability—a threat that was expected to increase steadily over the next few years…”

As NSC 68 pointed out, the consistent threat meant the basic U.S. attitude and approach would remain substantially the same as in 1948. However, as Paul Nitze explained in a 1993 speech to the National War College, NSC 68 represented some distinct departures from NSC 20/4. One of the major differences was that NSC 68 “proposed to place greater emphasis on strengthening our own military capabilities in the face of significantly increased Soviet capabilities, rather than relying primarily, as we had theretofore, on extensive economic assistance and limited military aid to our allies.”

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137 Rearden, 531.

the U.S. would soon be in a position in which it could not sufficiently defend itself, its interests, or its allies. By April 1950, international developments combined with that fear to create a situation with threat levels defined more by Soviet actions than by U.S. interests alone.

NSC 68 illustrated a connection between military planning and general assumptions about the international situation. Such a connection became even more significant when the balance of power was taken into account. As the Soviet threat grew, the U.S. believed the balance of power was growing increasingly precarious. Any Soviet move, regardless of its location or extent, was seen as a potentially significant threat to that balance.

The capability and clearly communicated will to defend whatever area the Communist power might choose to attack, regardless of its intrinsic geopolitical weight in the overall balance, was necessary to prevent the Communists from picking and choosing easy targets for blackmail and aggression. _And a number of small territorial grabs could add up to a critical alteration of the global balance._ Moreover, our failure to defend one area would demoralize nationals in other such localities in their will to resist the Communists. Even in Western Europe people would wonder under what circumstances we might consider them dispensable.139

The threat posed by piecemeal aggression was not new. Kennan had addressed the question in his unfinished 1946 paper. In his rules for interacting with the Soviet Union, he advocated a strong response to Soviet piecemeal aggression. As he saw it, the Soviet Union would continue movement of this nature until they came up against a significant response. Through small advances, “they may gradually bring about a major improvement in their position before the

other fellow knows what’s up.”

Although Kennan and others believed the risk of war with the Soviet Union was low in the late 1940s, by 1950 shifts in the balance of power had increased the threat. There was a growing fear that increasing Soviet capabilities augmented this threat. This fear was further compounded by the nuclear consideration. As NSC 68 explained, the fact that both sides possessed atomic weapons only increased the importance and potential benefit to the Soviet Union of piecemeal aggression. Instead of opting for an all-out global war, which might well draw an atomic response, it would be more beneficial for the Soviet Union to take small, relatively unobtrusive steps. Theoretically, at least, such steps would be too small to draw severe American response, and would still help the Soviet Union continue to spread its influence. Atomic weapons placed “a premium on piecemeal aggression against others, counting on our unwillingness to engage in atomic war unless we are directly attacked.”

As Chapter I discussed, many people viewed the North Korean aggression in 1950 as an indication of Soviet attempts at just such an advance.

With such an increased threat, it soon became clear the military budgets and plans in place at the beginning of 1950 were insufficient. The drafters of NSC 68 recognized their changes would require significant military buildup. There have been debates about what the Policy Planning Staff believed about the needs for increased military involvement, and what impact those needs would have had on the military situation in 1950. It was clear that to achieve the type of military involvement NSC 68 proposed would require a significant increase in both

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142 Also see Chapter IV for discussion of U.S. interpretations of the attack.
funding and arms development. Some have criticized the study, however, for its failure to specify exactly what levels of funding would be needed to accomplish such goals.\textsuperscript{143} Both Acheson and Nitze have responded to those criticisms, explaining they were very aware of the disparity between requested and available means.\textsuperscript{144} The study’s purpose, however, was to define the threats facing the U.S. and the options it had for countering those threats. Naturally, this meant some analysis of the military situation must take place. The study acknowledged a “sharp disparity” between American military commitments and the means available to fulfill them. The study also stated that the world situation as a whole, instead of just the present U.S. military commitments, should determine the level of U.S. military capabilities.\textsuperscript{145} In other words, instead of preparing only for current commitments, the U.S. must instead take stock of the world situation and the likely trends of threats, and act accordingly.

In response to the debate generated by Samuel Wells’ fall 1979 article, “NSC 68: Sounding the Tocsin,”\textsuperscript{146} the editors of International Security asked for the opinions of historian John Lewis Gaddis and NSC 68’s main author, Paul Nitze. In the article, Gaddis addressed the question of commitments and the means to fulfill them. He speculated that the NSC 68’s authors may have seen a solution to the differences of commitments and means in the belief that “[c]onsiderations of priority and economy might be appropriate in normal times, but in the face of a threat such as that posed by the Soviet Union, preoccupations

\textsuperscript{143} Wells, 139.
\textsuperscript{145} NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950}, I, 261.
\textsuperscript{146} See the footnote about the article, earlier in this chapter.
of this sort had to go by the board.” This was not to say that priorities would never be considered—NSC did not adopt that stance at all. Gaddis’s point, however, which can be seen throughout NSC 68, was that the U.S. believed the Soviet Union represented an increasing worldwide threat. When combined with the potential benefits to the Soviet Union of piecemeal aggression, areas that might otherwise have been considered less vital assumed new, sometimes significant, importance. NSC 68 still advocated measured response, but it broadened the area in which that response could potentially take place.

Nitze confirmed this reasoning, explaining the drafters’ beliefs in his 1993 National War College lecture.

As we saw it, Soviet ideology took seriously the Marxist/Leninist view that Communist socialism was destined, eventually, to triumph everywhere and that it was their duty to assist that historic process in every practicable way. Thus, as we saw it, the contest was not one of competition over specific national interests; it had an absolute ideological quality about it, which, from the Soviet side, did not permit compromise.

Although Nitze explained that some others did not share the drafters’ belief of the threat’s severity, it is nonetheless clear that NSC 68 represented the growing conviction that the Soviet threat was unprecedented, and was not going to decrease in the foreseeable future.

Even though NSC 68 focused on the military response, it did not count negotiation with the Soviet Union out of the question. It was understood that any such negotiation, however, would take place in a unique environment. One of the fundamental characteristics of the Soviet Union that NSC 68 established from the

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147 Gaddis and Nitze, 167.
149 Ibid.
beginning was its requirement for absolute conformity, both in the Soviet Union proper, and in its satellites.\textsuperscript{150} Throughout the document, Nitze and the other authors described ways in which that tendency challenged communication with the West. However, NSC 68 also explained how building up the non-communist world was essential to any communication that \textit{might} occur. The assumption was not that the Soviet Union would suddenly come to communicate with the West on the latter’s terms. Instead, NSC 68 believed that Western actions could “gradually…bring about a Soviet acknowledgement of realities which in sum will eventually constitute a frustration of the Soviet design.”\textsuperscript{151}

With this prospect in mind, it was to the advantage of the U.S., and the non-communist world as a whole, to maintain communication with the Soviet Union. NSC 68 described a complete absence of diplomatic relations as deleterious, in fact.

At the same time, it is essential to the successful conduct of a policy of ‘containment’ that we always leave open the possibility of negotiation with the U.S.S.R. A diplomatic freeze—and we are in one now—tends to defeat the very purposes of ‘containment’ because it raises tensions at the same time that it makes Soviet retractions and adjustments in the direction of moderated behavior more difficult. It also tends to inhibit our initiative and deprives us of opportunities for maintaining a moral ascendancy in our struggle with the Soviet system. In ‘containment’ it is desirable to exert pressure in a fashion which will avoid so far as possible directly challenging Soviet prestige, to keep open the possibility for the U.S.S.R. to retreat before pressure with a minimum loss of face and to secure political advantage from the failure of the Kremlin to yield or take advantage of the openings we leave it.\textsuperscript{152}

The paper continued, explaining that these concepts had failed thus far, and that part of the reason for the “diplomatic impasse” with the Soviet Union was due to

\textsuperscript{150} NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950, I}, 240.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 242. For further discussion on this, see pp. 242-245, 272-273, among others.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 253.
a significant decline in U.S. military capacity.\textsuperscript{153} Gaddis pointed out, however, that NSC 68’s call for military increase did not mean it called for offensive action:

It should be emphasized that the authors of NSC-68 saw this build-up as defensive in nature. They rejected preventive war as both unfeasible—since it would rely on atomic weapons which in themselves might not compel capitulation or deter attacks on allies—and morally repugnant. A ‘first blow’ against the U.S.S.R. could be justified only if it was ‘demonstrably in the nature of a counter-attack to a blow which is on its way or about to be delivered.’ Nor should a war with the Soviet Union, if one occurred, seek annihilation of the enemy… The idea here, in short, was calibration: to do no less, but also no more, than was required to safeguard American interests.\textsuperscript{154}

In addition to the military increase, NSC 68 also explained the necessity of maintaining economic aid to those areas most affected by World War II (which many believed were the most vulnerable to potential Soviet advances). It was in this respect that U.S. interaction with Korea most clearly figured. NSC 68 determined that “an essential element in a program to frustrate Kremlin design is the development of a successfully functioning system among the free nations. It is clear that economic conditions are among the fundamental determinants of the will and the strength to resist subversion and aggression.”\textsuperscript{155} Just as it had been established in earlier policies, NSC 68 called for continued aid to areas like Japan, the Philippines, and Korea.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{154} John Lewis Gaddis, \textit{Strategies of Containment}, 100. The quotes within this come from NSC 68 (\textit{FRUS: 1950, I}, 282)—this section was discussing the drawbacks to attempting a preemptive war strategy.
NSC 68 and the Korean War

Although NSC 68 established a U.S. security policy much closer to perimeter defense than strongpoint defense, it did not commit U.S. forces to indiscriminate action across the globe. Nitze and others have reiterated the authors’ recognition of the limitations of U.S. means. So how did Korea become such a significant focus of U.S. security policy, in many ways assuring NSC 68’s dramatic changes would be accepted, at a time when Korea was not one of America’s vital defense centers? One of the biggest reasons was the increasing extent of communist advances in the Far East. With the establishment of the Communist Chinese state in 1949, many saw the Soviet Union’s attention turning more toward China. This represented a greater threat to existing non-communist states in the Far East, including the Republic of Korea. In a memo to Secretary of State Acheson in January 1950, however, Kennan warned that despite the increased threat, the U.S. must carefully measure its response. He believed countries in the Far East were likely more susceptible to communist influence because of their internal unsettlement, generally negative ideas about the West, and what he saw as political immaturity. He called for measured response, perhaps not even military in nature, explaining that the U.S.’s best chance for success in the region lay in its relations with non-communist countries.156

Kennan clearly recognized the potential threat to the balance of power if the Soviet Union were able to gain significant advances in the Far East. Shortly after the Korean War began, he “acknowledged that ‘if these developments

156 “Memorandum by the Counselor (Kennan) to the Secretary of State,” Confidential [611.00/1-650], (Washington, 6 January 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 129, 132.
proceed in a way favorable to Soviet purposes and prestige, and unfavorable to our own, there will scarcely be any theater of the east-west conflict which will not be adversely affected thereby.’”157 As was mentioned before (see Chapter I), the U.S. decision to act in Korea, despite it not being one of the identified strategically vital centers, has been viewed by many as a reversal in national security policy. This change, however, was not out of line with the precepts set forth in NSC 68. One of the primary emphases of NSC 68 was the need for the U.S. to respond actively to Soviet advances, and to possess a force capable of backing up that response, if necessary. As one historian explained it, the U.S decision to act in Korea was based largely on the conviction that, even though Korea was not strategically vital, it was vital for U.S. politics and prestige.

By acting in Korea, American leaders hoped to deter the Soviets from launching other local aggressions and, thereby, to make a general war less likely. … American leaders feared that failure to oppose the North Korean aggression would markedly weaken (a) the prestige and position of the United States in the cold war; (b) the United Nations and the principle of collective security; and therefore, also (c) the forces of opposition to Communist expansion throughout the world.158

Moreover, NSC 68 viewed “‘piecemeal aggression’ as an instrument of war,” and thus as dangerous, especially when individual steps were viewed as part of a broader goal.159 Therefore, the U.S. could not allow the North Korean invasion to go unchecked. During the summer of 1950, an ad hoc committee further considered NSC 68 at Truman’s request, defining the focus for budget increases. The resulting draft, NSC 68/1, was given to Truman 21 September

159 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 97.
Its introduction explained the impact of the North Korean invasion on policymakers. First, “[t]he invasion of the Republic of Korea…has amply demonstrated both the nature of the Soviet threat to the United States, and the willingness of the communist leaders to employ force to achieve their objectives as delineated in NSC 68, even at the risk of global war.” It further explained, “[a]s stated in the President’s message, the nature of this attack has removed any doubt as to the willingness of the communist leaders to employ force, prepared in stealth and delivered with surprise, in disregard of international commitments and without provocation.”

One dominant aspect of the U.S. decision to act in Korea was the U.S. propensity to equate North Korean communist success with Soviet success. Gaddis explained that NSC 68 focused on the Soviet threat, but he pointed out that

[a] victory for communism in a particular country might not, in the long run, be a gain for the Soviet Union, but it was certain in the short run to appear as a loss for the United States. … American interests, NSC-68 had argued, depended as much on the perception of power as on power itself; if the United States even appeared to be losing ground to its adversaries, the effects could be much the same as if that loss had actually occurred.

This conviction of a general communist threat was fueled by the fear that Soviet unwillingness to risk an all-out war with the U.S. meant conflicts would most likely occur in secondary areas. NSC 68 emphasized the variety of areas and ways

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160 NSC 68/1 was completed 21 September 1950, and on 30 September 1950 President Truman approved NSC 68’s conclusions as part of NSC 68/2. See the timeline on pp. 18-19 of Drew, Forging the Strategy of Containment for a good tracking of the approval process.

161 “Draft: Tentative Report by the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” in “Note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security,” NSC 68/1 (21 September, 1950), in Drew, 103. NSC 68/1 was not included in the Foreign Relations series.

the Soviet Union might attack the West. Even though this analysis did not differentiate areas of priority as Kennan had done, it did acknowledge that the Soviet Union would likely act in its satellite areas, out of a hesitancy to provoke all-out war. The peripheral nature of the threat did not diminish the U.S. need to respond, however. Though any fighting would likely be between the U.S. and a proxy of the Soviet Union, not the Soviet Union itself, the Soviet Union nonetheless remained the United States’ primary threat. This remained the case even beyond the first months of the Korean War. In a meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in December 1950, “Acheson warned the Joint Chiefs of Staff that ‘the great trouble is that we are fighting the wrong nation. We are fighting the second team, whereas the real enemy is the Soviet Union.’”

Conclusion

NSC 68 was not officially approved until after the Korean War started and U.S. forces were committed to the peninsula. However, its general acceptance and influence in the months leading up the war, especially when combined with the influence of containment as a general policy between 1946 and 1949, provided the reasoning on which the U.S. based its involvement in Korea. As will be seen in the next chapter, containment influenced the way the U.S. interpreted developments such as the Soviet atomic bomb, the question of atomic diplomacy, and the communist revolt in China. These factors in turn directed U.S. involvement in Korea, establishing the war as the first of the proxy wars in the

Cold War, and underscoring the U.S. conviction that it must halt communist aggression, wherever it occurred.
CHAPTER III

THE INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE:
THE COMPELLING NATURE OF ATOMIC DIPLOMACY AND THE
COMMUNIST THREAT

1. THE ATOMIC QUESTION

One of the major questions surrounding U.S. national security and military involvement between 1945 and 1950 was how best to use atomic power. Between 1945 and 1950, international relations became increasingly tied to nuclear weapons as tools for both defense and negotiation. In the U.S., a reliance on nuclear weapons reinforced demobilization and budget decisions that left the U.S. with a military force inadequate for its growing commitments. The integration of nuclear weapons into U.S. national security policy also reflected a growing anxiety about Soviet intentions and capabilities. These and other factors combined in an environment that heightened international tensions and fostered suspicion in international relations.

NCS 68 encapsulated U.S. assumptions about the Soviet Union and America’s relation and response to it. The question of requisite military force figured prominently in the document, which emphasized the U.S potential for a strong military, but only if the administration took actions to build it up adequately.\textsuperscript{164} NSC 68 also acknowledged the current U.S. dependency on atomic

weapons and discussed at length the expected place and effect of those weapons in a major war with the Soviet Union. The U.S. based its atomic strategy as much on deterrence as on the actual use of atomic weapons in warfare. NSC 68’s authors also understood the potential risks of both the U.S. and Soviet Union building up their atomic weapon stockpiles, however. By 1950, tension and suspicion had grown to levels at which the existence of nuclear weapons seemed as likely to incite war as deter it.\textsuperscript{165}

The potential use of atomic weapons was not without its drawbacks, as policymakers knew. NSC 68, for example, pointed out the limitations of conditions in which the U.S. could realistically use the bomb. Policymakers knew the U.S. could only use the bomb in the case of “clear and compelling” need, and only in a situation that had the support of the general public.\textsuperscript{166} Additional questions surfaced about the actual combat effectiveness of using the bomb against the Soviet Union. Although the U.S. in 1950 still had a clear superiority in atomic weaponry, there were questions as to its true potential use in a military situation. NSC 68’s authors pointed out that, even if the bomb were used against the Soviet Union in a war, it was “doubted whether such a blow, even if it resulted in the complete destruction of the contemplated target systems, would cause the U.S.S.R. to sue for terms or present [prevent] Soviet forces from occupying Western Europe against such ground resistance as could presently be

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\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 266.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 267.
Policymakers did not question whether atomic weapons would have any use; rather, there were questions about how decisive they would be.

Despite these questions, however, atomic weapons became an integral part of U.S. security policy and overall military strategy. The belief that they should be used both as tools and deterrents of war was based largely on the threat the Soviet Union posed to America’s sharply weakened military force. What the U.S. could not sufficiently provide by conventional means, it would compensate for with atomic weapons. This belief had significant implications on how the U.S. exercised its power throughout the Cold War. One of the earliest cases was the Korean War.

**Atomic Trends, 1945-1949**

In the postwar years, the Western world believed the communist threat was steadily increasing and saw atomic technology and the power it provided as a decisive way to establish an advantageous position in international relations. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the United States alone possessed this technology. It was not alone, however, in recognizing the potential of such power. Numerous international conferences were held between 1945 and 1949 for the express purpose of determining the best way to control and regulate atomic power. Although there was discussion about regulating peaceful uses of atomic power, participants at the talks remained acutely aware of the threat posed by

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167 Ibid., 265-266. Brackets in original.
168 One of the most significant reports from these conferences is from George Kennan: “Memorandum by the Counselor (Kennan),” [Extracts], Top Secret [Department of State Atomic Energy Files], “International Control of Atomic Energy,” (Washington, 20 January 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 22-44.
atomic weapons, and the boon such weapons would provide to the defense of whichever countries possessed them. A concentration on atomic weapons was appropriate to the general attitude of the time. With continued improvement in weapons technology, many believed developing a security policy reliant on atomic weapons was the logical step in the face of increasing tensions.

Though scientists continued to advance atomic weapons technology, it was not a foregone conclusion that those weapons would be used, or that the U.S. would center its defense strategy on them. Instead, a variety of factors converged to bring about this reliance. One of the biggest factors was the diminished size and strength of U.S. conventional forces. Part of this change came from the massive demobilization that had taken place in the years following World War II. Between 1945 and 1947, U.S. military manpower had decreased almost 87%, from 12.1 million to 1.6 million men. The military budget dropped almost 84%, from $81 billion to $13 billion over the same two years.169 The U.S. faced increasingly broad and significant international commitments, to which it was progressively unable to respond with an adequate level of support. Limited U.S. conventional capabilities could not adequately counter the large and growing Soviet conventional force.170

Many policymakers, and many in the military, believed atomic weapons would compensate for the lack of conventional forces, at least while the U.S. maintained a nuclear monopoly. Policymakers and scientists alike knew this monopoly would not last forever, however. When the day came that another

power—especially the Soviet Union—achieved an atomic explosion, the U.S. would be forced to seriously reconsider its defensive position.

The nature and frequency of postwar deliberations on the use and control of atomic power made it clear that many nations understood the potential advantage atomic technology could provide for any nation possessing it. On 31 December 1946 the U.N. Commission on Atomic Energy reported to the Security Council: “[T]he development and use of atomic energy are not essentially matters of domestic concern of the individual nations, but rather have predominantly international implications and repercussions.” The postwar years represented a new mentality, heightened by the atomic bomb, in which international situations were more interrelated than ever before.

The Soviet Explosion and the End of the U.S. Nuclear Monopoly

By mid-1949, it had become clear that international agreement on nuclear control was not going to be reached soon, if ever. In light of this breakdown, the U.S. remained more committed than ever to retaining the same kind of nuclear advantage it had enjoyed immediately after the war. Both policymakers and scientists believed the loss of the U.S. monopoly should not prevent the U.S. from establishing itself at the forefront of whatever advances in atomic weapons technology took place. As Truman explained in his memoirs, when discussing the course of the atomic program with members of the U.S. Atomic Energy

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Commission (AEC) and other policymakers, “[I]n my mind I was firmly committed to the proposition that, as long as international agreement for the control of atomic energy could not be reached, our country had to be ahead of any possible competitor. It was my belief that, as long as we had the lead in atomic developments, that great force would help us keep the peace.”

The international situation changed forever on 29 August 1949. As American scientists would confirm over the next month, on that day the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic bomb. The U.S. quickly detected evidence of the explosion, and scientists conducted experiments through most of September, confirming their findings. Truman announced the explosion to the U.S. public on 23 September, emphasizing that the U.S. had expected the Soviet Union to achieve atomic capability. What was entirely unexpected, however, was the timing: the explosion came almost three years earlier than most experts expected. Truman’s immediate reaction, however, indicated this did not truly come as a surprise. As Truman explained in his memoirs, the U.S. “was not unprepared for the Russian atomic explosion. There was no panic, and there was no need for emergency decisions. This was a situation that we had been expecting to happen sooner or later. To be sure, it came sooner than the experts had estimated, but it did not require us to alter the direction of our program.”

Although there were no panicked reactions or emergency decisions, the Soviet

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explosion nonetheless had tremendous impact on the U.S., changing its international position, both real and perceived, and forever altering the U.S.-Soviet relationship.

In light of the recent failure of nuclear arms control talks, the U.S. had been planning an expansion of its nuclear program even before the Soviet nuclear test became known. With the increased Soviet threat, the U.S. believed the only way it could maintain a position of nuclear security was to expand its atomic arsenal to a level that would be sufficient in a conflict. In July 1949, Truman commissioned a special committee of the NSC to study the requirements and implications of expansion. This committee, made up of the Secretaries of Defense and State (Louis Johnson and Dean Acheson), and the Chairman of the AEC (David Lilienthal), worked on the report through the summer, eventually submitting a final draft on 10 October 1949. The report emphasized that, although the Soviet atomic test raised new considerations, the U.S. had been planning to expand its atomic capability for some time.\footnote{This was mostly going to be done by increasing the quality and quantity of both bombs and delivery systems.} That the expansion had been discussed, however, did not change the fact that the Soviet explosion dramatically shifted the international situation.

“[I]t now seemed more important than ever for the United States to accelerate the production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons to meet military requirements before the Soviet Union acquired a ‘significant’ atomic arsenal of its own. In the opinion of the Joint Chiefs, this potential threat made it all the more vital, militarily, psychologically, and politically, for the United States to maintain an overwhelming superiority in atomic weapons and to press ahead with the accelerated program.”\footnote{Steven L. Rearden, \textit{The Formative Years: 1947-1950}, part of the History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense series, Alfred Goldberg, gen. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 1984), 444.}
Going Thermonuclear: Addressing the Question of the Hydrogen Bomb

The discussion on atomic strategy soon turned to serious consideration of the development of a thermonuclear weapon (hydrogen bomb). The idea of a “super,” or fusion, instead of fission, bomb originated in the early 1940s, but the difficulty of its development compared to fission technology led scientists to push it back in favor of developing the types of bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the Soviet atomic explosion, however, the issue of a hydrogen bomb came to the forefront. Scientists believed such a “super,” as it came to be known, could provide a “quantum jump” to preserve the U.S. lead in nuclear weapons.\(^\text{177}\) When combined with the significant effect the Soviet explosion had on the general public, “which shattered the relative confidence the United States had enjoyed during four years of atomic weapons monopoly,”\(^\text{178}\) it became obvious to many policymakers that the U.S. needed to develop a hydrogen weapon.

The Soviet explosion may not have drastically escalated official U.S. plans for atomic development, but it is clear that once the Soviets achieved atomic capability, the urgency with which those programs were carried out increased dramatically. The program for hydrogen bomb development received a great deal of this new attention. Though the questions and issues about its development had been raised years earlier, “the actual debate over whether to proceed with the H-bomb lasted only a few brief months—from late 1949 to early 1950…”\(^\text{179}\) There

\(^{177}\) Ibid., 447.
\(^{179}\) Rearden, 446.
were, of course, questions of its moral as well as practical utility, the former of which would prove extremely divisive, even among scientists who had worked on and promoted the development of the first atomic bombs. Few people had any doubt, however, that the hydrogen bomb would have significant impact. The issue of whether it should be used or not is beyond the scope of this paper, but the final decision was made that it should—indeed, that it must—be developed, and that decision had lasting implications on U.S. Cold War involvement in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

One of the primary considerations leading to Truman’s approval of development of the bomb was the potential danger if someone else—namely the Soviet Union—were to develop it first. One account in particular indicated the importance of this consideration. When meeting with the NSC’s special committee (Secretaries of State and Defense and the AEC Chairman) on 31 January 1950, Truman demonstrated the urgency of the Soviet factor.

At Acheson’s suggestion, Lilienthal briefly recapitulated some of his arguments against the H-bomb. Truman listened politely for a while but then interrupted before Lilienthal could finish. ‘Can the Russians do it?’ he asked. Everyone agreed that they could. ‘In that case,’ Truman said, ‘we have no choice. We’ll go ahead.’ Without further deliberation he approved the committee’s recommendations and immediate release of the press statement. The decision had been made, and by evening it was headline news.180

A front-page article from the 1 February 1950 New York Times described Truman’s actions in his capacity as Commander in Chief, remarking on the context Truman established in his press release. “It is part of my responsibility as Commander in Chief of the armed forces to see to it that our country is able to

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180 Ibid., 453.
defend itself against any possible aggressor. Accordingly, I have directed the
Atomic Energy Commission to continue its work on all forms of atomic weapons,
including the so-called hydrogen or super-bomb." 181 The article also commented
on the significance of the bomb and Truman’s reaction. “Mr. Truman was as
undramatic in making his announcement as he was last Sept[ember] 23 when he
disclosed that Russia had achieved an atomic explosion—a development that
clearly showed that our absolute dominance in atomic weapons was virtually
ended."182 For the public, the Soviet atomic bomb and Truman’s decision to
develop a hydrogen bomb represented a set of circumstances that appeared
increasingly threatening to the United States.

For the administration, however, the threat these events represented
prompted changes that fit closely with general trends in American defense and
security policy. The hydrogen bomb project provided a new dimension for a
defense plan that was becoming more centered on atomic weapons. This reliance
had grown since 1948, when “American military planners had become committed
to a strategy based on atomic weapons…in response to Truman’s rigid 1950
defense budget ceiling, which effectively put conventional alternatives out of
reach.”183 Policymakers had begun to realize by early 1950 that the U.S. needed to
move away from this dependence,184 but this change only began in 1950, so the
forces available at the beginning of the Korean War were still at the low 1948-

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182 Ibid., p. 3.
183 Rosenberg, 86.
1949 levels. This understandably impacted how the U.S. chose to involve its forces in Korea.

**The Atomic Threat: Nuclear Weapons and National Security Policy**

Like the fission bomb before it, the hydrogen bomb also became closely associated with deterrence. On 13 January 1950, the JCS sent Defense Secretary Louis Johnson a memorandum reviewing the conclusions the AEC’s General Advisory Committee had made the previous October. This memorandum was typical of the general military position on the hydrogen bomb by early 1950. The JCS called for an immediate, but not “crash,” program of hydrogen bomb development, specifically to determine its technical feasibility and that of potential delivery systems. \(^{185}\) It also addressed questions of military and diplomatic use of the bomb, explaining that for the U.S., it would be an “intolerable position if a possible enemy possessed the bomb and the United States did not.” \(^{186}\) Considering the issue of whether the U.S. should renounce development or use of the hydrogen bomb, the JCS explained the bomb’s necessity in a Cold War context. “In the present world, where peace and security rests \(\text{sic}\) so completely on the military capability of the United States vis-à-vis Communist aggression, it would be foolhardy altruism for the United States voluntarily to weaken its capability by such a renunciation.” \(^{187}\)

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\(^{185}\) “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Secretary of Defense (Johnson),” Top Secret (Washington, 13 January 1950), in *FRUS: 1950, I*, 504.

\(^{186}\) Ibid., 508.

\(^{187}\) Ibid.
Policymakers clearly based many of their decisions on the hydrogen bomb’s value as a deterrent to potential Soviet aggression. Deterrence, the U.S. believed, required clear American nuclear superiority. The hydrogen bomb’s role in maintaining that superiority was self-evident to many, including the JCS. The JCS presentation of the hydrogen bomb as a logical next step in American national security policy helped speed Truman’s approval. Low budget ceilings still held U.S. defense forces at insufficient levels, and the threat from Soviet conventional forces was not lessening. Under these circumstances, when the U.S. was still unwilling to devote massive amounts of money to a military buildup, atomic weapons in general, and the hydrogen bomb in particular, were attractive solutions for U.S. inadequacies.

The *New York Times* article announcing Truman’s decision also indicated that “Truman regarded the hydrogen bomb as a progressive outgrowth of the United States production of the uranium-plutonium atomic bomb.”\(^\text{188}\) As important as this logical progression was, however, the potential benefit to American national security was an even more significant factor.

Far more important, the JCS offered this analysis in the context of its recent presentation to the president on American military weakness vis-à-vis Soviet conventional forces and the desperate need to upgrade the United States’ atomic capability. Within such a strategic context, the need to develop the most powerful weapons possible…seemed unavoidable.\(^\text{189}\)

Although military planners advocated development of the hydrogen bomb, they generally did not believe the Soviet Union yet had sufficient atomic weapons to threaten the U.S. Thus the military’s main concern remained focused on Soviet

\(^{188}\) Leviero, p. 1.

\(^{189}\) Rosenberg, 83.
conventional forces through early 1950. In February 1950, however, some of this focus changed in response to a memorandum by Brigadier General Herbert B. Loper, a member of the AEC’s Military Liaison Committee (MLC). In this memorandum, Loper theorized that if the Soviet Union had been involved in atomic development since the early 1940s, it might potentially have reached a level comparable to that of the United States, and thus could be a much greater threat than contemporary intelligence believed. Though this memorandum was only hypothetical, it “verbalized for the first time the unspoken anxiety that had been growing in military circles since the Soviet atomic blast, and that had been further aggravated by recent reports on Soviet atomic espionage. Although it did not invent new concepts, it effectively mobilized military thinking around a new perception of atomic strategy.”190

Even though Loper himself warned that his “speculations were of a ‘fantastic order,’ ” he was not alone in believing the theory should not be completely disregarded.191 Although officials did not accept Loper’s theories as fact, it is clear the memorandum encouraged existing anxieties. Policies such as NSC 68 reflected an increasingly tangible fear of Soviet actions. The impact of Loper’s memorandum is one indication of how U.S. officials perceived the Soviet threat: animosity between the countries was so great, and recent developments had cultivated such suspicion that even a purely hypothetical—and highly unlikely—scenario had enough impact to transform, in the minds of military policymakers, the opponent they were facing. Though available evidence did not

190 Ibid., 84.
191 Ibid.
support Loper’s hypothesis,\textsuperscript{192} the pervasiveness of the contemporary mentality was enough to cause the U.S. to change its view. The upcoming NSC 68 policy paper showed evidence of this connection: the U.S. believed part of the Soviet Union’s fundamental design focused on using whatever actions would most effectively extend its influence around the globe.\textsuperscript{193} Fears generated by Loper’s hypothesis combined with conclusions such as this to create what many believed was a worst-case scenario. Drawing far-reaching effects from changes that were in reality very small was a common phenomenon in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and helps explain why the U.S. would see such significance in communist movement in an area previously given only peripheral importance.

**Atomic Policy and the Korean War**

The reevaluation that took place in NSC 68 was the product of numerous new factors and considerations that had become relevant by early 1950. One of the key characteristics of NSC 68 was that “[f]or the first time since the war, military planning concepts were tied to an explicit body of assumptions about the political and technological state of the world.”\textsuperscript{194} Anxieties over Soviet intentions exerted some of the strongest influence on policymakers. With the apparently rapidly shrinking gap between Soviet capabilities and intentions, the international

\textsuperscript{192} The timetable Loper proposed was, for instance, inconsistent with what the U.S. knew about the Soviet explosion of its atomic bomb.

\textsuperscript{193} NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in *FRUS: 1950, I*, 243 (the comment on this page refers to the definition of the “fundamental design” of the Soviet Union, as defined on p. 238).

climate was growing extremely volatile. In such a climate, the U.S. could not allow any Soviet expansion to proceed without clear response.

The Soviet Union had long made clear its intentions to expand its authority, particularly at the expense of areas under Western influence. NCS 68 and other policy papers of the late 1940s indicated that the Soviet Union had not lessened in this desire. On the contrary, many policymakers believed that since Soviet capabilities were improving, the Soviet Union would see this time (especially 1950-1954)\(^{195}\) as the best opportunity for expansion, in an attempt to improve its footing in relation to the West. Policymakers were afraid Soviet actions could draw the U.S. into war if the Soviet Union believed it had enough of an advantage. Additionally, the U.S. was convinced that every Soviet action was driven by the fundamental communist ideology.\(^{196}\) Combating this ideology, in turn, was the heart of the U.S. objective in the Cold War. This consideration thus exercised heavy influence on U.S. decisions in response to Soviet actions.

During the spring of 1950, the U.S. began to believe that Korea might be a location that would offer the Soviet Union the strategic and ideological victory it sought. The Central Intelligence Agency submitted a memorandum evaluating North Korea’s capabilities less than a week before the outbreak of hostilities. Part of the report dealt with the Soviet position on North Korea, which analysts felt was determined primarily by Korea’s strategic location. The report indicated that Soviet interest in the peninsula was not limited to influencing North Korea. The


\(^{196}\) Policymakers had understood this for years. See Kennan’s Long Telegram and “X” article as examples.
CIA explained that “northern Korea provides a base for eventual extension of
Soviet control over southern Korea, which, if accomplished, would give the
Soviet Union a further strategic advantage in its positional relationship with Japan
and consequently enhance the position of the USSR vis-à-vis the US in the Far
East.”197 This fear of Soviet expansion and the resulting shift in the balance of
power was a significant factor driving U.S. defense policy, often directly
determining the areas on which the U.S. focused.

Once the war started, and especially after the Chinese entered in late 1950,
the question of whether and how the U.S. might use the atomic bomb became
even more important. Though some policymakers were finding the bomb’s
potential uses significantly narrowing,198 it was not ruled out entirely.199
Interestingly, some policymakers were coming to the realization that the atomic
bomb by itself was no longer sufficient to deter potential Soviet moves.200 It is
clear the U.S. entered the war largely basing its actions on the same conclusions
that led to NSC 68. Though many such conclusions were based on the military
utility of atomic weaponry (fission or fusion), the potential use of atomic weapons
in the field remained extremely complex and uncertain. Some historians have

197 “Memorandum by the Central Intelligence Agency,” Secret [FE Files: Lot 55D275], Current Capabilities
198 Some documents indicated that the bomb would not have a decisive effect: “Memorandum by the Director
of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze),” Top Secret [Policy Planning Staff Files], (Washington, 4 November
1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 1041-1042; others discuss the limitations of using the bomb, in the interests of
international relations and potentially escalating threats: Roger Dingman, “Atomic Diplomacy during the
Korean War,” in International Security, vol. 13, no. 3 (Winter, 1988-1989), 66-69; see also NSC 68 (FRUS:
1950, I, 251-252, 265-267, 272) for discussions of potential limitations of atomic weapons in direct war with
the Soviet Union.
199 The previous memorandum kept open the possibility of using atomic weapons, but only under U.N.
jurisdiction. This memorandum discusses atomic weapons’ potential use in more concrete terms.
“Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Chinese Affairs (Clubb) to the Assistant Secretary of State for
Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk),” Top Secret [795A.5/11-750], (Washington, 7 November 1950), in FRUS: 1950,
I, 1090.
200 Ibid., 1091.
pointed out that despite the far-reaching implications if it were used, the U.S. nonetheless remained open to using an atomic bomb in Korea.

If there was to be a military contest with the Chinese Communists, the bomb apparently was of little military utility, nor evidently could it be used as a threat to forestall counter-intervention by the Soviets. This was also part of the atmosphere of the times—especially with respect to any official contemplation in public of its use against Asians so soon after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, the Korean War also eroded this constraint on the United States calculations of usable power in conflict situations. Truman did not unequivocally rule out the use of the bomb.201

Historians at the time also understood the limitations. The Council on Foreign Relations’ United States in World Affairs series explained the perspective after the Korean War had started.

The Korean attack, and its support by the Soviet Government even after the United States had decided to intervene, suggested that the deterrent effect of our atomic bomb stockpile was less absolute than had been hoped. Not only was the atomic bomb of little use under field conditions such as obtained in Korea, but its availability for retaliation against the U.S.S.R. itself evidently would not prevent that country from proceeding in its own way against nations that lay within reach.202

The increasing number of international considerations among both allies and adversaries meant the U.S. faced new limitations on using the bomb in Korea. The U.S. could neither risk greatly increasing the threat of global war that could result from using the bomb in agreement with its allies, nor could the U.S. afford to alienate its allies in the event that it made a unilateral decision to use the bomb. It is an interesting testament to the compelling nature of atomic diplomacy at this time that the U.S. still kept the nuclear option open.

201 Brown, in Guttmann, 257.
2. COMMUNIST INFLUENCE ON THE KOREAN CONFLICT

The U.S. was also concerned with exactly how the Soviet Union and Communist China were influencing North Korea. Fear of potential Soviet (and later Chinese) endeavors in peripheral areas of the world played a significant role in determining U.S. foreign and military policy positions in the postwar years. This fear was reinforced by the Soviet Union’s expansionist philosophy, and general changes in the balance between communist and non-communist powers in the late 1940s. As previous chapters have shown, potential communist threats—both perceived and real—formed the basis for the majority of U.S. foreign policies established between 1945 and 1950.

The U.S. designated areas of priority for defense against communist influence, and though Western Europe retained the highest priority, the vulnerability of U.S.-influenced areas in the Far East became more apparent as the 1940s drew to a close. Policymakers had reached the conclusion that certain areas of the Far East were much more crucial than others. That conclusion, however, did not prevent increased Soviet and Chinese activity in the region from alerting the U.S. to the possibility that even non-vital areas might come to assume great importance in the overall world balance. The U.S. closely associated communist activity with a rapidly changing world balance, attributing even greater significance to events such as the communist victory in China. Because of this association, the U.S. felt it increasingly necessary to respond clearly and decisively in any threatened areas, particularly if those areas were traditionally
under American influence. This naturally had specific implications for involvement in Korea.

Since the war, historians have debated the extent to which the Soviet Union and China influenced the Korean conflict. Some influence has been obvious, such as the flow of Chinese forces into Korea in late 1950. Other effects have been less easily discerned, particularly that of the Soviet Union on the North Korean invasion itself. However, since the fall of the Soviet Union, more sources have become available, helping to provide a fuller picture of both Soviet and Chinese influence on North Korea’s decision to initiate aggression in June 1950. It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss in depth all the potential influences on North Korea’s attack. However, it is important to establish, as well as can be done, the Soviet Union’s and China’s basic role in the conflict, and the effect that role had on determining the nature of U.S. involvement.

**The Communist Revolution in China**

The Communist victory in China in October 1949 had a pronounced effect on the U.S. position on the Far East. This impact has been relatively clear in historical studies. Debate has centered on the extent of this effect, however, and the exact manner in which U.S. actions and policies were shaped by it. There is no doubt that American sympathies lay from the beginning with Nationalist China, the members of whose government had fled to Taiwan shortly after the revolution. However, most U.S. policymakers recognized the potential quagmire of becoming too deeply involved in a conflict with China, so U.S. aid to
Nationalist Chinese forces on Taiwan before the outbreak of the Korean War was limited. Some officials, like Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, believed the U.S. should support Taiwan with a “‘modest, well-directed, and closely-supervised program of military aid.’” Secretary of State Acheson did not agree, and Truman’s 5 January 1950 decision about aiding Nationalist China defined the official U.S. position, removing it from direct involvement in the divided country.

The United States has no desire to obtain special rights or privileges, or to establish military bases on Formosa [Taiwan] at this time. Nor does it have any intention of utilizing its Armed Forces to interfere in the present situation. The United States Government will not pursue a course which will lead to involvement in the civil conflict in China.203

Perhaps more significant than direct involvement with Nationalist China were the implications the U.S. drew from the new situation in the Far East as a whole. Some officials believed the U.S. needed to observe the developing impact of Communist China carefully, but that it should not be immediately categorized as hostile or dangerous. In a 6 January 1950 memorandum, Kennan explained what he thought was the necessary U.S. response to developments in the Far East. He believed it was most important for the U.S. to foster good relations with non-communist countries, and that only by doing so would the U.S. strengthen its position in the area and establish a foundation from which to prevent further communist expansion.

In [the] cold war, we are holding our own, on balance. [The] Tito controversy [Yugoslavia’s break from Soviet communism] has roughly offset communist successes in China, [the] full significance of which is not yet clear. But victory in [the] cold war will be a meaningless concept if we do not make real progress in development of our relations with [the]

203 Schnabel and Watson, 15-16.
non-communist world. Here we must proceed with courage, insight and restraint demanded of us as [a] great power…

Kennan’s emphasis on establishing a foundation of non-communist countries conformed to his views that the most effective way the U.S. could combat communism was not by confronting it directly, but instead by building up non-communist countries. These countries would provide an additional buffer in the physical sense, and would also benefit the U.S. in the world balance of power. The communist victory in China, therefore, represented a dual threat to the U.S. In the practical sense, there was the danger rising from such a significantly larger land area now controlled by communist powers. China had a massive population from which it could draw a “more or less inexhaustible” military force, if needed. Additionally, the cessation of internal hostilities in China directly impacted the situation in Korea. As one historian explained, there was a growing belief in the U.S. (primarily among the military), that once the communists achieved victory in China, “the tens of thousands of Koreans who had fought in their armies would return to the North and provide the DPRK with a decisive advantage over its enemy. Under such circumstances, the seventy-five hundred American soldiers in the South would be in a highly vulnerable position.”

204 “Memorandum by the Counselor (Kennan) to the Secretary of State,” Confidential [611.00/1-650], (Washington, 6 January 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 138. As regards Kennan’s statement that Yugoslavia offset China, other documents, including NSC 68, seem to indicate the U.S. believed there might be potential to incite similar types of splits with the Soviet Union among other communist countries. If successful, this would help the U.S. in its efforts to bolster anti-Soviet sentiment. Kennan did remain committed to reconciliation by negotiation, however, so his statements may have reflected that sentiment more than anything else.
205 Stebbins, 402.
206 William Stueck, Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 78. Although these troops were all withdrawn by the end of June 1949, the U.S. set up a permanent military advisory board to stay in South Korea. This established a U.S. military presence, but without the forces in place or potential reinforcements typically available in such situations. Whether the additional tens of thousands of Koreans surfaced or not, the U.S. had indeed established a
The second aspect of the Communist Chinese threat concerned the position and prestige of the U.S. on the world stage. The outcome of the revolution was a clear victory for worldwide communism. The U.S. concern with maintaining the world balance, combined with policymakers’ association of world communism with the Soviet Union, gave the Communist Chinese victory even greater significance. The U.S. faced a difficult choice. Even though the U.S. clearly supported Nationalist China, Truman could not afford to risk overextending his limited resources. It appears, however, the fears of all-out war with China, if the U.S. became to deeply involved with Taiwan, were balanced with the fear that complete U.S. withdrawal would provide too great an opportunity for Communist China to extend its influence. In his 5 January 1950 decision, Truman authorized continued economic aid to, in addition to extending diplomatic recognition only to, Nationalist China.\textsuperscript{207} The latter would prove to be a critical factor in the first days of the Korean War.

The U.N. Security Council’s five permanent members were the United States, Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China. After the communist victory in China, the U.N. recognized only Nationalist China, allotting it China’s seat among the permanent members.

The Soviet Union began an unsuccessful campaign to have Communist China admitted to the United Nations and to the permanent seat on the UN Security Council that was allotted to China in the UN Charter. On 13 January 1950 the Soviet delegate, Yakov A. Malik, left the Council, announcing that his country would not participate in its proceedings or recognize the legality of its actions until the representative of the ‘Kuomintang group’ had been ousted. Quite inadvertently, the Soviet

\footnote{\textsuperscript{207}Schnabel and Watson, 16.}
Union thus left the Security Council free to act, unfettered by a Soviet veto, when the Korean crisis erupted five months later.208

The Soviet boycott of the Security Council, which would last until 1 August 1950, was, as one contemporary history explained, a disturbing indication of the Soviet mindset. The boycott “showed more dramatically than any previous incident, the contemptuous indifference of the Kremlin to the accepted international ideals of the time. And it offered a disquieting suggestion of the lengths to which Moscow might go in trying to impose its will on nations that disagreed with it.”209 As the history indicated, rarely were Soviet actions viewed as isolated incidents. Instead, they were seen in the much larger context of what the U.S. believed was the fundamental Soviet design. In this case, the Soviet boycott directly impacted U.S. and U.N. entry into the Korean conflict.

The conflict in China remained important to the U.S., as was evidenced by the deployment of the Seventh Fleet to the waters off Taiwan in the early hours after the Korean War began.210 However, China’s more immediate impact on the U.S. and its actions in Korea came from the way it disrupted the balance of power in the Far East. To the U.S., the communist victory in China represented a significant victory for communism in general, further heightening the tension in the Far East. As one historian explained, the U.S. felt part of this impact because the potential conditions for a significantly divided world were no longer hypothetical. It was now an “immense strategic fact of life.”211

208 Ibid.
209 Stebbins, 41.
210 Ibid., 207.
211 Brown, in Guttman, 246.
American Understanding of Soviet Involvement in the Korean Conflict

The other, more important, consideration regarding potential communist involvement in the Far East was the influence many in the West believed the Soviet Union was exerting on North Korea. Policymakers generally believed at the time that the main danger to U.S. interests in the Far East (and certainly to the world in general) was from the Soviet Union. This was evident in the numerous instances where documents equated the communist threat with the Soviet threat. The U.S. believed strategically vulnerable areas in the Far East were particularly subject to the expansionist desires of the Soviet Union.212

As previous chapters have shown, the early postwar determination of U.S. Far East policies was predicated on the potential danger those areas might face if threatened by the Soviet Union. This in part explains the emphasis the U.S. placed on its defensive perimeter in the late 1940s, which included Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines. Numerous documents and histories have demonstrated the U.S. belief that any Soviet advance, whether it was in an area identified as strategically significant or not, was intolerable. Whether the U.S. would respond depended on the situation, but the concept and extensive significance of Soviet expansion meant it could not be ignored.

U.S. policy in the Far East in relation to the Soviet Union developed further in conjunction with an overall firmer stance against Soviet pressures worldwide. Though the U.S. remained committed to the Japan-Ryukyus-Philippines defensive perimeter it had identified, it was quickly becoming clear that vulnerabilities existed elsewhere that the U.S. might soon need to address.

212 Stebbins, 31, 244.
Despite an inability to respond adequately to such threats, between early 1948 and early 1950 the U.S. Far East stance began addressing more concretely the question of potential involvement with areas not on its defensive perimeter.\textsuperscript{213} The emphasis on the principles of Soviet expansion that lay at the root of the containment policy provided further justification for the U.S. Far East policies. Thus, when it became clear in August and September 1947 that the postwar agreements for developing a four-power joint commission in Korea (per the Moscow Agreements of December 1945) would not be resolved,\textsuperscript{214} the U.S. believed the Soviet refusals demonstrated a fundamental unwillingness to reconcile with U.S. interests.

The effects of the two countries’ intrinsic distrust became evident in Korea by 1948. Korea had been artificially divided after World War II, with the Soviet Union occupying the country north of the 38\textsuperscript{th} parallel, and the U.S. occupying the southern portion. Attempts to reconcile the two areas under one governing body acceptable to both the U.S. and Soviet Union failed. Though the reasons for this continued divide were extensive and complex, the overall situation seemed to the U.S. to demonstrate a Soviet intent to extend its influence beyond northern Korea.


“The persistent refusal[s] of the Soviet Union to cooperate in good faith with the U.S. … have made inescapable the conclusion that the predominant aim of Soviet policy in Korea is to achieve eventual Soviet domination of the entire country.”215 Policymakers had long understood the Soviet desire to unify Korea under its control.216 In the climate of the late 1940s, it is easy to understand why Soviet refusals would have heightened this assumption. Moreover, the “extension of Soviet control over all of Korea would enhance the political and strategic position of the Soviet Union with respect to both China and Japan, and adversely affect the position of the U.S. in those areas and throughout the Far East.” The U.S. believed that if it withdrew while the Soviet Union remained in such an advantageous position, it “might well lead to a fundamental realignment of forces in favor of the Soviet Union throughout that part of the world.”217

U.S. policymakers closely associated any North Korean threats with corresponding capabilities and intentions of the Soviet Union. Both Americans and Koreans in the ROK believed the threat of the Soviet Union extending its influence was growing throughout 1949, especially as the U.S. finalized preparations to withdraw its occupation forces in the middle of that year. The Soviet Union had withdrawn its forces from North Korea at the end of 1948, but the U.S., for various reasons, kept its forces in the South until mid-1949. In the spring of 1949, as the U.S. officials made those preparations, policymakers and

215 “Report by the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Korea,” Top Secret – NSC 8 (Washington, 2 April 1948), enclosure in “Note by the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Souers) to President Truman,” Top Secret, NSC 8 [895.50 recovery/8-1248], (Washington, 2 April 1948), [hereafter NSC 8] in FRUS: 1948, VI, 1167. The footnote in the text indicates that NSC 8 was approved by President Truman on 8 April, and communicated to Seoul on 26 April.
216 This belief is discussed throughout Chapters I-IV.
217 NSC 8, in FRUS: 1948, VI, 1167.
U.S. officials in South Korea increasingly feared Soviet action once U.S. troops had left. Much of this fear can be tied back to the close association between Soviet and North Korean policies and intentions.

The U.S. believed more than ever that the Soviet Union was building up North Korea “in [the] typical Communist monolithic disciplined mould,” as a telegram from the American mission in Korea explained in February 1949.\(^\text{218}\) The telegram continued, reinforcing the general belief that the Soviet Union was increasing its readiness and willingness to seek expansion by violence, if necessary. The U.S. was convinced that more than anything, the Soviet Union believed Korean unity was the “creation by any and all means of [a] Soviet controlled Korean Communist state. Soviets would, of course, prefer to accomplish their objective without bloodshed, but if that [were] not possible, [the] Soviets [would be] quite willing in our opinion to plunge Korea into [the] abyss of civil war.”\(^\text{219}\)

The close connection the U.S. made between communism in general and Soviet communism in particular became evident once fighting broke out on the peninsula in June 1950. Reactions at the time clearly showed the belief among policymakers and officials in general that the Soviet Union was ultimately responsible for the new crisis. On 6 July 1950, the NSC submitted a report in response to the new situation in Korea. The report discussed “shocks” to which Truman must respond. The first of these identified “the now unmasked great and growing combined military strength of Soviet Russia, and such of its willing and

\(^{218}\) “The Chargé of the American Mission in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State,” Secret [895.00/2-1649: Telegram], (Seoul, 16 February 1949, 2 p.m.), in FRUS: 1949, VII, Part 2, 962.

\(^{219}\) Ibid.
ambitious satellites as China and North Korea.”220 It emphasized that “[w]hen they believe they are ready, the Soviet Union plans to attack the United States, because it is their often reiterated intention to rule the world.”221 It believed, however that “[i]n the interim, the Soviet Union can be expected to harass the United States, through such satellites as North Korea, communist China, and eastern Germany.”222

Although the Soviets initially denied involvement in Korea, Kennan believed they were attempting to divert U.S. attention from the Soviet Union itself by drawing the U.S. into conflict with Soviet satellites.223 Kennan’s belief, fairly common among policymakers at the time, was that the Soviet Union knew the U.S. could not ignore Soviet advances, even if they were in the periphery. A 1951 history by the Council on Foreign Relations saw the significance. “It was certainly ironical, and probably not accidental, that Soviet Communism had attacked in an area where the free nations recognized a positive moral commitment but were utterly without means to back it up.”224

Relatively speaking, this lack of means was accurate. As policymakers discussed throughout NSC 68 and other policy papers such as NSC 73/4, completed 25 August 1950, the U.S. military needed to be substantially increased

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220 “Statement by the Chairman of the National Security Resources Board (Symington) to the National Security Council,” Top Secret [Policy Planning Staff Files], “Suggested Action by the NSC of Consideration of the President in the Light of the Korean Situation,” (Washington, 6 July 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 338.
221 Ibid., 339.
222 Ibid., 340.
224 Stebbins, 200.
if it were going to be effective as a deterrent or offensive force. Despite some statements about the unique nature of Korean hostilities being such that the U.S. military, as it existed early in the war, was insufficient to the task. For instance, an early draft in the NSC 73 series (NSC 73, from 1 July 1950), explained that

our current involvement in the Korean crisis is unique in that it has occurred in the only theater in which the U.S. is capable of conducting immediate general offensive operations with its armed forces. In all other areas discussed herein, the armed forces of the U.S. are either not appropriately positioned or are of such inadequacy as to be incapable of effective action in the event of further crisis.

In NSC 73/4 (the draft that was ultimately approved), the same idea of the U.S. ability to respond adequately did not appear. Perhaps this was because of the changing tenor of the war between the beginning of July and the end of August (see Chapter IV for more details). Regardless of the specific reason, however, it is clear the potential for expansion of conflict with the Soviet Union, whether in Korea or elsewhere, was extremely influential in how the U.S. viewed the fighting in Korea.

This need for military buildup was felt particularly clearly in Korea because many viewed it as only part of a much more extensive Soviet campaign. Some people theorized the Soviet Union set up peripheral conflicts in order to divert American forces, preventing them from responding to a main attack

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elsewhere. This was not an uncommon theory, and it corresponded to the
tendency to view Soviet actions as part of a larger strategy. NSC 73/4 identified
the options left open to the West if the Soviet Union expanded the fighting:

The USSR, by provoking insurrections and satellite armed actions
simultaneously on many fronts, and without openly committing its own
forces, would confront the United States and its allies with the following
alternatives: abandoning positions of vital political and strategic
importance, committing and dissipating available strength on the many
fronts chosen by the USSR, or undertaking global war.²²⁷

Though hindsight has made it obvious the Soviet Union did not expand the
fighting to other peripheral areas in 1950, at the time, policymakers fully believed
the North Korean attack might be the beginning of further aggression. As NSC
73/4 explained, “USSR action in regard to Korea, and its employment of satellite
forces there, should be regarded not as an isolated phenomenon but possibly as
part of a general plan which might involve correlated action in other parts of the
world.”²²⁸

Despite fears of expansion, there was a common belief, promoted by
Kennan and others, that the Soviet Union was not actively seeking war with the
U.S., particularly since it saw itself in a disadvantaged position. Though the
Soviet Union might not resort to outright war, however, the U.S. believed the
Kremlin had given its authorization and blessing for the North Korean attack, and
had likely provided much of the material support. The CIA and other U.S.
intelligence agencies believed that the “‘Democratic People’s Republic’ of
northern Korea [was] a firmly controlled Soviet Satellite that exercise[d] no

²²⁸ Ibid., 379.
independent initiative and depend[ed] entirely on the support of the USSR for existence.”

The Council on Foreign Relations summarized the contemporary perceptions in its 1950 volume.

No one in the West could say definitely by whom or for what purposes the Korean invasion had been ordered, nor how far the U.S.S.R. was prepared to press this latest and most serious attack on the foundations of international morality and the free world. But the Soviet Government’s demeanor soon made it clear that Moscow, while disclaiming responsibility, had at least provisionally made the North Koreans’ cause its own and was determined to squeeze the last drop of political advantage from whatever steps the free nations might take, whether forward or backward.

Although studies from the end of the war in 1953 through the end of the Soviet era in 1991 have come to varying conclusions about the true Soviet involvement in instigating and maintaining North Korean aggression in the Korean War, it is clear policymakers as a whole assumed the Soviet Union had a very large hand in directing the Korean War.

**A Reappraisal of Soviet Intentions**

U.S. accounts have shown that at the beginning of the Korean War, the U.S. clearly believed the Soviet Union’s support was primarily responsible for the North Korean attack. An understanding of Soviet intentions as fundamentally expansionist prompted this conviction. Containment and Far East policies that centered on preventing the spread of communism reinforced these worldviews in

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230 Stebbins, 199.
the minds of Truman and his administration. However, since the Soviet Union’s
collapse in 1991, new archival sources have become available to historians,\textsuperscript{231} and
have done much to fill in the picture of Soviet involvement in Korea in the years
and months prior to and immediately after the war’s beginning.

These archives, when combined with recent secondary studies, give a
picture that is somewhat compatible with U.S. fears at the time, yet provides some
intriguing and crucial differences. There is no doubt the Soviet Union was
influencing North Korean actions, but this relationship was far more complex than
has previously been appreciated. Additionally, archives have shown a closer
interplay between the Soviet Union, North Korea, and China than observers could
have understood at the time. It is true the Soviet Union directly influenced when
North Korea began its aggression. However, the decisions surrounding the
beginning of the war have revealed a wider variety of motives and considerations
on the part of the Soviet Union than historians have previously understood.

Many historians have underscored the impact of the Soviet Union on
Korea’s fundamental desire for unification and independence. This consideration
becomes particularly relevant when we examine the argument that it was
primarily Korea’s desire for unity that drove the North Korean invasion. Historian
William Stueck explained, “The fact is that, however nationalistic Koreans may
have been—they were intensely so—their fate was so closely tied to the designs
of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China that their ability to act

\textsuperscript{231} One of the most accessible archives is the Cold War International History Project (hereafter CWIHP),
online at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, in which foreign documents are translated
into English. For this paper, the most relevant archival collection is The Korean War, accessible online:
<http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.browse&sort=Collection&item=Th
e%20Korean%20War>.
Independently was severely circumscribed.”232 In other words, Stueck concluded that, in order to act, and certainly to act with any degree of effectiveness, the North Koreans were forced to rely on Soviet and Chinese aid and input.

Although observers at the time recognized the existence of multiple communist states in the Far East, the overwhelming emphasis remained on the Soviet Union as the single force behind them. There were isolated accounts that differentiated between Soviet and North Korean motives in the Korean War, however. The Council on Foreign Relations called North Korean (as opposed to referring to them as “communist”) forces “well-trained [and] well-equipped…” It also explained they were “well-indoctrinated,” however, showing the assumption of an inherent tie to the Soviet Union.233 Tying North Korea to the Soviet Union was not at all uncommon. An Intelligence Estimate prepared in the State Department on 25 June 1950 asserted that, “[t]he North Korean Government is completely under Kremlin control and there is no possibility that the North Koreans acted without prior instruction from Moscow.” The following statement clearly illustrated why this association was so persuasive: “The move against South Korea must therefore be considered a Soviet move.”234 Although historians now realize this was a false assumption, at the time it was very compelling. As in the case of the Loper memorandum, fears and anxieties associated with interacting with the Soviet Union fueled the assumption that North Korea was being closely supported by the Soviet Union.

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232 Stueck, 66.
233 Stebbins, 217.
Another comment in the Council on Foreign relations history referred to the Soviet U.N. boycott as “strengthen[ing] [for] some observers…the belief that Premier Kim Il Sung’s regime had ordered the invasion on its own responsibility and without prior approval from the Kremlin.” Those observers believed that if the Soviet Union had a major role in the North Korean aggression, the Soviet Union would have been much better served to remain on the U.N. Security Council, thus preventing the swift resolutions made in the days following the outbreak.

Despite such acknowledgements, however, the overwhelming opinion was that the Soviet Union was directing the attacks. Some, like Kennan, believed the Soviet Union was “exploiting the Asiatic satellites against us,” instead of using Korea as the first stage of a global campaign, “because there was no risk involved for the USSR.” The implication here portrayed the Soviet Union as a cautious, but willing, supporter. The general opinion, however, seems to have been that the conflict represented aggression “by a force that presumably had behind it all the armed power of the Soviet bloc.” This fit the belief that the Soviet Union would likely seek to “drain off the strength of the free world” through a series of “‘little hot wars,’ ” instead of a global conflict. Regardless of the specific motivation policymakers believed was driving the Soviet Union, the U.S. clearly operated under the assumption that the Soviet Union was behind the North Korean attack.

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235 Stebbins, 218.
237 Stebbins, 204.
238 Ibid., 245.
With the release of new archival evidence, it has now become clear that North Korean leader Kim Il Sung actively sought the Soviet Union’s blessing and assistance in launching an attack into the southern portion of Korea. Stueck cited Kim’s request as early as 7 March 1949. Stalin expressed his reservations in a response, giving criteria he would repeat over the next year: “He told Kim to be patient, that his opportunity would come if South Korea attacked first, in which case everyone would support him in a counterattack.” Throughout mid-1949, border skirmishes increased across the 38th parallel, particularly after the U.S. withdrew its troops at the end of June.

After a lull through the end of August, Kim sent another message to Stalin on 3 September 1949, asking for permission to attack. Over a series of communications, Stalin asked Kim to give his assessment of South Korean capabilities and the probability that DPRK forces would receive aid from locals in the ROK. Kim’s response to these and other questions was intriguing, because it pointed out two areas in which Soviet intervention and attitude were significant factors. The cable, sent to Moscow 14 September 1949, related a meeting between Kim and Grigoriy Ivanovich Tunkin, the charge d’affaires of the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang, and former Chief of the First Far Eastern Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this meeting, Kim laid out a plan for DPRK movements. Kim showed he expected direct Soviet aid when he emphasized that “[i]f the

239 Stueck, 70.

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South Korean army is not demoralized as a result of the Ongjin operation, … [it is necessary] to wait until additional arms arrive from the Soviet Union."

Many sources, both before and after the Soviet collapse, have described the flow of Soviet materials into North Korea, though they have varied in their analysis of how important or potentially effective those arms could be."

The more interesting aspect of this cable was Tunkin’s reasoning about potential American involvement. The language was somewhat vague, so it is unclear whether it was Kim himself making this conclusion, or whether it was the members of the meeting as a whole. The cable indicated that fears of American involvement were very real, and were in large part a response to recent developments in the Far East.

Moreover, a drawn out civil war is disadvantageous for the north both militarily and politically. In the first place, a drawn out war gives the possibility to the Americans to render corresponding aid to Syngmann Rhee. After their lack of success in China, the Americans probably will intervene in Korean affairs more decisively than they did in China and, it goes without saying, apply all their strength to save Syngmann Rhee. Further, in case of a drawn out civil war the military casualties, suffering and adversity may elicit in the population a negative mood toward the one who began the war. Moreover, a drawn out war in Korea could be used by the Americans for the purposes of agitation against the Soviet Union and for further inflaming war hysteria."


242 Historian Bruce Cumings, perhaps, downplays the effect of Soviet arms shipments, indicating for example that “Soviet arms shipments to the North consisted, then, of selling them obsolescent equipment…” (Bruce Cumings, Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 2: Roaring of the Cataract, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 447); see Stueck, 71, for the analysis that “Kim was in no position to launch an invasion of the South without massive Soviet support, and he knew it.”

This time the Politburo responded, discouraging action, citing insufficient North Korean forces, no guarantee of rapid victory, and a lack of partisan support in the South. It assured Kim of Stalin’s support in North Korea’s mission to free “the people [who] are waiting for the unification of the country… from the yoke of the reactionary regime.” Despite such endorsement, however, the Politburo reiterated the volatility of the American threat: “Moreover, it is necessary to consider that if military actions begin at the initiative of the North and acquire a prolonged character, then this can give to the Americans cause for any kind of interference in Korean affairs.”

A prescient conclusion, indeed.

By the beginning of 1950, however, the Soviet Union had begun to warm to the idea of a North Korean invasion of the South. This was in part a result of a cable, marked “Strictly secret,” from the Soviet ambassador to North Korea T.F. Shtykov to Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky, in which the former relayed information from a meeting with Kim Il Sung, and Chinese and Korean delegates. In this meeting, Kim requested permission to visit Stalin, in order to have a better chance of obtaining permission for an attack. As Shtykov explained, “Kim said that he himself cannot begin an attack, because he is a communist, a disciplined person and for him the order of Comrade Stalin is law.”

In the event he could not meet with Stalin, Kim was content to meet with Communist Chinese

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leader Mao Tse-tung, since, as Kim emphasized, Mao had “promised to render him assistance after the conclusion of the war in China.”

Stueck saw Stalin’s change of heart as a result of meetings with Kim between 30 March and 25 April 1950. During those meetings, Stalin and Kim discussed the increasingly favorable international situation, including the most significant development: the establishment of Communist China. “Now that Mao was ‘no longer busy with internal fighting,’ he could commit his ‘attention and energy to the assistance of Korea.’ If necessary, he could even send troops.” This sense of relief Stalin displayed at the likely Chinese intervention underscored his concerns about aiding the North Koreans alone, and from a position of disadvantage. However, Stalin also saw increased cooperation as an opportunity to demonstrate that the communist front in Asia was united. “The China situation was ‘important psychologically’ as well, as it demonstrated the strength of ‘Asian revolutionaries’ and the weakness of their adversaries and ‘their mentors…in America,’ who would ‘not dare to challenge the new Chinese authorities militarily.’” Despite this confidence, however, Stalin still demanded that Kim rely on Chinese permission and support for the attack; if Kim “ran into difficulty with the United States, [Kim]… would have to depend on China, not the Soviet Union, to bail him out.” As additional documents indicated, Stalin continued to provide war materiel to Kim throughout the spring and summer of 1950.

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246 Ibid.
247 Stueck, 73. It appears that in this instance and in Note 85, Steuck quotes from Sergei Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 260-261, though his note is somewhat unclear.
248 Ibid.
249 See, among others, the following correspondence: “Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky,” (16 March 1950), CWIHP: The Korean War,
also aided Kim by cooperating with China to place Chinese units on the Manchurian border with Korea, in preparation for potentially necessary volunteer actions.\(^{250}\)

Such increased cooperation between the Soviet Union and China further reinforced American fears that not to act in Korea would lead to dire consequences. Once Communist China was established, the communist bloc was much bigger and situated much closer to the vital areas of interest Acheson identified in January 1950. It was a force the Truman administration could not ignore. Throughout the summer of 1950, the military situation in Korea grew more serious, and it became more likely that Communist China would soon intervene. Troops of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) moved closer to the Korean border throughout the early summer 1950, with more troops joining in mid-September. Though Peking called the movements routine, as one historian has pointed out, “[O]ne should not ignore the possible relationship of this particular move to the defense of Manchuria in the event of reversals in Korea, or to eventual assistance for the DPRK forces.”\(^{251}\)
Additionally, statements by China’s Foreign Minister Chou En-lai at the end of September indicating China would not stand for “imperialist” actions in the Far East were seen alongside troop movements as an indication of coming attack.\(^2\)\(^{252}\) In his memoirs, Truman explained that on 3 October “the State Department received a number of messages which all reported the same thing: The Chinese Communists were threatening to enter the Korean conflict.”\(^2\)\(^{253}\) However, he also pointed out that those threats could not necessarily be taken at face value. Past experience with China and the Indian Ambassador to Peking, K. M. Panikkar (through whom Chou En-lai had passed the threats) had shown Truman that such communications were often nothing more than communist propaganda. When added to the fact that a key U.N. vote to authorize operations north of the 38\(^{\text{th}}\) parallel was scheduled for the next day, according to Truman, “it appeared quitely \([\text{sic}]\) likely that Chou En-lai’s ‘message’ was a bald attempt to blackmail the United Nations by threats of intervention in Korea.”\(^2\)\(^{254}\) Nonetheless, policymakers recognized the connection between Communist China and the Soviet Union, and understood the danger to the diminished U.S. military capacity if the available forces in China or the Soviet Union joined the conflict.\(^2\)\(^{255}\)

In light of the worsening situation, proposals from policymakers such as Kennan, who suggested diplomatic communication and economic support were the most effective opposition to communism, seemed far off the mark. The more accurate interpretations, many felt, emphasized the Soviet conviction that

\(^{252}\) Stebbins, 359.
\(^{254}\) Ibid., 362.
capitalist countries were doomed to fall, a conviction that communism was “a messianic faith that not only spurs the USSR to assist the transformation of the Marxist blueprint into a reality, but...also gives the Soviet leaders a sense of confidence that in whatever particular course they follow they are riding the wave of the future.” 256 By late summer 1950, it seemed clear to the U.S. that such confidence had led the Soviet Union to orchestrate the attacks in Korea. With the help of Communist China, the Soviet Union apparently sought to expand communist influence over a key part of East Asia, thus upsetting the fragile balance of power.

Conclusions

Though it has since become (and for Kennan and others, was at the time) clear that the Soviet Union was not seeking direct confrontation in 1950, it is also clear that the Soviet Union wanted to significantly reduce U.S. influence in the immediate region. However, it is important to remember that at the time, relatively little was known about the inner workings of the Soviet Union or its elusive leader. It was not possible for American policymakers to know the details of Soviet intentions or concerns about becoming involved in the North Korean invasion. There was a prevailing fear among U.S. officials that, despite the Soviet Union’s apparent reluctance to directly engage the U.S. militarily, communist actions in Korea represented a situation in which the “Soviets were embarked, now, on some pattern of military aggression to pin down the resources of the

256 “Study Prepared by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff (Nitze),” [Extract], Secret [661.00/2-850], “Recent Soviet Moves: Conclusions,” (Washington, 8 February 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 147.
United States in peripheral battles, and then to move, when the right moment arrived, virtually unopposed into Western Europe.” Additionally, Communist Chinese and Soviet cooperation supported the relatively common assumption “that Communist China would stand shoulder to shoulder with Soviet Russia on major world issues.” The resulting shift, in which “the world balance of power seemed likely to tip in favor of the Communist bloc,” provided the pieces needed to complete the puzzle from the American point of view.

There were other interpretations from which U.S. policymakers could have chosen. Although many perspectives, chief among them Kennan’s, reflected a more moderate situation than many feared, they, too, did not always fully represent the situation. In his 6 January 1950 memorandum to Secretary of State Acheson, Kennan warned of the “[g]reat dangers in over-simplified and impulsive approaches” to U.S. actions against Soviet expansion in the Far East. He believed this particularly addressed military considerations. “Remember, [the] Russians haven’t attacked anyone militarily since V-J Day. Their successes, such as they have been, have been primarily in the minds of men. True, their communist stooges have used force; but they first had to be convinced themselves.”

In hindsight, it seems clear Kennan’s assessment was accurate in believing the Russians themselves would be hesitant to attack anyone militarily. It has also become clear the Soviet Union preferred to hold onto a potential ideological victory, particularly if there were others to provide the forces for the attack. The

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257 Brown, in Guttmann, 251.
258 Schnabel and Watson, 13.
259 “Memorandum by the Counselor (Kennan) to the Secretary of State,” (6 January 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 129. Emphasis in original.
Soviet Union was supportive and willing to lend material and moral aid as long as it believed its direct risk was—or could be made to be—relatively low. Stalin’s agreement to provide Kim with material support in 1950 was only made when Stalin believed the U.S. threat had reached a manageable level. The fact that Stalin did not wait to see if the threat would diminish further indicated the importance of the Korean peninsula to the Soviet Union’s goals.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has become clear that the Soviet role in Korea was much more complex than many historians since the war had traditionally believed. At the same time, the Soviet Union exerted less direct control than many early histories reflected. The willing cooperation of Communist China also played a significant role, certainly in the direct execution of the war itself. The early effects of the communist victory in China on U.S. and international policies directly altered the situation in which key decisions about both U.S. and U.N. involvement in the Korean War were being made. Interestingly, the Chinese ideological role in the war itself appears to have been secondary to Soviet influence, but its place as the primary external direct military influence (the influx of troops in late 1950) had decisive effects on the ways American military policy changed in the first year of the war, as will be seen in the next chapter.
CHAPTER IV
THE UNOFFICIAL LIMITED WAR: CONTAINMENT AS A WARTIME STRATEGY

One of the most notable characteristics of American involvement in the Korean War was its limited nature. Historians have debated the reasoning of the limitations, discussing both whether Truman fully understood the implications of those limits when he entered the war, and whether the strategy, as adopted, was effective. The latter question received particular attention at the inconclusive end of the war, after two years of protracted peace talks. Another relevant question, however, concerns the route by which the U.S. reached the level and type of involvement it experienced during the first year of the war. Between June 1950 and spring 1951, U.N. forces fought on front lines ranging from nearly the southern tip of the peninsula to the border of North Korea and Manchuria. By mid-1951, the front had stabilized near the 38th parallel, and remained approximately there until the end of the war. During the first year, U.S. involvement was marked by rapidly changing fortunes, many of which required increased commitment to the peninsula. Despite such increases, however, U.S. involvement was also characterized by the ways policymakers kept it limited.

It is clear the considerations discussed in previous chapters had a profound impact on creating an international and domestic environment conducive to limited involvement. Increasing apprehensions of potential Soviet aggression magnified the fears underlying the influential containment policy. Together wit
new atomic considerations, these factors generated a situation in which the U.S. was compelled to respond to the North Korean attack, while at the same time restraining its actions so as not to provoke the Soviet Union.

In the five years following World War II, growing international tensions were a source of great concern for policymakers. As containment’s rapid acceptance illustrated, the U.S. was becoming increasingly anxious about Soviet actions and intentions, believing the Soviet Union was growing more intent on expanding its boundaries. Since the manner of expansion was determined by expediency, policymakers believed,²⁶⁰ potential Soviet actions were difficult to predict. More importantly, policymakers believed the Soviet atomic explosion in August 1949 signaled that Soviet capabilities were growing much closer to being able to satisfy Soviet expansionist intentions. The U.S. felt its advantage was decreasing precipitously, and that anticipated Soviet advances in the early 1950s would soon bring the two nations closer to the same strategic level, making interaction between the two potentially much more volatile.

Interpreting the North Korean Attack

In light of the atmosphere of growing tensions, there was the question of how the U.S. would interpret an action like the North Korean aggression. The interpretation would in large part decide the extent of actions the U.S. felt both

compelled and allowed to take. Much of this determination centered on the question of what the North Korean invasion meant for U.S.-Soviet relations. Although it is clear to historians now that Kim Il Sung and Stalin had very different ideas for the timing and course of North Korean action into the South, at the time U.S. officials and policymakers made a very clear and very consistent connection between Soviet actions and intentions, and those of communism in general.

Statements during the opening weeks of the war clearly demonstrate this connection. Although policymakers did not always explicitly associate the Soviet Union and communism in general in official documents, it is nonetheless clear the U.S. placed primary responsibility for the North Korean attack on the Soviet Union. For instance, in a telegram to the Embassy in Britain in the early morning hours of 27 June, Acheson concluded the “[a]ttack makes amply clear [that] centrally directed Communist Imperialism has passed beyond subversion in seeking [to] conquer independent nations and [is] now resorting to armed aggression and war.”261 At the request of the British Foreign Office, however, Acheson’s statement was revised in order to leave the Soviet Union “the opportunity to beat a retreat when confronted with U.S. determination to oppose aggression in Korea.”262 President Truman’s 27 June statement thus read, “The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use...

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262 Ibid. [Footnote], 187.
armed invasion and war.”263 Though the wording changed, the sentiment did not diminish: the Soviet Union was being held responsible. In July, Acheson expressed the same idea. There was no doubt “but that this aggression was ordered by the Kremlin…”264 Although the U.S. recognized that both the Soviet Union and Communist China were threats, policymakers and other officials believed the Soviet Union was the major force behind the North Korean aggression.

Historian Alexander L. George conducted one of the main studies of U.S. interpretations of the North Korean attack shortly after the war. Using primarily newspaper accounts, George differentiated five potential interpretations for the North Korean invasion. Although he acknowledged the limitations of his study,265 the interpretations he presented are evident in many other documents. George’s interpretations were notable because they centered around what the Soviet Union was doing, or intending to do, rather than what North Korea was doing. This is understandable considering the close connection policymakers made between the two. Numerous sources from the late 1940s have reflected the U.S. conviction that Soviet movements and intentions were the primary threat to U.S. security. Policymakers recognized that the Soviet Union’s intentions would likely be acted upon in peripheral areas of its control. According to the mindset of the time, any shift in those areas represented a distinct threat to U.S. security. Such was the case

264 “The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom,” Top Secret [795.00/7-1050: Telegram], (Washington, 10 July 1950, 5 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 348.
265 Alexander L. George, “American Policy-Making and the North Korean Aggression,” in World Politics, vol. 7, no. 2 (January 1955), 209-232. He explained that, even though he supplemented his study with the 1951 Senate hearing transcripts (the MacArthur hearings), there was still a great deal more research that could be done to substantiate his conclusions. He also discussed the limitations and problems with his interpretations, pp. 215-232.
in North Korea, which many in the U.S. believed was at best an area of significant Soviet influence and at worst a puppet government of the Kremlin.

Of George’s interpretations, it seems the ones he labeled “diversionary move,” “testing,” and “demonstration” had the most impact. The commonality of these three interpretations was that they assumed the Soviet Union was moving in directions it knew would provoke the U.S., in order to test the latter and determine how far it could push before the U.S. would respond.\textsuperscript{266} Considering the numerous times when policymakers cited potential Soviet expansion and aggression as the primary threats to American national security, it is understandable that officials would assume the Soviet Union was testing its ability to expand. NSC 68 was a prime example of this line of thinking. Throughout that document, its authors explained that the Soviet Union was “pursuing the initiative in the conflict with the free world. Its atomic capabilities, together with its successes in the Far East, have led to an increasing confidence on its part and to an increasing nervousness in Western Europe and the rest of the free world.”\textsuperscript{267}

Truman further demonstrated the association of communism and the Soviet Union in an address he gave on 19 July 1950. He made the connection between communism in general and events in North Korea. “On Sunday, June 25\textsuperscript{th}, communist forces attacked the Republic of Korea. This attack has made it clear, beyond all doubt, that the international communist movement is willing to use armed invasion to conquer independent nations. An act of aggression such as

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 211-214.
\textsuperscript{267} NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950, I}, 277.
this creates a very real danger to the security of all free nations.”\textsuperscript{268} This illustrated another common belief from the time: that communist aggression represented a worldwide threat, and that any expansion of communist influence, whether directly from the Soviet Union, or as part of a peripheral expansion, threatened the U.S. and the free world in general. Again, this was expressed in NSC 68: “The whole success of the proposed program hangs ultimately on the recognition by this Government, the American people, and all free peoples, that the cold war is in fact a real war in which the survival of the free world is at stake.”\textsuperscript{269} This perception continued after the war began in June 1950, as well. In Acheson’s July telegram to the Embassy in Britain, he expressed gratitude for the international contributions made in response to Korea.

We believe that the overwhelming support from the free nations of the world is precisely due to their recognition that the whole future of the free world is at stake. …while we will make every effort on our part to safeguard and preserve this world-wide support, the objective of all must be to do what has to be done to defeat the present aggression in Korea and to forestall its possible outbreak elsewhere in the Far East.\textsuperscript{270}

The same considerations that influenced how quickly and completely policymakers accepted the containment policy also influenced how the U.S. decided to become involved in Korea. Even though it was not stated in official policies, there was a belief among U.S. officials and others that the U.S. \textit{must} respond to instances of Soviet aggression. As Truman explained in his memoirs, “We let it be know that we considered the Korean situation vital as a symbol of


\textsuperscript{269} NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950, I}, 292.

\textsuperscript{270} “Secretary,” (10 July 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950, VII}, 347.
the strength and determination of the West.”\textsuperscript{271} Truman further explained the concern over U.S. action among other countries. At a 28 June meeting, Averell Harriman recounted his recent experiences in Europe. As Truman explained,

\begin{quote}
Harriman…observed that the people there had been gravely concerned lest we fail to meet the challenge in Korea. After my decision had been announced, he said, there had been a general feeling of relief, since it had been believed that disaster would otherwise be certain. He added that the Europeans were fully aware of the implications of my decisions.\textsuperscript{272}
\end{quote}

The necessity of response was tempered, however, by the understanding that the U.S. was extremely unprepared for any large-scale military response, and that it must build up its forces if it were to stand a chance of effectively responding to any kind of Soviet aggression. Once the North Korean invasion began, the U.S. saw it as a signal that Soviet capabilities were growing to levels that could soon endanger the U.S. For these and other reasons, which will be discussed, the U.S. believed the developing situation in Korea was something it could not afford to ignore.

The considerations discussed in the previous chapters affected how the U.S. became involved in Korea, and then influenced the nature of its involvement throughout the war. The policy of containment had a very distinct impact, by lessening the likelihood the U.S. would escalate the conflict into general war. Though there was some early initiative to push back the communist forces (an initiative that was in part supported by language common to NSC 68 and other policy documents), by the time the war stabilized in mid-1951 the U.S. had adopted a wartime strategy in line with containment. The U.N. attempted a

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{272} Ibid., 340.
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rollback strategy in the fall of 1950, when its forces pushed the North Korean Army’s (DPRK) troops back through North Korea. Though U.N. and ROK forces reached the Yalu River briefly, a rapid influx of Communist Chinese troops dramatically changed the situation. U.N. forces were pushed back down the peninsula. The U.S. realized the massive potential for war on a scale far beyond anything the U.S. could handle, and eventually adopted a version of wartime containment that kept the front confined to an area around the 38th parallel for the rest of the war.

**Initial Actions: A Response to a Growing Concern**

The rapid actions Truman took in response to North Korea’s attacks were prompted in part by Korea’s importance to U.S. prestige, and in part by concerns expressed by South Korea. As early as February 1948, officials in Korea described a growing threat in South Korea from forces in the north.

[T]here can be but one conclusion, namely, that the Soviets are moving rapidly to transform the *de facto* North Korean Communist Government of North Korea into a ‘national’ Korean government that can and may be recognized by at least some of the satellite states as the Government of Korea. … Even if [the] UN should withdraw from the local scene, the official stand in North Korea is so far committed that it would be well nigh impossible to recant, and the completion of the maneuver can be used as an added means to bring pressure on the United States to meet the Soviet mutual withdrawal proposal and to hamper our efforts at stabilization in South Korea…  

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Documents such as NSC 8, from April 1948, reinforced the belief among policymakers that the Soviet Union’s ultimate goal was unification under Soviet rule.274

By 1949, the situation was becoming even more alarming to the South Korean leaders. In May, ROK President Syngman Rhee questioned what the U.S. position would be should war break out.

The Republic of Korea is struggling for its life against a Communist menace that is not of its own making. … The Communists were greatly encouraged and strengthened in South Korea by efforts to deal with them on a basis of compromise. Compromise with aggressors means ultimate surrender without a chance to resist, which we cannot and will not do.275

Although Syngman Rhee’s fears may have been exaggerated, there is no doubt that many shared his general frame of mind. The North Koreans, who many believed were acting on behalf of the Soviet Union, were showing increasingly definite signs that they were willing to risk war to expand their influence. To many, both in the U.S. and in South Korea, this was another example of the worldwide danger of communist expansion.

Therefore, in June 1950, when the North Koreans crossed the 38th parallel, it seemed to confirm what many had feared: that the Soviet Union, working through one of its satellites, was seeking to expand its influence into areas previously under U.S. influence. The basic concept of Soviet expansion was not new, but a number of factors combined to make the threat much more pressing. At

274 “Report by the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Korea,” Top Secret – NSC 8 (Washington, April 2, 1948), enclosure in “Note by the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Souers) to President Truman,” Top Secret – NSC 8 [895.50 recovery/8-1248], (Washington, April 2, 1948), in FRUS: 1948, VI, 1167.
a 3 August 1950 meeting with representatives from the U.S., Great Britain, and France, U.S. diplomat Charles Bohlen explained the increased danger. “He noted that whereas the technique of Soviet aggression by proxy is not new, this is the first occasion of an unconscious aggression by proxy. This would seem to denote that the Soviet Union is prepared to take greater risks today than a year or so ago and that the Soviet rearmament program has doubtless progressed to a point permitting of greater risks.” 276

The heightened Soviet danger also meant that previously peripheral areas now had greater importance. The Council on Foreign Relations’ 1950 volume of its United States in World Affairs series explained Korea’s symbolic value. Though Korea was of minimal military value, “from a political standpoint Korea, like every other country threatened by Soviet Communism, represented a responsibility which could not be evaded without damaging the whole political and moral fabric of the free world.” 277 Added to the moral and political responsibility of the U.S. was the possibility that areas which had been declared vital to U.S. security would come under attack. In his memoirs, Truman raised this concern. “The Republic of Korea needed help at once if it was not to be overrun. More seriously, a Communist success in Korea would put Red troops and planes within easy striking distance of Japan, and Okinawa and Formosa would be open to attack from two sides.” 278 Regardless of how accurate—or

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inaccurate—Truman’s conclusion was, this mindset strongly influenced the contemporary opinions and decisions.

The early actions the U.S. took that established its presence in the Korean War—including moving troops from Japan—also established the tenor of U.S. involvement throughout the war. The U.S. did not immediately commit large numbers of troops, and when it did so over the following months, it did so explicitly under the aegis of the United Nations. In its general strategy, the U.S. remained committed to the strategies set forth in NSC 68, continuing to build its forces for what it believed might yet develop into a major war.

**Limited Entry and Limited Approach**

There has been little question of the generally limited nature of U.S. involvement in the Korean War. When compared to a total war, in which something close to all means at one’s disposal are used, the Korean War was clearly limited, most notably in that atomic weapons were never used. However, it is also clear that for Truman, a limited strategy did not completely preclude some expansion. On the contrary, several times during the war Truman and officials in his administration judged the intensifying Soviet actions and apparent intentions to be significant enough to warrant expanding offensive actions.

Truman’s decisions for action in the Far East were tempered partly by overall U.S. military force levels, specifically those in the Far East. The *United States Army in the Korean War* series explained the condition of the Far East Command. “[O]n the eve of the storm the command was flabby and soft, still
hampered by an infectious lassitude, unready to respond swiftly and decisively to a full-scale military emergency.”\textsuperscript{279} Despite the low levels of military preparation, the U.S. felt it could not afford not to respond in Korea. The officials believed developments including the Soviet atomic bomb were an indication of an increased willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to be more aggressive. Additionally, the apparent change in Soviet attitude represented an even greater threat than its military strength alone. “The [Soviet Union], it now appeared, possessed not only a decisive military superiority over its neighbors but also a much greater readiness to exploit this advantage than had been generally assumed.”\textsuperscript{280} The U.S. believed the combination of factors suggested the Soviet Union was getting dangerously close to a position from which it would feel it had an advantage over the U.S.

Many policymakers believed this position had less to do with each nation’s capabilities and stockpiles, and more to do with the more rapid rate of growth of Soviet technologies and capabilities when compared to the U.S.\textsuperscript{281} This assumption stemmed from an assessment that the Soviet Union not only regarded the U.S. as its primary adversary, but designed its national strategy around bringing about U.S. defeat. Nitze and the other authors of NSC 68 explained:

\begin{quote}
With particular reference to the United States, the Kremlin’s strategic and tactical policy is affected by its estimate that we are not only the greatest immediate obstacle which stands between it and world domination, we are also the only power which could release forces in the free and Soviet
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{280} Stebbins, 244.
worlds which could destroy it. The Kremlin’s policy toward us is consequently animated by a peculiarly virulent blend of hatred and fear. Its strategy has been one of attempting to undermine the complex of forces, in this country and in the rest of the free world, on which our power is based. In this it has both adhered to doctrine and followed the sound principle of seeking maximum results with minimum risks and commitments. The present application of this strategy is a new form of expression for traditional Russian caution. However, there is no justification in Soviet theory or practice for predicting that, should the Kremlin become convinced that it could cause our downfall by one conclusive blow, it would not seek that solution.282

Although the recognition of this threat lent itself much more to an offensive than a defensive mindset, policymakers realized the U.S. could not hope to respond adequately to widespread areas of confrontation. This recognition was particularly true for those “insiders,” who had the best sense of the U.S. military situation. The U.S. believed the buildup of Soviet forces, combined with U.S. material and manpower limitations, created a situation in which the U.S. faced a “window of vulnerability.”283 For the time being, the U.S. would be unable to respond if threats surfaced in multiple points around the world.

By 1950, a shift had begun among officials in the administration, who began placing an increasing emphasis on U.S. military capabilities. However, this shift could not, and did not, take place overnight. This delay was a source of concern for policymakers, particularly since they believed the Soviet Union was building up its forces at a greater rate than the U.S. NSC 68 explained that “[b]etween [potential U.S. capabilities] and our capabilities currently being utilized is a wide gap of unactualized power. In sharp contrast is the situation of the Soviet world. Its capabilities are inferior to those of our Allies and to our own.

283 Trachtenberg, 6.
But they are mobilized close to the maximum possible extent.” NSC 68’s authors may have made this last statement based on the assessment that the centralized nature of Soviet rule gave it greater freedom when appropriating funds for the military or calling up active mobilization. Regardless, it seems clear that policymakers believed the greater priority assigned to Soviet military development would make Soviet forces an even greater threat in the event of conflict.

The great military potential of the U.S. and its allies could not be realized, however, without a fundamental change in mindset to one more closely approximating wartime mobilization. Policymakers understood the need for this mobilization; without it the U.S. could not hope to respond adequately in the event the Soviet Union instigated a war. Moreover, until the U.S. mindset changed, the threat level would continue to increase. “The difference between the two economies means that the readiness of the free world to support a war effort is tending to decline relative to that of the Soviet Union.” This was part of the reason policymakers believed the apparent increased aggressiveness of the Soviet Union was such a danger. “Major rearmament decisions were made in late 1950, but it would be a long time before the actual military balance could be reversed.”

This military disparity, combined with low levels of existing military capabilities, reinforced the U.S. decision to limit its involvement in Korea. That

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285 Ibid., 262.
286 Ibid., 256.
287 Trachtenberg, 21.
limited involvement, however, had to be balanced with the U.S. ability to respond in other, potentially more vital, areas. Truman recognized this need. “I wanted to be sure that we would not become so deeply committed in Korea that we could not take care of such other situations as might develop.”²⁸⁸ The U.S. nuclear superiority did not fully compensate in those vital areas, however. Policymakers felt the continued Soviet support for North Korea, despite U.S. atomic superiority, indicated the limits of atomic diplomacy. Specifically, “the atomic bomb would not be wholly effective as either a political or a military weapon unless it was more adequately correlated with other forms of military strength as part of the global strategic conception.”²⁸⁹

The authors of NSC 68 recognized this problem as well. Even though atomic weapons gave the U.S. an advantage, that advantage likely would not be sufficient to “cause the U.S.S.R. to sue for terms or present [prevent] Soviet forces from occupying Western Europe against such ground resistance as could presently be mobilized.”²⁹⁰ The Soviet Union’s potential atomic capability, combined with its large and growing conventional force, gave the Soviet Union a significantly larger force in being available for multiple extensive areas of conflict. The U.S. would be able to exercise the same extended efforts, but only after a period of military build-up. As NSC 68 pointed out, “[i]f war breaks out in 1950 or in the next few years, the United States and its allies, apart from a powerful atomic blow, will be compelled to conduct delaying actions, while

²⁸⁹ Stebbins, 244-245 (quote from 245).
building up their strength for a general offensive.”291 Additionally, if the U.S. maintained its current military levels without any significant program of expansion, it “[would] mean that the United States and especially other free countries [would] tend to shift to the defensive, or to follow a dangerous policy of bluff, because the maintenance of a firm initiative in the Cold War is closely related to aggregate strength in being and readily available.”292 When combined with the Soviet Union’s apparent willingness to take greater risks, Truman and his administration understood they had to be very judicious in deploying the limited number of existing U.S. forces.

Proponents of containment had to balance their desire for assertive polices in relation to the Soviet Union with a need to be realistic and mindful of both domestic and allied concerns. The same issues were raised regarding involvement in Korea. At the beginning of the war, U.S. officials embarked on a limited engagement, but without the benefit today’s historians and strategists have. Though limited war is still not strictly defined, in 1950 there was no precedent for such a conflict in the nuclear age.293 In Korea, officials sought to restrict U.S. actions to the least provocative level possible, while making it clear the U.S. would not freely accept communist expansion. Some, like Acheson, have claimed it was Truman’s intent from the beginning to “fight a limited engagement

291 Ibid., 276. Although this statement acknowledges the potential for using atomic weapons, numerous other places in NSC 68, along with other documents, have discussed the limitations of atomic warfare. See Chapter III for more information.
292 Ibid., 277. Emphasis added.
293 Instead of starting with a policy of “limited war,” the U.S. set out to limit its actions, if at all possible, to the least provocative level in an effort to avoid escalating to global war. Although these represent the same end results, the former is much more structured, and implies a much greater grasp of the utility of limited means. It is difficult to see how the U.S. adopted this, especially since throughout the war there was discussion of contingencies and requirements for expanding the war beyond Korea. There is no doubt the U.S. conducted limited warfare in Korea, but Truman does not appear to have adopted the strategy as a fully formed policy, per se.
Truman has explained that one of the reasons he advocated limited interactions was to avoid openly provoking the Soviet Union. Many of the decisions to limit U.S. involvement centered on the question of how far—or whether—to expand the fighting. Most policymakers (and people in general) at this time expected a war with communist powers would likely expand into a global war with the Soviet Union. They believed this was the case particularly when beginning with localized conflicts. During Senate hearings in spring 1951, Truman explained his understanding of the threat. “The dangers are great. Make no mistake about it. Behind the North Koreans and Chinese Communists in the front lines stand additional millions of Chinese soldiers. And behind the Chinese stand the tanks, the planes, the submarines, the soldiers, and the scheming rulers of the Soviet Union. Our aim is to avoid the spread of the conflict.”

Despite the concerns over potential expansion, however, from the beginning of the war policymakers considered the contingencies for the war’s potential expansion. One aspect of this addressed the impact if the U.S. publicly stated it would not push beyond the 38th parallel. In a 1 July memorandum, the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs explained that any public statement to that end could be “fatal to…South Korean morale.” At the same time, however, Truman and others made it very clear that the U.N. was to do

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297 “Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs (Allison) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk),” Secret [795.00/7-150], “Subject: Korean Speech for President Truman,” (Washington, 1 July 1950), in *FRUS: 1950, VII*, 272.
everything possible to avoid provoking the Soviet Union or Communist China by advancing too far or too indiscriminately into North Korea. There are numerous directives and policy statements calling for U.N. forces to stop well short of the border with Manchuria.298

Although most of the calls for restraint came from a desire not to provoke outside involvement, the state of the U.S. military and the level of combat it could sustain were also crucial. In the history of the U.S. Army in Korea, James Schnabel explained some of the connections between U.S. military readiness and the situation in Korea.

One of the unique aspects of the Korean War was the close control which Washington maintained at all times over operations in the field. Routine transactions and problems which during World War II would have been handled by a theater commander became, during Korea, matters of great concern to the nation’s highest officials in Washington. These exceptional practices were owing in large part to the scarcity of United States military resources when the war began and to the real danger that miscalculation in Korea might result in a full-scale war with the Soviet Union and/or Communist China.299

Though these factors combined to restrain U.S. and U.N. actions, the question still remained of whether and how to expand the war, if necessary. Such expansions did take place, shifting the frontline from the southern port of Pusan to near the Yalu River. However, these expansions and shifts were eventually

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298 See, for example: “The Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur),” Top Secret, Emergency [795.00-6-2950: Telegram], (Washington, 29 June 1950, 6:59 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 240-241; Minutes of 3 August Meeting, in FRUS: 1950, VII, 521; “Memorandum by Mr. John Foster Dulles, Consultant to the Secretary of State, to the Secretary of State,” Top Secret [795.00/7-750], (Washington, 7 July 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 328; “Memorandum of Conversation, by Mr. James W. Barco, Special Assistant to the Ambassador at Large (Jessup),” Top Secret [795.00/8-2550], “Subject: United States Courses of Action in Korea,” (Washington, 25 August 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 646-647; “Memorandum by Mr. Walter P. McConaughy, of the Staff of the Ambassador at Large (Jessup),” Top Secret [795.00/8-2550], “Rough Notes on NSC Senior Staff Meeting on Korea, August 25, 1950,” (Washington, 25 August 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 649-651; and “Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State for National Security Council Staff Consideration Only,” Top Secret [795.00/8-3050], “U.S. Course of Action as to Korea,” (Washington, 30 August 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 660-663; among others.
299 Schnabel, ix.
moderated by the influence of containment and other Cold War considerations. The result was the stabilization of the front near the 38th parallel for the last two years of the war.

**Escalation and the Chinese Question**

The fighting intensified throughout the summer of 1950. The North Koreans captured Seoul within the first days of the war, and throughout July and August continued their drive. U.N. forces retreated south to a small perimeter around the southeastern port city of Pusan. (See Maps 3a & 3b.)

On 15 September 1950, however, troops under General Douglas MacArthur landed at the west coast port of Inchon, just south of the 38th parallel, beginning the campaign that would quickly push the North Koreans back into the North. With the successful U.N. campaign came the question of how to treat the boundary. Since the early days of the war, Truman had instructed forces to strictly limit their actions when north of the parallel. However, as the summer progressed, there was a growing belief that U.N. forces needed to cross the border. A Defense Department draft memorandum of 31 July 1950 explained that “from the point of view of military operations against North Korean forces as now constituted, the 38th parallel has no more significance than any other meridian. North Korean forces can be engaged and defeated wherever found, by

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whatever means are necessary, in the same fashion that air and naval power now are used to destroy military targets anywhere in Korea.”301

Map 3a: Pusan Perimeter, August 1950. This map shows the advance of the North Korean forces as of 26 August. Source: History Department at the United States Military Academy.302

301 “Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of Defense,” Top Secret [795.00/7-3150], “U.S. Courses of Action in Korea,” (Washington, 31 July 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 502. Though this was a draft memorandum, the majority of the text (including this passage) remained identical in a later draft.

302 Map available online, “United Nations Defense,” History Department at the United States Military Academy,
Map 3b: Pusan Perimeter, September 1950. This map shows the farthest advance of the North Korean forces. Source: History Department at the United States Military Academy.\(^{303}\)

<http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlas/korean%20war/korean%20pages/korean%20war%20map%202011.htm>.  
Opinions about crossing the parallel were not unanimous, however. In an August meeting, Charles Bohlen reemphasized the U.S. awareness that crossing the parallel would increase the risk of Soviet intervention. A group of State Department officials decided in late August that as long as there was no Soviet or Chinese intervention it “might be desirable for South Korean troops to pursue North Korean troops beyond the 38th parallel but that American unit participation should be minimized.” The momentum generated by MacArthur’s forces as they advanced through South Korea helped bring about authorization to continue north of the parallel, however, despite the initial caution.

The risk of expanding the war came not only from U.N.-initiated movements. From the beginning of the war, policymakers understood that one of the greatest threats lay in potential intervention by either the Soviet Union or China. Throughout summer and early fall 1950, U.S. officials believed Chinese forces were becoming a greater threat, but did not necessarily believe China would fully intervene. During October, however, China’s leadership became increasingly vocal in its objections to U.S. and U.N. actions. There was clear indication China “would not sit by while North Korea [was] ‘invaded.’” Despite this, neither U.S. nor U.N. command believed China was preparing for mass intervention. This opinion persisted in part because of the optimistic reports

304 Minutes of 3 August Meeting, in FRUS: 1950, VII, 521
305 “Memorandum of Conversation, by Mr. James W. Barco, Special Assistant to the Ambassador at Large (Jessup),” Top Secret [795.00/8-2550], “Subject: United States Courses of Action in Korea,” (Washington, 25 August 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 647.
306 “The Ambassador in the Netherlands (Chapin) to the Secretary of State,” Secret [800.00/10-1750: Telegram], (The Hague, 17 October 1950, 4 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 974. For another estimate of the Chinese attitude, see “The Consul General at Hong Kong (Wilkinson) to the Secretary of State,” Secret [795.00/10-1750], (Hong Kong, 17 October 1950, 3 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 976-977.
General MacArthur submitted throughout October. He did not think China was likely to intervene on any large scale.\(^{307}\)

The question of Chinese intervention was addressed again concerning the border of North Korea and Manchuria. On 24 October 1950, MacArthur launched a major U.N. offensive, ordering troops to push all the way to the Yalu River. Prior to this point, the Joint Chiefs had limited U.N. action, planning only for ROK troops to approach the northern border. However, MacArthur defended his action as military necessity. ROK Army troops, he said, were neither ‘of sufficient strength’ nor ‘sufficiently well led’ to handle the situation, and they were effective only when integrated with U.S. forces. The removal of the restrictions, he continued, did not violate the September 27 directive because it was not a ‘final directive,’ and Marshall’s letter of September 30 gave him tactical and strategic latitude.\(^{308}\)

Both the Eighth Army in the west and Tenth Corps in the east met increasing opposition as they pushed north. Beginning on 25 October, U.N. troops started identifying captured enemy troops as Chinese soldiers. In spite of the opposition, for the most part U.N. officials did not believe POW reports that they were part of a much larger Chinese force.\(^{309}\) This assessment was reinforced by reports from the Eighth Army that it was not encountering significant Chinese forces. A 29 October telegram explained that “[o]n [the] basis [of] current information [the] Eighth Army is not inclined to accept reports of substantial

\(^{307}\) One discussion that took place between Truman and MacArthur is recorded in Truman, *Memoirs, Vol. 2*, 365-366. There are numerous other sources documenting MacArthur’s optimism regarding Chinese entry into the war.


\(^{309}\) Ibid., 76-77.
Chinese participation in North Korean fighting.” Despite such optimism, however, there was at least some indication the Chinese were a greater threat than those reports had indicated. Chinese troops did prove to be a significant threat in their early offensive, forcing the Eighth Army into retreat in the west, and temporarily stopping the Tenth Corps in the east. Although the front had stabilized in both areas by the first part of November, on 7 November the Chinese forces ended their offensive, “suddenly fading northward into the hills.”

After this first encounter, it appeared U.S. forces likely would have to engage China again in the future. There were still questions about the extent of China’s involvement, however, and how the U.S. should respond. On 7 November 1950, John P. Davies of the Policy Planning Staff wrote a draft memorandum explaining the U.S. reaction to the early Chinese involvement. As he pointed out, we do not know what course Peiping and the Kremlin will follow in the coming months. Not only are their intentions veiled from us, but also—situations such as this tend to generate their own imperatives. We must proceed, therefore, on the basis that the situation confronting us contains a wide range of possible developments. At best we may be able to bring about a local solution to which Peiping and Moscow accede. At the worst we may find ourselves in World War III. Our objective should be to seek the first and urgently prepare for the second.

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310 “The Chargé in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State,” Secret, Priority [795.00/10-2950: Telegram], (Seoul, 29 October 1950, 5 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 1014.
311 For an example, see a telegram from the Consul General at Hong Kong concerning an intelligence report about a meeting among Communist Chinese leaders, led by Vyacheslav Molotov, which determined official Chinese involvement in Korea: “The Consul General at Hong Kong (Wilkinson) to the Secretary of State,” Secret, Priority [793.00/10-3150: Telegram], (Hong Kong, 31 October 1950, 11 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 1019-1020.
312 Wainstock, 79.
313 Ibid., 78.
There was no doubt the Chinese entry represented a pivotal change in both the war and in the Cold War international climate. As the 1950 Council on Foreign Relations history explained,

> [e]vents accompanying and flowing from the Chinese Communist intervention in Korea were capable of inflicting irreparable damage not only on the structure of immaterial values known as Western civilization but even on the physical and technological apparatus by which that civilization had been perpetuated and diffused. This crisis differed from earlier postwar tensions both in its greater seriousness and in its geographic scope. For the first time the free world, already habituated to the expansionist menace centered in Moscow, faced the full implications of Communism’s rise to power in China and its voluntary or involuntary association with Soviet Communism.315

This also raised the question of whether the U.S. was willing to extend the war to China. If so, what form would this take, and under what circumstances would it be carried out?

A CIA National Intelligence Estimate (NIE-2) issued on 8 November 1950 explained how the Chinese entry signified a shift in the war’s balance.

> 7. The Chinese Communists, in intervening in Korea, have accepted a grave risk of retaliation and general war. They would probably ignore an ultimatum requiring their withdrawal. If Chinese territory were to be attacked, they would probably enter Korea in full form.

> 8. The fact that both the Chinese Communists and the USSR have accepted an increased risk of a general war indicates either that the Kremlin is ready to face a showdown with the West at an early date or that circumstances have forced them to accept that risk.316

The NIE also determined that the primary trigger for Chinese entry had probably been the U.S. crossing of the 38th parallel. As it explained, China’s “failure to act on those occasions [when U.N. forces were confined to the Pusan Perimeter and

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315 Stebbins, 395.
in response to the Inchon landings] appears to indicate that Peiping was unwilling to accept a serious risk of war, prior to the U.S. crossing of the 38th Parallel."  

Though there was a general appreciation of the serious nature of the Chinese threat, there was no single opinion of how best to respond. In October, the optimism of early field reports had contrasted with and offset early indications of increasing Chinese involvement. Though in early November, MacArthur continued to have “drastic mood swings,” by 8 November he had decided the best option was to initiate another massive U.N. offensive to the Yalu. “Any program short of this, he replied, would condemn his forces to difficult defense lines and arouse deep resentment among the South Korean troops.” Although there was some initial concern among the members of the Joint Chiefs, by the time the NSC met on 9 November, the JCS, the NSC, and Truman all agreed to approve MacArthur’s plan. On 21 November, a U.S. infantry unit from Tenth Corps reached the Yalu, and MacArthur was extremely optimistic. U.N. troops appeared to be in a good position for the planned 24 November offensive. (See Map 4.)

317 Ibid., 1104.
318 Wainstock, 85. For examples of MacArthur’s conflicting reports, see the following: “Editorial Note,” in FRUS: 1950, VII, 1036; “The Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” Top Secret, Flash [Department of Defense Files: Telegram], (Tokyo, 7 November 1950, 8:25 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 1076-1077; and Wainstock, 84-85.
319 Wainstock, 84.
320 Ibid.
321 Ibid., 89-91.
This optimism ended quickly, however. On 25 November 1950, China launched a major offensive, dislodging U.N. troops from North Korea and swiftly reversing MacArthur’s offensive. By mid-December U.N. troops were pushed south of the 38th parallel. (See Map 5.) The dramatic effect of the Chinese troops was obvious, both on the battlefield and within both U.S. and U.N. command. Not only did the 25 November offensive become a decided turning point in the war, but it also highlighted the influence of limited involvement on the U.S. response.
The way the U.S. ultimately dealt with the Chinese entry was interesting, and indicative of the U.S. commitment to limited involvement. The U.S. willingly engaged Chinese forces on the Korean peninsula, but was reluctant to expand the fighting beyond the Yalu. Policymakers had decided long before the Chinese entry that if Chinese troops fought as a part of North Korea’s army, they were to

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323 Map available online, “Chinese Communist Offensive in North Korea,” History Department at the United States Military Academy, <http://www.dean.usma.edu/history/web03/atlas/korean20war/korean20pages/korean20war20map%2015.htm>. This map is my derivation of the original.
be treated as North Koreans. However, if at any point China officially announced its involvement, the matter would be immediately taken to the U.N.\textsuperscript{324} This was an example of the limited philosophy of U.S. involvement: an “official” expansion was treated much differently than an unofficial one. The question of whether to allow combat operations to extend north of the Yalu River, however, remained a major issue. Truman was committed to keeping the war localized. “There was no doubt in my mind that we should not allow the action in Korea to extend into a general war. All-out military action against China had to be avoided, if for no other reason that because it was a gigantic booby trap.”\textsuperscript{325} The answer, therefore, was to limit U.N. operations to the peninsula. This choice represented a conscious understanding that if the fighting were extended to include mainland China the U.S. would be embarking on a level of warfare for which it was not prepared and which it did not desire.

The U.S. desire to avoid becoming involved in a war with China was not new. Since the Korean War began, policymakers had examined contingencies for various levels of potential Chinese involvement, and there was general agreement from the beginning that the U.S. should not become involved in a war with Communist China.\textsuperscript{326} Once the war began and China intervened in late October 1950, it became clear the U.S. was perhaps dealing with a “more ominous” situation than policymakers had appreciated. “Chinese Communist capabilities


\textsuperscript{326} See for example, “Memorandum by the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (Lay),” Top Secret – NSC 81 [Executive Secretariat Files: NSC 81], “Note by the Executive Secretary to the National Security Council on United States Courses of Action With Respect to Korea,” (Washington, 1 September 1950), in \textit{FRUS: 1950, VII}, 290; there are numerous other examples, as well.
that its intervention [could] be greatly expanded both in volume and duration. Even if intervention [was] limited in form it can easily be limitless in time.”

A 17 November memorandum from the Office of Chinese Affairs “reiterate[d]…that the carrying of UN military operations into Manchuria would be attended by a strong possibility that there would be set off a violent political-military reaction which would be detrimental to the UN and U.S. political and military positions alike.”

By the end of November, the situation with China had reached a key point. MacArthur had attempted “a ‘general offensive…to end the war,’” and had met a massive Chinese force. As Truman pointed out in his memoirs, MacArthur’s optimistic goals had by 28 November proven unattainable. There has also been considerable debate over the timing of MacArthur’s offensive, which coincided with the arrival of a Chinese Communist delegation at the U.N. Later on 28 November Truman held an NSC meeting in which officials discussed the situation and potential courses of action. General George C. Marshall expressed a common point of view. “Our purposes are to fulfill our UN obligations but not to become individually or as a member of the UN involved in general war in China with the Chinese Communists. To do this would be to fall into a carefully laid Russian trap.”

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330 Ibid., 381.
331 Stebbins, 416-417.
332 “Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador at Large (Jessup),” Top Secret [795.00/11-2850], “Subject: Notes on NSC Meeting, November 28th, 3:00 pm, The White House,” (Washington, 28 November 1950), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 1243.
the U.S. into direct confrontation with the Soviet Union was very evident. Truman
explained that “[i]f we chose to extend the war to China, we had to expect
retaliation. Peiping and Moscow were allies, ideologically as well as by treaty. If
we began to attack Communist China, we had to anticipate Russian
intervention.”333 Acheson placed the situation in the general Cold War context. As
regarded the Chinese intervention in Korea, Acheson explained that “[w]e must
consider Korea not in isolation but in the world-wide problem of confronting the
Soviet Union as an antagonist.”334

The U.S. decision in late November 1950 to withhold troops from moving
into mainland China so shortly after the U.N. campaigns had success moving
north335 was another indication of the influence of containment on wartime
strategy. Even though documents such as NSC 68 had provided guidelines for the
contingency of global warfare,336 when faced with warfare on a limited scale
(against North Korea) in addition to a potential expansion (against Communist
China), the U.S. chose to restrict fighting to the peninsula. In addition to showing
the influence of containment, this decision also showed the evolution of the
concept of vital areas of interest. Part of what made containment so applicable to
the situation in the Far East was the presence of U.S. vital interests in the area.
Even though the North Korean invasion did not directly threaten vital centers such
as Japan, the idea remained that Soviet motivations for inspiring the North

336 NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in FRUS: 1950, I, 267-269. These pages provide a good discussion of this topic specifically in terms of atomic weapons, but the question of the requirements for conducting war against the Soviet Union are discussed throughout the document.
Koreans could also motivate plans to expand in the same way against areas that were vital to U.S. interests.

**Containment, China, and Vital Interests**

One critical question surrounding the outbreak of the war and the U.S. entry into it was why the U.S. chose to act in an area it had already decided was not vital to its security.337 This became a particularly relevant issue when differentiating between U.S. actions against North Korea and against Communist China. The question of vital centers appeared several times in Alexander George’s discussion of interpreting the North Korean attack. One of the interpretations raised the concern the Soviet Union was trying to prevent normalization of relations between the U.S. and other areas in the Far East (the “Soviet Far East strategy” interpretation); another indicated the North Korean move was in reality designed by the Soviets to divert U.S. attention from the location of the primary Soviet expansion.338 This “diversionary move” tactic, as it was called, was one of the more dominant interpretations. It had particular force when combined with fears that the North Korean attack might be a signal for extensive action in areas much more vital to American interests.

A National Intelligence Estimate of 15 November 1950 (NIE-3) identified a number of goals toward which the Soviet Union was working. After immediate domestic and East Asia concerns, the estimate predicted the Soviet Union would

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337 One of the clearer examples of this policy, and one which brought the Truman administration under a great deal of fire, was Acheson’s Press Club speech in January 1950, in which he outline Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines as the components of the American defensive perimeter.

338 George, 211-212, 214-215,
make every effort possible to expand its control over other areas of the world in
general, and over the U.S. in particular. To do this, the estimate predicted, the
Soviet leaders “[would] inevitably impinge upon vital interests of the Western
Powers and thus incur the risk of involvement in a general war through Western
reaction.”339 The difference between the U.S. becoming involved in Korea and in
China was only partially based on which had the greater impact on vital American
interests. It was also based on balancing the threat of potential communist
expansion with the threat of getting the U.S. involved in a situation from which it
could not extract itself without seriously compromising national security.

The way the United States fought the Korean War—particularly our
willingness to allow sanctuary status to Communist China even after she
became an active belligerent—did confirm and sharpen the pre-existing
official premise that mainland Asia was a secondary weight in the balance
of global power as compared with Western Europe. But the fact that we
were willing to fight a high-cost war to keep South Korea out of
Communist hands also gave impetus to the emerging realization that the
power contest could be won or lost in the secondary theatres when there
was a stalemate in the primary theatres.340

This realization, brought into focus by the difference in U.S. actions
toward China and North Korea, lay at the heart of how containment influenced the
U.S. decision to act in Korea. Because the U.S. so closely associated communist
actions in general with Soviet actions in particular, the U.S. could not view
Communist Chinese intervention as anything other than an indication of further
Soviet involvement in the Korean crisis. NIE-2 concluded that “[t]he Chinese

November 1950), annexed in “Memorandum by the Special Assistant for Intelligence (Armstrong) to the
Secretary of State and the Under Secretary of State (Webb),” Top Secret [Policy Planning Staff Files],
“Subject: National Intelligence Estimate No. 3: Soviet Capabilities and Intentions,” (Washington, 17
340 Seyom Brown, “Korea and the Balance of Power,” [from Brown, The Faces of Power: Constancy and
Change in United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press,
Communist decision to commit troops in North Korea, entailing as it does the serious risk of widening the Korean conflict, would not have been taken by Communist China without Soviet sanction or possibly direction.”\textsuperscript{341} Similarly, NIE-3, published one week later, stated that “the commitment of Chinese Communist forces, with Soviet material aid, indicates that the USSR considers the Korean situation of sufficient importance to warrant the risk of general war.” Additionally, NIE-3 estimated that, despite the connection with Communist China, the Soviet Union would not actively seek out war in Korea at this time.\textsuperscript{342} Estimates such as the latter reinforced the U.S. decision to limit its involvement, providing justification for the belief that, although the Soviet Union might be forced to directly engage in a war at some point, late 1950 in Korea was neither the time nor the place.

The Question of Rollback and the Expansion of the War

Despite the impact of the containment policy, it was not the only influence on U.S. wartime strategy in Korea during the first year of the war. Another prominent influence was the idea of rollback. Rollback called for the U.S. to take every opportunity it could to reduce the area currently under Soviet (or any communist) control. This idea found one of its greatest proponents in General MacArthur, but he was not the only one addressing the issue of rollback.

Rollback in the 1940s. The concept of rollback was discussed among policymakers and other officials in the late 1940s. Along with containing

\textsuperscript{341} NIE-2, in \textit{FRUS: 1950, VII}, 1104.
\textsuperscript{342} NIE-3, in \textit{FRUS: 1950, I}, 415-416.
communism many people believed the U.S. must reduce Soviet power and influence as much as possible while the U.S. still maintained a sufficient nuclear advantage. There were different methods by which the Soviet Union might make its presence known. Some proponents of rollback believed preventive war against the Soviet Union while the U.S. had an advantage was the only means by which to sufficiently shrink Soviet influence and power. Others considered the loss of the American nuclear monopoly to be the most significant event. Once the Soviet Union got the atomic bomb, it appeared to many that rollback was even more necessary than before, to curb increasingly aggressive Soviet tendencies. As one historian described it, many in the U.S. were responding to a “tremendous sense of foreboding,” feeling that the Soviet Union, aggressive even before it had the bomb, would grow increasingly dangerous once it was obtained. \(^{343}\) For many, the outbreak of the Korean War confirmed those threats.

**Rollback in NSC 68.** One of the most influential places in which the idea of rollback existed was NSC 68. Although the document did not advocate the expansion of a localized war into a global one,\(^ {344}\) it did assume that if a global war were to begin, the U.S. would respond quickly with atomic weapons in order to hopefully cripple, if not totally defeat, the Soviet Union as quickly as possible. The concept of rollback, when combined with the increasing Soviet threat level, had extremely strong influence in both the minds and actions of policymakers. This influence had both military and non-military aspects. Throughout its analyses and recommendations NSC 68 addressed the need for the U.S. to build

\(^{343}\) Trachtenberg, 5.
\(^{344}\) NSC 68, (7 April 1950), in *FRUS: 1950, I*, 244.
up its military forces. This buildup was in part a response to what NSC 68 described multiple times as the fundamental expansionist nature of the Soviet Union. If the U.S. were to be able to stand up to that expansion, it would need a much stronger military.\textsuperscript{345} Other aspects of the buildup focused on the need for a military force to support national security.\textsuperscript{346}

NSC 68 did not rule out negotiation and communication as a means by which to roll back Soviet influence. Much of NSC 68 was predicated on the requirement for fundamental change in the Soviet Union before there could be any hope of lasting peace or coexistence. To many, this requirement meant only one thing: the Soviet Union’s power and influence must be reduced. Negotiation could, over time, be a crucial tool toward this goal.\textsuperscript{347} Indeed, this result was one of the factors of containment Nitze specifically identified in NSC 68: “As for the policy of ‘containment’, it is one which seeks by all means short of war to … induce a retraction of the Kremlin’s control and influence…”\textsuperscript{348} Although this statement explicitly called for means short of war, as the threat grew, many felt the idea of actively reducing Moscow’s influence was of primary concern.

\textit{Rollback and Expansion in the Korean War}. In Korea, it was clear that pursuing a policy of rollback would result in a significant expansion of the war. From the beginning of the Korean War, there was a delicate balance in discussions of how the war was likely to expand and who was likely to enter. The general opinion among both military and civilian officials was that the Soviet

\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{345} See, for example, ibid., 237-238, 241, 246, 249, among others.
\textsuperscript{346} See, for example, ibid., 244, 252-253, among others.
\textsuperscript{347} Ibid., 272-276.
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid., 252. Emphasis added.
Union, though unpredictable and determined to expand its influence, was unlikely
to initiate war with the U.S. until it felt its advantage had been secured, or at least
sufficiently advanced. Discussions about widening the war beyond the Korean
peninsula involved similar considerations. The records of a 29 June meeting of
the National Security Council Consultants illustrated some of the early potential
reasons for expanding the war:

Mr. [James] Lay said that if Chinese Communists in uniform moved into
North Korea, we would be in a better position to conduct military
operations north of the 38th parallel. Mr. [George] Kennan agreed. He said
that if we caught the Chinese Communists in South Korea we could go
north of the 38th parallel and even bomb in Manchuria. He said we would
take the position that we would not recognize any Chinese Communist
declaration of war against us, but if they interfered with our mission in
Korea we would take any necessary action. In other words, we would
ignore their words but not their deeds.349

Both this and other sources have shown that the U.S. considered any potential
expansion in the context of the general international communist situation. This
would come to have a significant effect later in the war, when it appeared that
both the Chinese Communists and Soviets were building up their forces near
Korean borders in preparation for an attack.

There are two significant instances within the first year of the war when
Truman’s administration gave considerable attention to the possibility of
widening the war beyond the peninsula. The most famous is MacArthur’s request
to extend the U.N. offensive into Manchuria, as part of the successful U.N. push
into North Korea in late 1950. It does not appear that MacArthur directly
requested troops for such an extension in his 28 November communiqué that

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349 “Memorandum of National Security Council Consultant’s Meeting, Thursday, June 29, 1950, 2 p.m.,” Top
Secret [Policy Planning Staff Files], “Subject: Situation Resulting from Hostilities in Korea,” (Washington,
explained “[w]e face an entirely new war.” In this telegram, MacArthur also expressed his opinion that the situation had now passed beyond his authority, and must be decided on a larger scale. The Council on Foreign Relations history explained that many people had “interpreted [this statement] as an appeal for authority to take military action against China itself…” It is true that earlier in November MacArthur had requested authorization to bomb bridges crossing the Yalu. At that time, Truman authorized him to bomb the Korean terminals only, fully aware of the risk of greater war if the war were extended into Manchuria. However, it is unclear exactly why MacArthur’s 28 November cable would generate such an assumption. Most studies dealing with this question rightly raise the issue of conflict between MacArthur and Truman. However, since this paper is dealing less with specific battlefield campaigns or tactics, there would be insufficient room and context to adequately discuss the MacArthur question here.

Another instance of the rollback question illustrated the influence of the general Cold War climate, combined with the moderating influence of containment, on the question of expanding the war. That example came in April 1951, when President Truman transferred nine complete atomic weapons to the military’s control, removing them from civilian hands, largely in response to intelligence about a buildup of Soviet and Communist Chinese forces on Korea’s borders.

350 “The Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur), to the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” Top Secret, Flash [795.00/11-2850: Telegram], (Tokyo, 28 November 1950, 4:45 p.m.), in FRUS: 1950, VII, 1237.
351 Stebbins, 418.
In an event that has become largely overshadowed by MacArthur’s dismissal\textsuperscript{354} in early April 1951, Truman transferred nine complete atomic bombs (instead of transferring only the non-nuclear components) to the Air Force’s control. Previously, the bombs had been under control of the civilian U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, per the Atomic Energy Act of 1946. However, in April 1951, Truman felt a number of critical factors had combined to establish a situation that could rapidly escalate, and so he agreed to the JCS request for the bomb transfer. On 6 April 1951, Truman examined the intelligence he and his advisors had received, and determined the potential for escalation had reached a critical point. Reports of buildups of military equipment and troops in both Vladivostok and Manchurian air fields, combined with growing numbers of Soviet forces moving toward the Korean border appeared to Truman to be an indicator of a significant communist invasion. “Moscow might be about to try a one-two knock-out blow, striking UN forces by air in Korea and cutting them off at sea from their Japanese bases. To check this threat, Truman had decided to send complete nuclear weapons and SAC [Strategic Air Command] bombers across the Pacific.”\textsuperscript{355}

Although the weapons were never used, they were, in fact, deployed to the Far East, though to areas short of their originally intended locations.\textsuperscript{356} At this point, a reevaluation of the circumstances revealed the chances of escalation were

\textsuperscript{354} The majority of secondary sources examined for this paper, even those written in the past ten years, did not mention this specific incident, even though it represented a fundamental change in the mentality behind U.S. atomic policy in the Korean War.


\textsuperscript{356} Ibid., 73. For instance, the article says that a group originally bound for Okinawa was stopped at Guam, and the planned commander for the strike force remained in Omaha, instead of being deployed to Tokyo.
Truman decided reducing the likelihood of using the bombs would not hamper the U.S. position in the war. Just as Truman and his advisors had considered the effects of both the domestic and allied reactions at length as a part of implementing its containment policy, the decisions both to deploy and then to stand down the bombers were based on the same considerations. Numerous sources have discussed the effect of Truman’s decision on dismissing MacArthur and improving his own domestic posture regarding the war. When viewed within the overall context of the war it is clear that in addition to the domestic and allied considerations, Truman’s ultimate decision to hold back on the bombs coincided with greater intelligence information and a realization that expanding the war outside Korea’s borders would entail risks much too great for the U.S.

Although the concept of rollback as an active strategic policy did not result in expansion of the war beyond the Korean peninsula, the mentality behind rollback remained in effect, certainly throughout the first year of the war. By the time the front stabilized back around the 38th parallel in mid-1951, a policy of containment had surfaced again as a dominant force in wartime strategy. This did not mean that rollback was completely eclipsed, however. It remained a part of containment, to varying degrees, throughout the rest of the war.

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357 Ibid.
358 Dingman’s article discusses this fairly well, and he cites many other sources, both archival and secondary, to support his discussion.
Containment as a Wartime Strategy

Containment itself does not, by its nature, guarantee a limited war. There were many instances throughout the Korean War in which decisions were made (or considered) that showed the influence of rollback and the desire actively to reduce communist influence. Instead, as one recent history explained it, “The main reason the war did not expand is that the top leaders of the two nations with the greatest capacity to do so, the United States and the Soviet Union, preferred to contain the fighting.” As has been shown, however, “to contain the fighting” did not necessarily translate to containment as defined in policies such as NSC 68. Instead, the containment described in NSC 68 and other similar policies formed the framework within which U.S. involvement in Korea developed. Truman and his advisors entertained numerous considerations, many of which centered on issues such as the balance of power between communist and non-communist centers, and the way that balance might be affected by certain actions.

It is also clear that issues other than containment itself played a large role in U.S. military strategy and conduct in Korea. One of the biggest factors was the Soviet Union’s atomic capability. After 1949, the U.S. was certain the Soviet nuclear stockpile and delivery systems were growing, though the U.S. did not know the exact rate. In reality, the rate was less of an issue, however, because so much of American foreign policy concern centered on the threat of Soviet expansion or aggression. Often, these threats had at least some basis in fact, and when combined with the extremely close association policymakers made between

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Soviet communism and communism in general, the threats did indeed become extremely “foreboding.”

Probably more than anything it was this fear of the direction and degree of increasing Soviet aggression that impacted how the U.S. employed containment in Korea. The U.S. had observed Soviet actions in the late 1940s, and believed they were, in general, becoming more aggressive, as previous chapters have discussed. However, when the U.S. lost its nuclear monopoly in August 1949, the threat took on a new dimension. Policymakers feared the Soviet Union would prove in its actions to be as aggressive as its rhetoric had indicated for years. As NIE-3 explained in November 1950, “In the belief that their object cannot be fully attained without a general war with the Western Powers, the Soviet rulers may deliberately provoke such a war at the time when, in their opinion, the relative strength of the USSR is at its maximum. It is estimated that such a period will exist from now through 1954,* with the peak of Soviet strength relative to the Western Powers being reached about 1952."360

It is clear the policy of containment, particularly in concert with the factors discussed throughout this chapter, directly impacted how the U.S. became involved and conducted operations in the Korean War. Those considerations, both as strict aspects of the containment policy found in NSC 68 and as general concern in the context of the Cold War, shaped the U.S. entry into the war, influencing Truman’s decision not to expand the war (territorially or otherwise).

360 NIE-3, in FRUS: 1950, I, 415. Footnotes in the text: “*1954 is assumed to be the date by which North Atlantic Treaty forces in Europe will have been built up to such strength that they could withstand the initial shock of Soviet attack and by which the gap between the military strength of the Western Powers and that of the USSR will have begun to close. [Footnote in the source text.];” and “†After the USSR has made certain important deficiencies in atomic bomb stockpile and in certain types of aircraft and before the Western economy has been fully geared for a war effort. [Footnote in the source text.]”, p. 415.
beyond what the U.S. could reasonably handle. The combination of those factors shaped the Korean War into the first of the limited wars of the atomic age.
CONCLUSION

ESTABLISHING A PRECEDENT

By the time the Korean War reached a stalemate in the fall of 1951, conflict between the U.S. and Soviet Union had evolved into a picture that much more closely resembled that of the later Cold War period. There was little focus on the possibility of communication or negotiation. Instead the sort of miscommunication common to later decades hindered the progress of peace talks for another two years. Additionally, the character of the fighting was very similar to that seen later in the Cold War. Limited proxy wars, or “little hot wars,” as some had feared would develop in 1950, surfaced several times between 1953 and the fall of the Soviet Union. By the time the Korean War ended, many of the mindsets that would become characteristic of the Cold War had been firmly established. The U.S. continued to base its international relations on a general policy of containment, even if it was not as strict as what was seen in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Korea thus helped set the stage for the following forty years.

The speed with which the U.S. entered the war in Korea was one of the indications of the conflict’s importance. Even though the area was not among the defined vital centers on the U.S. defense perimeter, Korea’s vulnerability to Soviet advances—at least as policymakers understood it—lent it great importance in the international sphere. The rapid decisions policymakers made demonstrated the U.S. determination to hold any kind of communist advance at bay. Because of
the inherent associations the U.S. believed existed between any communism and
the Soviet variety in particular, the U.S. could no more allow North Korea to
overrun South Korea than it could allow the Soviet Union to make an overt
advance in Central Europe. This conviction had less to do with the objective
importance of each area (evidence has shown clearly that Europe was consistently
a higher priority for the U.S.), and more to do with the political and psychological
impact of a communist advance.

This determination was compounded by the influence of containment by
1950. Containment would remain a driving force through most of the next forty
years, though it would continue to be flexible, with policymakers adjusting its
means and ends to fit each situation. In Korea, a policy of containment was
essential to U.S. military response. George F. Kennan’s version of this policy in
the late 1940s established many of the U.S. beliefs about the fundamental Soviet
caracter. Kennan believed this character involved inherent expansion, but that
Soviet desires for such expansion were tempered by their unwillingness to enter
into overly risky situations. As Kennan explained in his Mr. “X” article, part of
this caution was governed by the Soviet Union’s need to stabilize its internal
power and legitimacy first.

By 1950, however, it appeared that some of this need for caution had
lessened. In 1949 the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, entering it
officially into the race for improved nuclear weapons.361 In part because this
development was so unexpected, coming three years earlier than U.S. officials

361 It is true the Soviet Union had been developing this project for some time. However, the explosion in
August 1949 was the first outright proof the U.S. had of Soviet efforts.
had estimated, the U.S. believed the Soviet Union was embarking on a much more aggressive foreign policy than had previously been observed. It seems clear the Soviet atomic bomb contributed to Stalin’s aggression, what Paul Nitze termed “boldness… [bordering] on recklessness…”362 Though Nitze’s statement might have been an overestimation at the time, particularly given what has since become known about Stalin’s caution when aiding Kim Il Sung, it is clear that Nitze’s assumption was very common among members of Truman’s administration.

By 1950, containment had become much more focused on the need for a substantial military buildup of U.S. military forces, as the 1950 policy paper NSC 68 demonstrated. The document cited among its reasons the inherent expansionist tendencies of the Soviet Union and Stalin’s determination to bring the free world under his control.363 For many, NSC 68’s conclusions were confirmed when the North Korean army crossed the 38th parallel in June 1950. Policymakers now saw Korea as the place where the communists (for most, this meant the Soviets) were exercising their power. This belief was strengthened by the influx of Communist Chinese forces in late October and November 1950. By this point, the U.S. believed Korea was the location where the line needed to be drawn against communist expansion.

Another consideration contributing to U.S. conduct in Korea was the question of atomic weapons. Before the war, an emphasis on atomic weapons

development reinforced the low military levels. Though policymakers realized the limits of this dependence in early 1950, by the time the war began there was still significant consideration given to using atomic weapons in warfare. At the same time, however, policymakers were beginning to doubt the complete usefulness of these weapons, making it an even greater question of whether, and how, the bomb might be used in Korea.

The Korean War clearly established a precedent for limited war in the nuclear age. Both the U.S. and Soviet Union were committed to preventing the war from escalating beyond their control. The policy of containment played a major role in establishing these limitations. Despite discussion of expanding the war beyond the peninsula, in the end influences of caution and containment kept the front stabilized near the point where it had begun. The dramatic shift in U.S. policy from what existed at the end of World War II was brought about partly by external factors, such as international developments between the U.S. and Soviet Union. It was also brought about, however, by a growing conviction among American officials that communism was a danger that needed to be stopped. In Korea, the U.S. found a situation that allowed it to exercise its authority in a limited manner, but in a way that left few questions as to its intent.


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