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# Rules of the Game: Examining U.S. Policy in Korea (1947-1950)

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Rules of the Game: Examining U.S. Policy in Korea (1947 – 1950)

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE PREREQUISITE FOR HONORS IN  
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J. L.

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## Chapter I

### *Introduction*

On June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea. President Truman responded by dedicating American air, navy, and ground troops to the peninsula within the first week of the invasion and calling for a separate UN coalition to get involved. Over the course of three years, the United States paid for the war in both blood and treasure. After \$30 billion<sup>1</sup> and 36,000 American lives, the two Koreas agreed to sign an armistice, thus concluding the Korean War. The two countries, however, are technically still at war since a formal peace agreement was never signed. The United States continues to aid South Korea to this day.

The American decision to lead an international coalition into Korea in 1950, however, is quite puzzling. Following the liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, the Koreans were not deemed “fit for self-government,” so the United States and the Soviet Union became heavily involved in the region’s restoration. In September 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union occupied Korea for the purposes of accepting the surrender of Japanese troops in the peninsula.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. and USSR occupied southern and northern Korea respectively, based on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel that had been arbitrarily agreed upon two months earlier in Potsdam.<sup>3</sup> In December, the United States and the Soviet Union reached an agreement—the so-called Moscow Decision—that a U.S.-USSR joint commission would continue occupying the different zones until a provisional Korean democratic government could be established.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cost is in 1950 terms (in other words, not in 2014 terms adjusted for inflation) and only includes military operations cost; Stephen Daggett, "Costs of Major U.S. Wars," *CRS Report for Congress* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2008). <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/108054.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8: The Position of the United States with Respect to Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 2, 1948), 2.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of State, "The Political Adviser in Korea (Langdon) to the Secretary of State, Dated January 4, 1947," *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 596.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8, 2*.

In 1948, after failed attempts by the U.S. and USSR to bilaterally negotiate for a national government in a unified Korea, the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) was created under the Resolution of the UN General Assembly. Its purpose was to observe the elections that would "choose representatives who will constitute a National Assembly of Korea with whom the Commission may consult and which representatives may establish a National Government of Korea."<sup>5</sup> Although the Soviets rejected the UNTCOK in its zone, elections were nevertheless held on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948 and Syngman Rhee became the first president under the UN-supervised elections.<sup>6</sup> With a new "legitimate" leader, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) was founded on August 15<sup>th</sup>; less than a month later on September 9<sup>th</sup>, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) was inaugurated.<sup>7</sup>

In June 1949, the United States formally withdrew its occupation forces from South Korea as the Soviets had done the previous year in the north. Korea had not become any more secure than before, but the U.S. withdrew anyway indicating that its mission in Korea was coming to a close. At the same time, the U.S. continued to provide substantial economic aid and limited military aid to South Korea. When North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, the United States reversed its earlier position of unenthusiastic engagement to promptly devote its own troops to the peninsula. This reversal in policy presents a puzzle because if the peninsula were of any strategic value, the U.S. would not have withdrawn its troops only to intervene with an international coalition a year later. On the other hand, if it were of such little value, the United States ought not to have devoted so much aid, economic or military. The signals of disinterest the

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<sup>5</sup> The Resolution being referred to is a UN General Assembly Resolution adopted on November 14th, 1947. "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Dated February 21, 1948," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1948), 1124.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> "Korean War," In *The Harry S. Truman Encyclopedia*, edited by Richard S. Kirkendall (Michigan: G. K. Hall, 1990), 200.

U.S. conveyed in 1949 stood in sharp contrast to the lengths to which the U.S. was willing to go in 1950 to ensure that it could fight in Korea while maintaining commitments elsewhere. So how did the value of Korea change overnight to warrant such an immense response from the United States when it had mattered little before?

Although there are some possible explanations, none are satisfactory. The puzzle cannot be fully explained in terms of power. In 1950, there were other Asian countries that were considered strategically vital to American security – countries like Indochina, Japan, and Formosa (Taiwan) – that were also receiving American aid and vulnerable to the Soviet threat. If Korea were observed as strategically important at all, it would have only been one of many other possible places. Nor can intentions fully explain why the United States reversed its earlier position. It was not clear even in June 1950 that North Korea displayed aggressive intentions any more so than it had before; in fact, the same signals that would later be interpreted as signs of hostility – such as the country's intimate ties to the Soviet Union – existed well before 1950. Furthermore, if these signals had been processed as serious threat indicators, the United States would not have withdrawn in 1949. Thus, these explanations do not provide wholly satisfying answers for why the United States, following the North Korean invasion, intervened at such a high cost.

This paper argues that the United States' response in Korea was contingent not upon Korea's strategic value or intentions, but on the emergence of the Cold War Consensus from 1947 to 1950. As long as there was no Cold War Consensus — when, as constructivists would argue, the “rules of the game” were in flux — United States' attention to Korean affairs was sporadic and transient. In contrast, once the Cold War Consensus was established, the North Korean invasion appeared as part of a growing existential threat of Communism, which

demanded a massive military response. More specifically, the U.S. first withdrew from Korea when the rules had not yet stabilized; the United States was transitioning from viewing the USSR as a threat requiring an economic response (mainly in Western Europe) to an existential, military threat with an ever-expanding sphere of influence. By the time North Korea invaded, the rules had settled and the Consensus was consolidated enough to lock the United States into viewing the invasion as the initiation of a hostile USSR agenda. The Consensus, in fact, was strong enough that opinions presenting different policy recommendations were either altered or ignored altogether. Thus, the United States did not intervene in Korea because the peninsula had suddenly become an area of strategic interest more than the prior year; nor did it solely intervene because an invasion was, in itself, a sign of aggression. Instead, the United States became involved because the U.S.-USSR relations had *made* Korea important.

This paper proceeds as follows. In this chapter, I provide a literature review of threat perception to examine the alternative explanations for why the United States intervened in Korea. I draw from the works of John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, and Thomas Schelling and Robert Jervis. Each of their arguments provides plausible explanations for the U.S. decision, but none does so as comprehensively as the rules of the game explanation, which states that the United States intervened because the Consensus had changed the significance of North Korea's attack. After the literature review, I present the methodology for the paper, including an explanation for the particular time frame of the research.

Chapter II presents the empirical research of the project, which simultaneously examines the American policy in Korea and the emerging Cold War Consensus. The research is divided into three different periods: the first when the Cold War Consensus had yet to consolidate, the



second when the Consensus took form, and the third when the Consensus was applied to the invasion.

The final chapter contains the analysis on why the “rules of the game” is the most convincing explanation for the vacillation of American policy in Korea. The paper closes exploring this argument’s implications in international relations theory and in contemporary East Asian scholarship.

### *Literature Review*

As hinted earlier, the scope of the American commitment to Korea following the North Korean attack was substantial. Although the international coalition involved in Korea was under the aegis of the UN, the U.S. provided approximately 300,000 of the 341,000 personnel (about 88% of the total international troop presence).<sup>8</sup> The decision to intervene in Korea required the United States to willingly accept the potential cost of another war (human and economic). It also necessitated a legitimate justification to a public that was weary from the World War that had concluded only five years prior.

For international relations scholars, the question “Why did the United States intervene?” has a simple answer: North Korea was perceived as a threat. Where scholars differ is what triggers states to perceive threat, which have direct bearings on how they respond to it. This section proceeds as follows. First, John Mearsheimer’s theory on power and great power relations is examined to determine what North Korea would be like in the realist world. Second, Stephen Walt’s theory on state alliance formation is studied for its implications on threats. Lastly, I present my theory in which Thomas Schelling’s theory on the “rules of the game” is

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<sup>8</sup> The exact breakdown of the international coalition was as follows: 12,000 British; 8,500 Canadian; 5,000 Turks; 5,000 Filipinos; and other contingents below 1,000. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 636.

combined with Robert Jervis' work on threat perception. Each explanation presents different reasons for why the United States ultimately reversed its policy of lessening commitments in Korea to devote significant troops following the North Korean invasion.

### *North Korea in the Realist World*

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer argues that states constantly seek "to survive in a world where there is no agency to protect them from each other" in which power is the key to their survival.<sup>9</sup> Power is broadly understood as the state's military power, based on the size and strength of a state's army and the supporting forces (like air force and navy).<sup>10</sup> A threat, therefore, must be another state that either has or is in the process of obtaining more power, obstructing the state's ultimate quest for survival. The process of *perceiving* threat is when there is an imbalance in great power dynamics. States are always wary of other states rising (especially in terms of relative gains), but they are hypersensitive when they are the existing hegemon. Mearsheimer argues that the emergence of a potential hegemon makes "the other great powers especially fearful, and they will search hard for ways to correct the imbalance of power and will be inclined to pursue riskier policies toward that end."<sup>11</sup> The logic behind the inclination for riskier behavior is simple: when a state threatens to dominate the rest, "the long-term value of remaining at peace declines and threatened states will be more willing to take chances to improve their security."<sup>12</sup> For Mearsheimer, the need for power easily explains the dynamics of the early Cold War. The U.S. was the only great power in 1945, but was rapidly

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<sup>9</sup> Mearsheimer does mention another kind of power – latent power – which is defined as the "socioeconomic ingredients that go into building military power; it is largely based on a state's wealth and the overall size of its population." However, given that this power greatly overlaps with military power in its essence and for the sake of simplicity, this paper foregoes this power type. John. J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 55.

<sup>10</sup> Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

challenged by the USSR politically, economically, and militarily. Thus, Mearsheimer and fellow realists would argue that the United States' policy in Korea changed because the U.S. saw an opportunity to engage the USSR in what was to be an inevitable conflict.

When applied to Korea, however, there are two problems with this argument. First, it is not at all clear that Korea was a vital strategic area of interest. Korea was not the likeliest of locations for the Cold War to become "hot." There were many other locations – both general regions and specific borders. In Europe, the Balkan region was a potentially explosive area.<sup>13</sup> The British, taking stark austerity measures after World War II, had ceased its economic and military aid to Turkey and Greece, leading President Truman to believe as early as January 1946 that the USSR intended to invade the region to seize the Straits.<sup>14</sup> A successful invasion would give the Soviets access to Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East.<sup>15</sup> So important was the region geostrategically that Secretary Marshall saw the British withdrawal from Greece in February 1946, as "tantamount to British withdrawal from the whole Middle East."<sup>16</sup> It was not merely the British withdrawal of aid (since Britain's post-war economic deterioration was no secret), but the swiftness with which they withdrew that caused alarm.<sup>17</sup> The Balkans was coming undone and the United States was the only state that could help.

In the Middle East, Iran was another contentious area. A month after the British had withdrawn from Greece, in March of 1946, the U.S. saw an increase in the number of troops in the region. President Truman, in response to intelligence about Soviet troop movements towards

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<sup>13</sup> Seung Young Kim, *Americans' Perceptions of Polarity and the United States Commitment to Korea, 1882 – 1950* (Massachusetts: Tufts University Press, 2003), 146.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Cohen, "Threat Perception in International Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 1 (1978): 99.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, *Americans' Perceptions*, 160.

<sup>16</sup> David McCullough, *Truman*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 541.

<sup>17</sup> The so-called underbelly of Europe was a region of concern significant enough for Truman to propose the Truman Doctrine in which he declared that the U.S. would "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures," referring, of course, primarily to the USSR. *Ibid.*

the Iranian border, “remarked that the United States might soon be at war” and that a violent outburst may be imminent.<sup>18</sup> The fear was not unwarranted, as the USSR had overwhelming superiority in the Near East compared to the drastically depleted American forces.

In Asia, historical tensions made Taiwan (or “Formosa”) another catalytic region. In a domestically divided China, the Communist Party was growing with increasing momentum and the U.S. policymakers knew that the USSR “was in a position to exert greater influence there than any other country.”<sup>19</sup> By late 1949, the United States suffered a “defeat” in China to Mao Zedong and cut support to Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government. Some countries in Asia were important for emblematic reasons. The Philippines, for example, was a symbol of U.S.-instituted freedom whose sovereignty was being jeopardized by the USSR.<sup>20</sup> Other countries had value because of their resources, which both the U.S and USSR sought after. Indochina was important for its raw materials while Japan was critical for its industrial capacity.<sup>21</sup> All of these areas were troubling regions long before North Korea crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and their importance was confirmed when Truman sent additional troops to these areas after the attack. Thus, the Korean peninsula was only one of numerous possible places where a U.S.-USSR military conflict, if it were inevitable, could have occurred.

Second, if the realist view were correct, the empirical research would have shown a consistent consensus building up towards seeing the Korean peninsula as a core threat much prior to the North Korean invasion. However, this was not the case. For the bulk of 1947 and 1948 (the time period when this paper starts), American priority was in Western Europe. Even when there was a shift to focus more on Asia in 1949, it was with regards to China, not Korea.

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<sup>18</sup> Cohen, “Threat Perception in International Crisis,” 97.

<sup>19</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 544.

<sup>20</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents. *Special Message to the Congress on Military Aid* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1 June 1950).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Perhaps the best demonstration of the lack of consensus to view Korea as a core threat was in the United States' withdrawal in 1949. If the peninsula had been considered a place of significant strategic value relative to the other regions mentioned earlier, the U.S. simply would not have withdrawn. The reality was that the U.S. had to “determine the extent and character of assistance to Korea not only by the demands of the Korean situation, but in light of worldwide commitments,”<sup>22</sup> which became more challenging as the Soviet Union posed a greater threat.

Thus, the realist theory is plausible to the extent that the “existing hegemon-emerging hegemon” dynamics could explain the relationship between the United States and the USSR. However, it cannot fully explain why the United States decided to intervene in a country that was only one of a host of other countries that were of strategic interest, or the lack of a consensus building towards viewing Korea as a threat. If an inevitable conflict had to occur between the two contending powers, there was little indication that it had to occur in Korea.

### *The Perception of Threat*

Stephen Walt presents another explanation in *The Origins of Alliances* in which he studies the behavior of states particularly with regards to what motivates them to align with a particular ally. State alliance formation provides an insight into threat perception because states choose to either “bandwagon” or “balance” against what it considers as a threat. The criteria to evaluate the animosity (or amicability) of another state include four factors: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions.<sup>23</sup> Of these factors, his argument about the importance of intentions is most relevant to this paper's analysis.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert K. Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, United States Army, (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 1988), 97 – 98.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17.

According to Walt, states seek to balance against a threatening state when the state is deemed “unalterably aggressive.”<sup>24</sup> In making his point that “intention, not power, is crucial,” Walt uses the example of the Triple Entente.<sup>25</sup> As Germany became more powerful towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was not its accumulation of power that caused alarm for the other European powers *per se*, but rather, its expansionist intentions.<sup>26</sup> States, therefore, do not balance solely against power – they balance against *threats*,<sup>27</sup> and threats are formed from determining the other side’s intentions. Thus, Walt’s theory would posit that the United States’ policy in Korea varied and ultimately led to an intervention because there were perceived “unalterably aggressive” intentions where there were none before.<sup>28</sup>

On the one hand, this explanation is plausible because North Korea did present threatening intentions by inspiring Communist-sympathetic mass demonstrations and riots in South Korea.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Walt’s theory argues that states tend to “focus on the domestic characteristics of potential partners to ally with those whose beliefs or principles [“ideology”] resemble one’s own.”<sup>30</sup> North Korea’s close association with the Soviet Union was also well known from the day the country was founded, and the United States knew that North Korea heavily depended on the USSR for its military capabilities. In other words, North Korea was not only ideologically different from the United States, but it was also allied with another U.S. enemy. Thus, if states responded to other states for the threat they posed and not just for their objective power, North Korea presented a convincing case that it could be a threat.

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<sup>24</sup> In the examination of whether states are more likely to balance against a threatening power, or bandwagon with them, he finds that there is a propensity for states to do the former. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> My emphasis. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 152.

<sup>28</sup> There is also the valid argument that an invasion is the ultimate sign of hostile intentions; however, this issue will be addressed in the “analysis” section of the second chapter.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2010), 121 – 123.

<sup>30</sup> Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 180.

Walt's theory cannot, however, explain the *vacillation* of US policy: why the United States chose to withdraw in the first place or why the same signals that were ultimately used to identify North Korea as a hostile entity were not interpreted as so in 1947. This theory also cannot fully explain the final decision to get involved in Korea because in reality, it was not clear even in 1950 that North Korea would be seen as a threat. In June 1950, Dean Rusk, the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, testified on the Hill that he saw no likelihood of war in Korea.<sup>31</sup> In another case, John Muccio, the U.S. Ambassador in Korea, expressed his concern that Korea had been unfairly omitted in American media coverage of the Atlantic Council talks that had taken place in May 1950. But opinions like Muccio's were not taken seriously on the whole. When Muccio communicated with Rusk, the latter responded that he had "come to the conclusion that the omission of Korea from the statements in question was probably not an oversight" because Korea was not a problem that had been discussed by the Foreign Ministers in London and Paris.<sup>32</sup> The fact that such assurances had to be given in the first place offers a strong counterargument to those who argue that Korea was increasingly perceived as a threat. There was no universally understood value of the Korea peninsula, and in some circles like the Atlantic Council, it was not even discussed.

The exchange above makes it all the more important to understand where the United States derived its motivation to intervene in Korea. It may be intuitive to argue that the U.S. automatically saw a threat in Korea. But this line of thinking is problematic because to argue that the role of North Korea in the Cold War was significant is only comprehensible in retrospect.

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<sup>31</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 777.

<sup>32</sup> Rusk assured Muccio that he would work to avoid "unjustified omissions of Korea" in the future, but neither would know that North Korea would invade just ten days later, giving the press plenty to talk about for the following three years. "The Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk) to the Ambassador in Korea (Muccio), Dated June 15, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 106.

### *The puzzle*

The previous theories highlighted the shortcomings of the existing explanations on why the North Korean invasion came to be seen as a threat requiring a massive military response. The Korean peninsula was not, in itself, *the* area of core strategic interest. There had even been violent Communist conflicts in other parts of the world, but the U.S. had not responded with the scale and military scope that it did to Korea prior to 1950. So why did the United States reverse its decision of minimizing its presence in the Korean peninsula to intervene in a tiny peninsula thousands of miles away? I propose a third explanation, which says that the answer lies in the *meaning* that the U.S. endowed the invasion in June 1950. It was not the invasion itself that was inherently a threat; rather, it was *interpreted* as a threat through the prevailing “rules of the game.” This section first examines the IR theory that is at the foundation of the rules of the game, particularly drawing from the constructivist literature; then, it proceeds to mention the rules of the game that the U.S. employed to define the USSR from 1947 to 1950.

### *Rules of the game in international relations theory*

Thomas Schelling, in *The Strategy of Conflict*, argues that there are general “rules of the game” (tacit or explicit) that are mutually understood by actors.<sup>33</sup> Despite realist claims that the international system is locked in a “state of perpetual anarchy in which the slightest collision might lead to war,”<sup>34</sup> the system appears to be at equilibrium the majority of the time indicating that the actors develop a consensus on what is or is not acceptable behavior. States may not work together, but they do not oppose each other either. Instead, they are “engaged in the routine administration of concerns which do not entail or require their mutual interaction at the high

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<sup>33</sup> To be clear, in these scenarios, communication among actors is prohibited. Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 57.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, “Threat Perception in International Crisis,” 104.



policy-making level.”<sup>35</sup> Since the common goal of most states is to “prevent, or at the very least limit, unwelcome contact,”<sup>36</sup> it is possible for different actors within a state to come to a consensus and develop a framework by which it can judge another state. Thus, “rules of the game” describes the framework of norms and institutions that defines threats and thus shapes events to be interpreted a certain way.

How, then, are the rules constructed in the first place? According to Robert Jervis, states determine another state's intentions (and respond accordingly) based on the image it has of the other state. If a state perceives a hostile image of another, incoming information is filtered through this lens and serves as confirmation for the perceived image.<sup>37</sup> An “image” itself is derived from narratives and identities. Any given event must be interpreted and how the event is endowed a meaning depends on what decision makers believe and want to believe: “perception is laden with interpretation and theory. Almost no inferences – perhaps none at all – are self-evident in the sense that all people under all circumstances looking at the information would draw the same conclusion.”<sup>38</sup> Jervis’ theory thus challenges the realist perspective that assumes that actors navigate international relations using seemingly indisputable and universally understood metrics, such as power.

The reality is that policies are formed not based on what is true, but what is *perceived* to be true. Here, it is important to draw from the constructivist argument that objective facts and material forces, even events as seemingly straightforward as invasions, are significant only when

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<sup>35</sup> Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, 65.

<sup>36</sup> Schelling argues that whether states as a whole have common or divergent goals when rules are formed is not particularly relevant, since coordination for a common gain can occur even when there is rivalry among the various actors (so long as they can coordinate expectations). Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Jervis, “Signaling and Perception,” in K.R. Monroe ed. *Political Psychology* (New Jersey: Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 297 – 298.

they are constituted with particular meanings for actors.<sup>39</sup> For example, an event as substantial as the attack on Pearl Harbor led to different interpretations by MacArthur's officers on its significance on U.S. position in the Pacific.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, David Campbell provides an example of how similar events can be met with different responses. In 1990, the U.S. initiated the First Gulf War as a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, which was puzzling since the Iraqi invasion, particularly given the distance, did not "in and of itself constitute a danger, risk, or threat" to the United States.<sup>41</sup> Campbell stipulates that it could have been possible for the U.S. to conclude that no matter how much it disapproved of the turn of events, the situation did not demand a full-scale response,<sup>42</sup> in which case there would have been a debate as to the extent to which the U.S. should have gotten involved, but would have ended as just that – a debate. But when Iraq had invaded Iran (another oil-producing state like Kuwait) a decade earlier, there had been "no apocalyptic denunciation or calls to action, let alone a military response, from the United States."<sup>43</sup> Thus, facts that are ostensibly indisputable signals of hostility (like invasions) are not uniformly understood. Instead, responses are tailored to the meaning endowed to the event because threats are constructed based on perceptions.

Narratives influence the perceptions themselves. Narratives, according to Janice Bially Mattern, are "a particular process of representation through which an author tells events"<sup>44</sup> and they are powerful because they are not merely about the "authors" telling events, but also about

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24.

<sup>40</sup> Referred to in James W. Davis, "Chapter 4: Rational Signaling Revisited," *Psychology, Strategy and Conflict: Perceptions of Insecurity in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2003), 78. Original work: Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962).

<sup>41</sup> David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Campbell, *Writing Security*, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Janice Bially Mattern, *Ordering International Politics: Identity, Crisis, and Representation Force* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 12.

how these authors construct those very events as they tell them.<sup>45</sup> In the case of the North Korean invasion, as this paper finds, the narrative was that the Soviet Union emerged as a force to reckon with on an existential level and the invasion was understood as an initiation of a hostile, expansive USSR agenda.

Objectively, North Korea's invasion was not the first case in which the Communists caused significant violence. In 1947, the Greek Communist party (KKE) launched a full-scale insurrection and formed a provisional government to counter the existing one, going as far as to seek international recognition;<sup>46</sup> the conflict resulted in hundreds and thousands of casualties.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, the North Korean government was considered provisional by the United States initially, lacking legitimacy. The KKE members were labeled "bandits"<sup>48</sup> because of their guerrilla tactics, much as North Koreans were first called when they invaded South Korea.<sup>49</sup> Despite the similarities, the U.S. did not respond with a military intervention in Greece to the extent that it did in Korea; instead, the Greek conflict was branded a "civil war," just like the China-Taiwan conflict between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek in 1949. Similar events had occurred, but how the event was understood and ultimately responded to depended on the prevailing rules of the game at the time. The narrative was not there to frame the situation in Greece as one that warranted an international intervention. Thus, what a state perceives as a threat is ultimately a construction and all events are registered within its narrative. Put another

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> John O. Iatrides, "Revolution or Self-Defense? Communist Goals, Strategy, and Tactics in the Greek Civil War," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2005): 3 – 33.

<sup>47</sup> Amikam Nachmani, "Civil War and Foreign Intervention in Greece: 1946-49," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct. 1990): 489 – 522.

<sup>48</sup> Iatrides, "Revolution or Self-Defense?" 3 – 33.

<sup>49</sup> Specifically, Truman initially said that the Republic of Korea was "unlawfully attacked by a bunch of bandits which are neighbors of North Korea. [sic] And the members of the United Nations are going to the relief of the Korean Republic to suppress a bandit raid..." Mentioned in: Public Papers of the Presidents, "The President's New Conference, Press Conference No. 179," *Harry S. Truman Presidential Library*, (Independence: Truman Library Archives, June 29, 1950).

way, even if intentions were observable (as Walt asserts) with a degree of certainty, the very element of *hostility* within the intentions must be constructed based on whether or not the actor chooses to make it so.

Rules of the game cannot be expected to be fixed precisely because they must be constructed and narratives themselves are subject to change. There are situations when “states *already* share an epistemological order”; or, to use Ann Swidler's term, “a socially *settled* time of shared basic truths.”<sup>50</sup> Then there are times when they are “unsettled” and the state undergoes an identity transformation. If rules are unstable, then multiple competing policies must be possible since there is no one policy that is universally accepted. If rules become stable, however, the structure can be expected to become more rigid so an acceptable view is narrowly defined.

Based on this concept, this paper argues that the United States was in unsettled times prior to 1949 because there was no clear narrative to define the USSR as a threat requiring a military response. There were competing arguments on both how to respond to the Soviet Union, and what the U.S. policy should be in Korea. There was some fluidity and flexibility. Decision makers were willing to make concessions with the Soviet Union with regards to establishing a unified government in the Korean peninsula because East Asia was a peripheral issue. The USSR itself was not yet “bent on achieving domination through force of arms,” and could be contained “through political and economic measures, rather than purely military ones.”<sup>51</sup> This was the view of George Kennan’s *Long Telegram* era, when there was doubt about the possibility of the Soviet Union posing a direct threat. Some, like Kennan, thought all the West needed to do was strengthen its economy and “maintain a steady, firm policy to keep the Soviet threat in check and

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<sup>50</sup> Bially Mattern criticizes exactly this point, that constructivism assumes stability as a necessary condition in which identities are formed and maintained. Bially Mattern, *Ordering International Politics*, 10. Original work of Ann Swidler: “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (April 1986).

<sup>51</sup> Excerpt describes George F. Kennan’s views. U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, April 14, 1950).

wait for [...] the inevitable: the downfall of the Soviet Union."<sup>52</sup>

This paper argues that starting in 1949, however, the U.S. observed a more settled set of rules of the game; the Cold War Consensus emerged, and the USSR became an existential threat with a global reach. The conflict with the Soviet Union was described as “momentous involving the fulfillment or destruction not only of this Republic but *of civilization itself*.”<sup>53</sup> The Soviet threat required a military response, and threats were no longer contained, but inextricably linked. This framework had a very different prescription for American foreign policy in general. Whereas the previous framework believed strengthening economies would suffice against the Communist threat, the settled rules of the game required general rearmament and constant vigilance for signs of violence that could spill over into other regions. Since a consolidation of the Cold War Consensus also meant a limited way of defining a threat, those who held different views were either coerced to change their opinions or ignored altogether.

So we return to the question: why the vacillation in U.S. policy toward Korea? This paper argues that the United States stabilizing its “rules of the game,” which became known as the Cold War Consensus, changed the significance of the North Korean invasion to necessitate an American response where it may not have required it before.

### *Methodology*

The last theory has the potential to explain not only the American policy to intervene in Korea, but why it had withdrawn from the peninsula in the first place. If North Korea, as addressed before, was sending the same signals to the United States in terms of its close alliance with the USSR (and therefore, the potential threat it posed), but the United States withdrew one

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<sup>52</sup> “The Cold War Consensus,” *Introduction in the Harry Truman Presidential Library* (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

<sup>53</sup> My emphasis. U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 68*, 1.

year and recommitted in the next, the metrics the U.S. used to interpret the signals must have changed. Thus, I sought to examine two things in this paper. First, I wanted to track the dependent variable: the American policy towards the Korean peninsula. Second, I wanted to measure how (if at all) the rules of the game (that is, the Consensus) shaped perceptions. To do this, I drew from three different sources: CIA reports, transcripts of Harry Truman and Dean Acheson's press conferences, and the Foreign Relations to the United States.

The first source was CIA reports, which provided the "big picture" accounts of who and what the United States perceived as a threat. The CIA reports' consistent availability contextualized Korea's priority in the list of all the threats the U.S. faced at the time; the reports were particularly useful for comparing purposes.

The second source was transcripts of Harry Truman and Dean Acheson's press conferences. The actors were chosen because they were the most influential actors in getting the U.S. involved in the Korean peninsula. The speeches examined were ones in which either the USSR or North Korea (or both) were mentioned. This source had its limitations, the most notable being that what was said for the public was not necessarily what was being discussed in private. These transcripts nevertheless captured how the U.S. was publicly developing its narrative of the Soviet Union. Another limitation of this source was its lack of consistent availability. Acheson's speeches were compiled at the Truman Library in boxes, which I navigated alone. Thus, human error could have missed some documents. Truman's speeches mentioning the USSR were also not available consistently mostly because a significant proportion of his speeches during this period pertained to domestic policies.

To explore the rules of the game and the shifting perceptions of Korea, I used content analysis on speeches and communication. The purpose of the content analysis was to look for

broad patterns of discourse, which I interpreted as the “rules of the game.” There were initially some limitations because a uniform coding sheet could not be applied due to the differing nature of Truman and Acheson’s positions. For example, the President was expected to comment on everything ranging from domestic labor unions to the situation in the Balkans, while Acheson was only expected to focus on foreign policy. To compensate for the vastly different nature of their speeches, Truman’s speeches were filtered using key words: Russia, Soviet Union, Stalin, Communism (Communist), threat, Asia, Europe, and Korea.<sup>54</sup> Despite the limitation, the transcripts still provided a snapshot of how the actors themselves were articulating the general Communist threat.

Lastly, the Foreign Relations to the United States (FRUS) provided a wealth of information and made it possible to consistently and chronologically track the American policy towards Korea. FRUS also compensated for the fact that Dean Acheson, despite being an important actor in shaping the Cold War Consensus, was not the Secretary of State until 1949 (which is considered Period II in this paper). Consulting FRUS, this paper examined all the memorandums, and then highlighted policies that were considered “landmarks” in the American policy for Korea. A limitation with consulting FRUS was the possibility that the Korea chapter, precisely because it was solely dedicated to Korean affairs, skewed the peninsula’s importance from the U.S. perspective. This problem was overcome by using the other sources, such as the CIA reports, to contextualize how Korea fit into the grand scheme of American foreign policy.

### *Time Frame*

The narrative chapter starts in 1947 for two major reasons. First, there were no coherent

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<sup>54</sup> For the tables in Chapter II, I did not count the speech a second time if there were overlaps; for example, if there was a speech that came up both for my search through “Stalin” and “communism,” it was omitted in my count the second time.

policies with regards to Korea before this time. The U.S. had been bound by treaty to this area as part of the postwar agreements, but the U.S. and USSR were getting nowhere between 1945 and 1946 and there was no noteworthy policy difference as 1947 began. Even going into 1947, the USSR and U.S. were at an impasse as to how to unify Korea and establish a local government. Nothing had been done since Korea's liberation in 1945, as demonstrated by the recommendation by the U.S. political adviser in Korea at the time who stated that, "Time is of the essence. Two years have been lost. The Koreans are becoming restless. [...] Whatever we do will be difficult but further uncertainty is worse."<sup>55</sup> At the same time, the United States was still willing to compromise and reach out for a detente on the issue of unifying Korea,<sup>56</sup> a sentiment that started to show signs of increased unwillingness in late 1947. The Soviet Union did not have a clear policy towards Korea prior to 1947, either. In fact, Bruce Cumings notes that, "the rapid end of the war also left Soviet policies toward Korea relatively unformed and thus reactive to American policies in the south. There is little indication that the Soviets thought much about Korea before [World War II] ended; and in 1945/46 they had to cope with awesome human and material destruction at home. This period of 'domesticism,' and the general emphasis of Soviet foreign policy on Eastern Europe, meant that Korea took a back seat."<sup>57</sup>

The second reason the paper starts in 1947 is because the United States' foreign policy combating the Communist threat started to become more coherent this year: the inauguration of the Truman Doctrine signaled the formal start of American policy specifically against the Soviet threat, and the formal institutions and programs that became critical in the following decades' war against Communism – such as NATO and the Mutual Defense Assistance Program – were

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<sup>55</sup> "Telegram from the Political Adviser in Korea (Jacobs) to the Secretary of State, Sent 19 September 1947," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 804.

<sup>56</sup> Robert L. Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume I*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 385 – 386.



all created following the Truman Doctrine.

The empirical research concludes in 1950 because the bulk of the American decision to intervene in Korea had been established by the end of the year. Truman made speeches calling for domestic economic reformation to accommodate the increased defense expenditure, and the U.S. accepted the possibility that its intervention could invite the Chinese to also intervene, but decided to commit troops anyway. In short, the first six months of the Korean War provided adequate evidence to this paper's interest of examining the *initial* American decision to intervene in Korea, since much of the bigger mobilization policies were already in progress by then.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter explored the literature for how the vacillation in American policy in the Korean peninsula could be explained. First, North Korea's actions were examined from a realist perspective. From such a view, the American decision to intervene in Korea was a consequence of great power dynamics. This theory, however, proved to not be completely applicable to Korea for two reasons: first, Korea never became *the* strategic area of interest and was, in fact, not even the likeliest place for the Cold War to become "hot"; second, there was also no consistent consensus building up towards seeing the peninsula as a place where U.S.-USSR tensions would erupt.

The theory on the perception of threat provided another explanation for the American decision to intervene by asserting that North Korea's hostile intentions would have provoked the United States. In reality, however, North Korea was not seen as a threat – that is, the U.S. did not wholeheartedly register its potential "hostile intentions" in shaping U.S. foreign policy – even in 1950. The signals for unrest was there, and some American officials stationed in Korea requested

more attention be given to the peninsula, but they were not given serious consideration until the invasion itself happened. Even then, as this paper finds, there were other areas that were considered to be at risk and that Korea was not, in and of itself, the hostile threat.

Lastly, the “rules of the game” presented another possible explanation, asserting that every event was artificially endowed meanings and that its interpretation was based on the rules of the game an actor developed. The United States’ decision to withdraw from the Korean peninsula had been justifiable when the Consensus – the “rules of the game” – had yet to be stabilized. When the Consensus had consolidated, however, the USSR was viewed as a hostile and expansionist threat. The Korean invasion only confirmed that the Communist threat was proliferating, and that the event marked the initiation of the long-anticipated U.S.-USSR hostilities.

In the following chapter, I seek to explain what drove U.S. policy in Korea by examining how the perception regarding the USSR changed from 1947 to 1950. The empirical research is divided into three periods: one, when the Cold War Consensus was not entirely salient; two, when the Consensus started to emerge to define the USSR as an expansive, potentially existential threat; and three, how this Consensus was applied to Korea when North Korea invaded. By tracking both the U.S. policy in Korea and the development of the Consensus, I determine that the Consensus shaped the importance of the Korean invasion, which contributed to the United States formulating an urgent response and ultimately leading an international intervention in the peninsula.

## Chapter II

This chapter is divided into three periods, each examining two things: the American policy towards Korea and the formation of the Cold War Consensus. In Period I, the Korean peninsula's main issue was the establishment of a local government. Any signal that Korea may be potentially explosive was lost to other regions that were deemed more pressing. At the same time, the Cold War Consensus had not yet consolidated; the USSR was defined as a threat that required an economic response; and the U.S. foreign policy was preoccupied with Western Europe to be substantially committed in any other region. Period II explores the time when the policy gap emerged in Korea, in which the U.S. continued its economic aid to the region but minimized its military presence by withdrawing its forces. At the same time, the Consensus began to emerge. There was a shift in perception so the Soviet Union became a rapidly expansive threat requiring a *military* response that could, if not responded to, pose an existential threat to the United States. Lastly, Period III investigates the U.S. policy following the North Korean invasion and how the shift in perception that had occurred earlier ultimately influenced its interpretation.

An important caveat to keep in mind in this chapter is that the demarcation of the periods is artificial. This paper may give the impression that the process of the Cold War Consensus consolidation was linear, but in actuality, there were many months when the United States was in transition and its stance either unclear or contradictory. It is important that this acknowledgement is made, but equally imperative to know that it did not hinder the paper's primary efforts to examine the broader outlines of the emerging rules of the game.

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## **Period I. (1947 – 48) Unsettled Rules of the Game**

In Period I, the general U.S. policy focus was to utilize economic restoration as a means of stabilizing the world order (especially in Western Europe), and more importantly, as a way of immunizing countries against the threat of Communism. This section examines two things: first, the U.S. policy in Korea, which was all about building a local Korean government and supporting the peninsula post-independence; and second, the lack of a Cold War Consensus. This period shows that there were some signs that Korea was a tumultuous place, but Korea was considered a place of “little strategic interest”<sup>58</sup> at the end of the day. Signs of potential trouble were not interpreted because of America’s focus on rehabilitating Western Europe where the USSR posed the greatest threat. The Soviet Union had yet to be exposed as an overt threat, which partially indicated to a lack of a Consensus. By the end of this period, however, there were emerging signals to indicate that the U.S. was in fact facing a belligerent and immensely dangerous enemy.

### *The Korea policy*

The American policy in Korea during 1947 and 1948 was one primarily focused on quickly establishing a national government in a preferably unified Korean peninsula. The U.S. focused on securing the Korean economy’s survival so as to “reduce the drain on U.S. resources and avoid the extent that involvement in Korea might become so deep as to preclude disengagement.”<sup>59</sup> The NSC 8, the most notable report that guided American decisions in Korea, stated that the U.S. would assist in building up the economy and military of South Korea, the

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<sup>58</sup> U.S. Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Interest of the United States in Military Occupation of South Korea from the Point of View of the Military Security of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, September 26, 1947), 1.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8*.

purpose of which was to ensure that South Korea could maintain its own security [with limited U.S. support] against the Communist North Korea.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the fact that neither the U.S. nor the USSR had yet defined a specific set of “rules,” the U.S. policy in Korea was based on an instinctive distrust of the USSR. The United States and the Soviet Union had initially intended on coming to a compromise on the issue of a unified Korean government through the joint commission established in 1945. By 1947, however, it became clear that the two sides were at an impasse. Speaking of a particularly frustrating session of the joint commission, the American Political Adviser in Korea reported to the State Department that, “Whatever may be the immediate motives of the Soviet delegation, all here concerned are pretty much unanimous in the view that the Soviet delegation and Moscow really do not want an agreement unless they are able to set up a provisional government in Korea and establish other arrangements which will ensure the ultimate control of a united Korea by a Peoples Democratic Front (Communist) party and thus establish another Soviet satellite state.”<sup>61</sup>

In part to escape the stalemate and in part to legitimize a new *democratic* Korean Republic, the United States proposed the Korea problem to the UN General Assembly in November 1947. The U.S. was getting impatient, and assessed that the probabilities of “long-term remunerative results” of continued occupation in Korea were low particularly if a solution was not achieved with the Soviets to unite the country soon.<sup>62</sup> Thus founded was the UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) that overlooked elections intended for a

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<sup>60</sup> Referred to in Stanley Sandler, *The Korean War: Not Victors, No Vanquished* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999). The report itself is: U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8*.

<sup>61</sup> "The Political Adviser in Korea (Jacobs) to the Secretary of State, Dated July 16, 1947," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 706.

<sup>62</sup> "The Secretary of War (Patterson) to the Acting Secretary of State, Dated April 4, 1947," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 626.

“National Korean Government.”<sup>63</sup>

The USSR, however, rejected the UNTCOK presence in the north — an action that only validated the speculation that the immediate Soviet objective in Korea was to manipulate the political environment to compel the United States to withdraw from its southern occupation zone.<sup>64</sup> This belief became increasingly credible since the USSR did not have to devote as much resources as the U.S. to secure the Korean peninsula due to its geographical proximity. If the USSR created a “puppet regime” (made possible with the UNTCOK absent) then voluntarily withdrew from the peninsula, the United States would be forced to withdraw also, pressured by the South Koreans to do as the USSR had done. Such U.S. withdrawal “would be followed by unification, and eventually, of course, by Soviet domination of the entire country through Korean Communist penetration and control.”<sup>65</sup> The idea that any government set up in North Korea would invariably be a puppet regime for the Soviet Union would later return to explain why the North Korean invasion of South Korea could not have been seen as anything other than an expansionist move on the part of the USSR. During this time period, however, it was just another reason to be skeptical of Soviet intentions when it came to settling policies in Korea.

To a certain extent, the United States continued to consider making concessions with the Soviets to create a unified Korean government – a vision that would be half-heartedly revisited years later even as the Korean War raged on. The United States’ continued engagement in the joint commission to produce a possible solution for Korea, for one, exemplified this willingness to concede. However, the more prevalent sentiment became frustration stemming from the policy deadlock, and the United States became skeptical of the Soviet intentions to *actually* want to

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<sup>63</sup> "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom, Dated February 21, 1948," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 1124.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated November 14, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1947), 6 – 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

create a unified Korea to the point that the U.S. declared it could not accept any “suggestions made by the Russians, either within or outside the framework of the Moscow Agreement, which held promise of getting on plans with a unified, democratic, and independent Korea.”<sup>66</sup>

The events that happened afterwards indicated the growing tension between the United States and the USSR. The UNTCOK officially took form in Korea and elections were held on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 1948 for the purposes of electing representatives to a Korea National Assembly (and subsequently, the National Government).<sup>67</sup> Some questioned the legitimacy of the results of the election precisely because the Soviet Union had refused to accept the UNTCOK in its occupation zone, depriving the Koreans in the north a chance to participate in the elections.<sup>68</sup> Despite the “divergences in the appraisal of [the] election” by some of the UNTCOK members, however, Syngman Rhee was declared the winner of the only “legitimate” government in Korea.<sup>69</sup> The Republic of Korea was officially founded on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1948 of which Rhee was the president. The following month, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was founded on September 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>70</sup> By the end of 1948, the United States maintained a slight hope for the unification of Korea, but there was also the admittance that North Korea was “irretrievably lost to the Communists.”<sup>71</sup> The only way to prevent Communist domination of the entire peninsula by this point was to acknowledge, however reluctantly, the existence of two different governments and to “give

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<sup>66</sup> “Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs (Vincent) to the Secretary of State, Dated January 27, 1947,” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 601.

<sup>67</sup> Even within the UNTCOK, there was some dispute regarding the legitimacy of the elections. The Commission was aware of the fact that the elections were not nationwide “in the sense that they do not comprise the south and north of Korea”; some members of the Commission doubted if the outcome of the elections would actually contribute to the solution of the Korean problem. “The Political Adviser in Korea (Jacobs) to the Secretary of State, Dated May 13, 1948,” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 1196.

<sup>68</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Political Adviser in Korea (Jacobs), Dated July 25, 1948,” *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 1258.

<sup>69</sup> The Political Adviser in Korea (Jacobs) to the Secretary of State, Dated May 13, 1948,” *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 1196.

<sup>70</sup> “Korean War,” *The Harry S. Truman Encyclopedia*, 200.

<sup>71</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation, by the Assistant Chief of the Division of Northeast Asian Affairs (Bond), Dated September 14, 1948,” *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 1300.

strong support to the government in the south."<sup>72</sup>

This begrudging (yet ultimately substantial) support to the Korean peninsula was demonstrated in two ways. On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1948, the USSR declared that it formally withdrew its occupation forces from North Korea, but this did little to change the U.S. policy because it had been determined earlier that “while the United States may consider itself to withdraw its occupation forces from south Korea as soon as practicable after the formation of a 'national' government under the terms of the Resolutions of November 1947 (in which the UNTCOK was established), the U.S. was also morally committed by the *spirit* of those Resolutions.”<sup>73</sup> The spirit of the Resolution meant the United States was bound to honor the economic commitments to the Republic of Korea that had been agreed upon in the Moscow Agreement.<sup>74</sup> The spirit also meant acknowledging “the political immaturity of Koreans and the danger of their gravitation towards highly centralized Governments” rooted in their inexperience in “democratic methods,”<sup>75</sup> and committing to supervise and guide a newly founded democracy. The condescending tone aside, the U.S. thought it was politically and perhaps even truly morally obligated to maintain its support to the Korean peninsula.

Despite the unclear value of Korea at the time (compared to other regions like Europe whose values were more salient), the United States also demonstrated willingness to commit to the peninsula by approving a three-year program to secure Korea's economy. The projected cost of the program was about \$410 million.<sup>76</sup> This policy was selected as the best option out of other

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> My emphasis. "Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs (Butterworth) to the Secretary of State, Dated March 4, 1948," *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 1137.

<sup>74</sup> "The Political Adviser in Korea (Langdon) to the Secretary of State, Dated May 21, 1947," *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 646.

<sup>75</sup> "The Secretary of State to the Political Adviser in Korea (Jacobs), Dated July 19, 1947," *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 676.

<sup>76</sup> "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Occupied Areas (Saltzman) on the Subject of Future Economic Assistance to Korea, Dated September 7, 1948," *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government



identified courses of action: "(1) to terminate aid with the end of FY 1949; (2) to revert to a relief program on an annual basis; (3) to continue a relief and rehabilitation (raw materials and repair and replacement parts) program on an annual basis or under a program of several years' duration; (4) to provide relief and assistance for economic development, including capital expenditure, under a program of several years' duration."

The focused account of U.S. policy in Korea should not, however, be misinterpreted as significant interest. The fact was that despite concerns about Soviet influence, Korea was not a priority during this period. Not only was there little strategic value endowed to the peninsula itself, but it was also located in a region where the Soviet Union presented a limited threat. According to the CIA, American priority in its efforts to contain the USSR, in order of importance, was: "a. Western Europe; b. The Near and Middle East (but within the region the situation in Greece is of great importance and the utmost urgency, while the situation with respect to Palestine is extremely dangerous); and finally, c. The Far East."<sup>77</sup> Korea's importance was often only articulated to highlight all the global post-war recovery processes in which the United States was involved. Public speeches mentioning Korea only did so in passing, and mostly to showcase a formerly occupied area that had been freed as a result of Allied efforts. For example, in 1947, President Truman gave a radio address stating:

"We are following a definite and clear foreign policy. That policy has been, is now, and shall be to assist free men and free nations to recover from the devastation of war, to stand on their own feet, to help one another, and to contribute their full share to a stable and lasting peace. [...]"

In furtherance of this foreign policy, we now have under consideration the part which the United States shall play in aiding a long-range recovery program for Western Europe. This plan presents great hope for economic security and peace in that vital part of the world. [...]"

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Printing Office, 1948), 1294. Compare this figure to the previous year's projected estimate of \$540,000,000 necessary to bring "at the end of three years, a viable, self-supporting Korean economy." To be clear, it was \$540,000,000 over the course of three years. "The Acting Secretary of State to the Secretary of War (Patterson), Dated March 28, 1947," *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 623.

<sup>77</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated September 26, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates), 1.

Serious difficulties have also been encountered in the occupied areas – Germany, Japan, and Korea. Additional funds will have to be appropriated this year in order for us to maintain our position in those areas.”<sup>78</sup>

The brevity of Korea’s mention was not limited to the instance above. Even before this radio address (which *only* mentioned Korea in the sentence above), it was apparent that people in Washington generally gave very little attention to Korea. Over and over again, Truman’s comments in press conferences related to Korea were in the following manner:

QUESTION. Mr. President, how is the program for aiding southern Korea going forward? We understood that there would be something coming up, following the [Greek-Turkey incident]?  
THE PRESIDENT. I have no information on the subject at the present time.<sup>79</sup>

Truman never followed up on this comment. In yet another incident:

QUESTION. What about Korea, Mr. President?  
THE PRESIDENT. The Korean situation has all been published. We want a united Korea with a democratic form of government, and we are approaching it now, I think, more nearly to a point of agreement than we ever have been. General Marshall knows how to handle it. He has been over there.<sup>80</sup>

Again, nothing more was mentioned in the subsequent conferences. If the excerpts did not demonstrate the general indifference to the region from the executive branch, the number of speeches in which Korea was mentioned certainly did: Truman mentioned Korea a total of six times in 1947 and four in 1948.

The CIA also showed a general lack of knowledge and interest in Korea, only publishing two full-length reports dedicated to the peninsula in 1947. In its January report, it assessed that “there is no doubt of the propaganda value of the Soviet Program, especially in the U.S. zone.

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<sup>78</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Radio Address to the American People on the Special Session of Congress, Dated October 24, 1947* (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

<sup>79</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *The President's New Conference, Press Conference No. 67, Dated April 3, 1947* (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

<sup>80</sup> The “more nearly to a point of agreement” comment was actually not entirely true, as indicated by the stalemate mentioned earlier in this section. Public Papers of the Presidents, *The President's Special Conference with the Association of Radio News Analysts No. 90, Dated May 13, 1947* (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

[...] The socialization of basic industries and the redistribution of land figure in the political platforms of every party in South Korea. Soviet policies might therefore be expected to have greater popular appeal in Korea."<sup>81</sup> Surprisingly, the report went on to say that, "*Despite a lack of evidence*, there are indications that the Soviet program has not won the support of the people."<sup>82</sup> The language in the Korea reports was sometimes remarkably nebulous considering these were intelligence reports, which demonstrated two things: one, not much was known about the Korean peninsula still; and two, although the United States claimed to want to unify Korea, there were not sufficient resources (or perhaps desire) to survey Korea as a whole to mitigate this lack of knowledge. Either way, the reports included passages such as:

"Discontent probably exists in North Korea, as in other areas of Soviet control. At present, however, the Soviet regime north of the 38th parallel appears [firmly] established..."<sup>83</sup>

And:

"The attitude of Koreans in the Soviet Zone is the only sure indication of the success of Soviet policy. But, aside from Soviet propaganda, almost no information is available on the state of public opinion north of the [38th parallel]. Occasional rumors of resistance, such as the report of riots in Pyongyang last June, reach the U.S. Zone."<sup>84</sup>

For the War Department, Korea was primarily discussed in the context of how much resources could be diverted *away* from the peninsula. At best, committing any more resources to the peninsula was a waste because there were other places the resources could be more effectively used, with no significant repercussions to the overall security of the Far East:

"In light of the present severe shortage of military manpower, the corps of two divisions, totaling some 45,000 men, now maintained in South Korea, *could well be used elsewhere*, the withdrawal of these forces from Korea would not impair the military position of the Far East Command unless

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<sup>81</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. *The Situation in Korea, Dated January 3, 1947* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates 5-1, 1947), 5.

<sup>82</sup> My emphasis. Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> CIA, *The Situation in Korea*, 6.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

in consequence, the Soviets establish military strength in South Korea capable of mounting an assault in Japan.

"At the present time, the occupation of Korea is requiring very large expenditure for the primary purpose of preventing disease and disorder which might endanger our occupation forces with little, if any, lasting benefit to the security of the United States."<sup>85</sup>

At worst, staying involved in Korea actively harmed U.S. security because of its potential to become a liability. Authoritative reports from Korea had indicated that the "continued lack of progress towards a free and independent Korea, unless offset by an elaborate program of economic, political, and cultural rehabilitation, in all probability [would] result in such conditions, including violent disorder, as to make the position of the United States occupation forces untenable."<sup>86</sup> If such disorder were to occur and the U.S. subsequently withdrew, American military prestige would be undermined to the extent that it would adversely affect cooperation in other areas more vital to the security of the United States,<sup>87</sup> not to mention that American lives would be in harm's way. Korea was a ticking time bomb.

The American policy towards Korea during this period could thus be summed up as a series of failed negotiations with the USSR to create a unified national government, the reluctant acceptance of the establishment of separate local governments, the economic obligations set forth by earlier agreements, and a sense of uncertainty on what to do next. The proper contextualization of the Korea policy, however, requires an examination of America's overall foreign policy and the Cold War Consensus (or the lack thereof).

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<sup>85</sup> My emphasis. In fact, it was the opinion of James Forrestal, then the Secretary of Defense, that "In the event of hostilities in the Far East, our present forces in Korea would be a military liability and could not be maintained there without substantial reinforcement prior to the initiation of hostilities. Moreover, any offensive operation the United States might wish to conduct on the Asiatic continent most probably would by-pass the Korean peninsula." Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Interest of the United States in Military Occupation of South Korea*, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *The Interest of the United States in Military Occupation of South Korea*, 2.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Cold War Consensus*

Narratives have a peculiar way of seeming like they have always existed, mostly because it is difficult to imagine a period as significant as the Cold War without one. However, this was the case in the immediate post-war years when it was yet unclear that the USSR posed a military threat and Western Europe was considered the most insecure region. The Cold War Consensus was not consolidated enough to be the prevailing rules of the game. This section examines how the United States initially defined the USSR as a threat and how, towards the end of 1948, the U.S. began making noticeable changes to set the stage for the consolidation of the eventual Cold War Consensus.

In 1947 and even into 1948 the Cold War Consensus was not completely salient. Immediately after World War II the USSR was becoming a threat to the United States, but what *type* of threat was not clear. At the very least, the threat was not overt. The CIA assessed that the USSR was unlikely to resort to open military aggression because its policy was to avoid war and build up war potential instead (“so it could extend its influence and control by political, economic, and psychological methods”)<sup>88</sup> The USSR had suffered greatly from World War II and its capabilities were still too limited. Any attempts of expansion or forced occupation, especially in Western Europe, would “impose upon the USSR the additional burden of holding in subjugation large hostile populations,”<sup>89</sup> which it was simply not ready to do so soon after the conclusion of World War II. In fact, any open military aggression would “forego favorable prospects for the further extension of Soviet hegemony by political and economic means.”<sup>90</sup> The Soviet *modus operandi* would therefore be covert; it would likely pose a threat in its ability to spread propaganda than intentions of an all-out war. The perception that the USSR would not

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<sup>88</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation, Dated September 26, 1947*, x.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

resort to outright violence persisted into 1948, when estimates of the USSR remained largely unchanged: "It is still improbable that the USSR has any present intention of provoking war."<sup>91</sup>

It is relevant that the USSR was viewed as a covert threat because it explains why the conflict between Communist and non-Communist forces in Greece in 1947 was *not* met with a military response to the same degree as Korea. Despite the parallels drawn between the two cases even by Truman himself, the United States did not expect the USSR to be blatantly hostile at the time. The rules of the game had not settled to warn against a violent, expansive threat, instead warning against a conspiratorial one; therefore, economic aid sufficed in Greece and the situation was first described as "guerrilla warfare" then a civil war, which was markedly different from the full-scale war Korea came to be.

At the same time, the greatest threat to the United States during this time was "the possibility of economic collapse in Western Europe and the consequent accession to power of Communist elements."<sup>92</sup> Since the overriding objective of the Soviet Union was to "defeat the European recovery program without incurring the risk of war,"<sup>93</sup> the USSR was defined as an economic threat. The Soviet Union, after all, was the only country that could offer competitive aid packages to other countries recovering from the war to gain its allegiance. The American priority therefore was to ensure that Europe was rehabilitated with no room for the Communist threat to infiltrate – a view that manifested itself in the Truman Doctrine and more specifically in the Marshall Plan and the Economic Cooperation Administration, all of which were designed to provide significant economic aid to American allies.

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<sup>91</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated April 8, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates).

<sup>92</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation, September 26, 1947*.

<sup>93</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated January 12, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates), 1.

Even America's Korea policy during this period emphasized that, "Every effort should be made, as an essential part of such a program, to encourage the Korean government to follow policies which would enhance *political and economic stability* and retard the growth of Communist influence through political subversion or other non-violent means."<sup>94</sup> As it related to the general approach to Korea, the United States decided that, "a positive political, cultural and economic program will be necessary, not only to improve the present unsatisfactory conditions in Korea, but in order to strengthen our hand for any future negotiations with the Soviets."<sup>95</sup> The emphasis on non-military means (and more specifically, economic means) was explicitly recommended in 1947 as the best option against other policy alternatives.

	Political/Ideological	Economic	Military/expansionist
<b>CIA Report</b>			
<b>1947</b>			
January – June	—	—	—
July – December (6)	33.3 (2)	66.6 (4)	—
<b>1948</b>			
January – June (6)	33.3 (2)	33.3 (2)	33.3 (2)
July – December (6)	16.6 (1)	—	—
<b>Harry Truman</b>			
<b>1947</b>			
January – June (27)	3.7 (1)	29.6 (8)	—
July – December (29)	3.4 (1)	20.6 (6)	—
<b>1948</b>			
January – June (15)	—	20 (3)	6.6 (1)
July – December (10)	—	20 (2)	—

Table 1. What is the most urgent type of threat posed by the USSR? Answers were categorized only when there were explicit mentions of a particular threat as the number one priority; when threat priorities were ambiguous or mixed, they were left out. (First figure shows percentage; figure in parentheses indicate absolute number of documents).

The third column of Table 1 confirms that the United States considered the most urgent type of threat posed by the USSR as economic, opposed to political and ideological, or even military. It is quite telling that in the State of the Union address in January 1948, Truman made

<sup>94</sup> My emphasis. U.S. National Security Council, NSC 8.

<sup>95</sup> "Memorandum by the Special Inter-Departmental Committee on Korea, Dated February 25, 1947," *FRUS, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 609.

no explicit mentions of the Soviet Union yet identified the greatest challenge to the United States as weak economies, both domestically and abroad. A healthy world economy was essential to world peace, Truman noted, while economic distress was “a disease whose evil effects spread far beyond the boundaries of the afflicted nation.”<sup>96</sup> Truman explicitly stated that “the most important efforts which we are now making are those which support world economic reconstruction. We are seeking to restore the world trading system which was shattered by the war and to remedy the economic paralysis which grips many countries.”<sup>97</sup> If the USSR posed a threat, it was because it would seriously impede the reconstruction efforts.

Since threat was defined as weak economies, Western Europe was naturally considered the most insecure region. This view was overwhelmingly uniform, as indicated in the table below. One caveat with the table is that it may give a skewed sense of importance to Western Europe because it only recorded regions that each source thought was the *most* threatened, thus disregarding other regions that were still of grave concern.

	Western Europe	Southeastern Europe (includes Turkey)	Middle East	East Asia
<b>CIA Report</b>				
<b>1947</b>				
January – June	—	—	—	—
July – December (6)	50 (3)	—	—	—
<b>1948</b>				
January – June (6)	66.6 (4)	—	—	—
July – December (6)	16.6 (1)	—	—	—
<b>Harry Truman</b>				
<b>1947</b>				
January – June (16)	50 (8)	6.3 (1)	—	—
July – December (18)	21.6 (7)	—	—	—
<b>1948</b>				

<sup>96</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, Dated January 7, 1948*, (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.



January – June (6)	33.3 (2)	—	16.6 (1)	16.6 (1)
July – December (5)	40 (1)	—	—	—

Table 2. Which region is the *first* threat priority? (Figures shown in percentages).

Of course, the United States was concerned about other regions. Since economic instability was conflated with *security* vulnerability, the countries outside of the immediate Western European circle unwittingly became security concerns for the United States. One of these regions was Southeastern Europe. As mentioned in Chapter I, the United States intervened to take on the aid to Greece and Turkey when the British faced economic failure following the war. The region faced serious Communist threats — some even being violent, as in the case of Greece. In a press conference in May 1947, Truman made the following statement to a reporter:

QUESTION. On the Greco-Turkish relation, there are two approaches to it. One is direct military, the other is the direct economic one--one against aggression, the other the attempt to build up constructively. Which do you feel is the most important at the present moment?

PRESIDENT. Well, I will answer that, anyway, because it is an easy question. The internal construction and the restoration to a peacetime economy is what we principally are interested in, on a free basis.<sup>98</sup>

Interestingly, this exchange not only demonstrated the U.S. concern in a region outside of Western Europe, but also confirmed that the policy best fit for the situation in Greece and Turkey was mitigating the economic threat posed by the USSR.

Other regions in the periphery were also considered important because it was difficult to predict where the USSR might go on the “offensive” next and present a challenge to the Truman Doctrine, be it in propaganda against capitalism or causing general mayhem, such as strikes. The CIA started 1948 off with the following assessment (note the list of places thought to be possible locations of significant Communist threats, and the likeliness with which they are all presented):

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<sup>98</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *The President's Special Conference with the Association of Radio News Analysts No. 90*.

"[...] increasingly effective Soviet coordination and direction of Communist efforts [against the Truman Doctrine] are apparent, as well as preparations for concerted offensive action on all European fronts. An early renewal of a campaign of strikes and disorders in Italy is probable, and may develop into an all-out insurrection. A similar development may follow in France. Meanwhile, intensification of Communist revolutionary activity in Greece will continue, with increasing Satellite support. [...]"

The general purpose of simultaneous threats in Germany and toward Scandinavia, Greece, and Iran is evidently to develop and exploit the panicky apprehension of further Soviet aggression."<sup>99</sup>

Thus, despite Western Europe being American foreign policy's focus in its combat against Communism, other regions were important — and becoming increasingly so. The difference between the existence of multiple “hot spots” during this period and in subsequent years, however, was the intraregional connectivity of the USSR threat. For the time being, the USSR was not considered to be a threat that would eagerly expand (it simply could not afford to); therefore, the U.S. could focus on rehabilitating Western Europe before becoming significantly devoted anywhere else.

### *Transitioning times: signs of the Cold War Consensus emerging*

The view that the USSR would not be an overt or violent threat began changing in the latter half of 1948. A Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in February and the Berlin blockade in June all indicated that “defensive” policies alone were no longer adequate to defeat the Soviet-directed forces that were becoming more frequently hostile.<sup>100</sup> For the first time, the CIA noted that “the United States should [...] take the lead in organizing a world-wide counter-offensive aimed at mobilizing and strengthening our own and anti-Communist forces in the non-Soviet world, and at undermining the strength of the Communist forces in the Soviet world.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated March 10, 1948* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1948), 1 – 2.

<sup>100</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 7: The Position of the United States with Respect to Soviet-Directed World Communism* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, March 1948), 5.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

This statement not only foreshadowed the drafting (and eventual passing) of the NSC 68 that dramatically increased the country's military expenditure, but also marked the changing political mindset of a country that was now more willing to be proactive about using force against the Communist threat.

Additionally, in June 1948, President Truman mentioned Korea in a significant way by describing it as a "disturbing" site, not because the peninsula itself was particularly threatening, but to illustrate the growing tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union:

"There [in South Korea], the Soviet Government has defied the clearly expressed will of an overwhelming majority of the United Nations by boycotting the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea. This commission was created last fall by the General Assembly to help set up a Korean national government based on free and democratic elections. The Soviet boycott has prevented the residents of the northern zone of Korea from electing representatives to establish a unified national government for Korea.

On its own initiative, the Soviet Union can abandon its boycott of the United Nations Commission. It can permit the people of North Korea to work with their compatriots in the south in creating an independent and democratic nation.

If the Soviet Union genuinely desires to make a contribution to peace and recovery in the world, it can prove it in Korea."<sup>102</sup>

The speech emphasized the widening incompatibility of the United States and the Soviet Union, which the U.S. attributed to the Soviet's delinquent behavior. The same kind of rhetoric returned in 1950 when the United States intervened in Korea and Truman said that the Soviet Union could stop the violence in Korea at any time if it wanted to (and that its unwillingness to do so only confirmed that it was a hostile force). It thus came as no surprise that the National Security Council determined that "certain free nations the security of which is of critical importance to the United States require strengthened military capabilities, if they are to present effective political resistance to Communist aggression now, and military resistance later if

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<sup>102</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents. *Commencement Address at the University of California, Speech given on June 12, 1948* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1948).

necessary.”<sup>103</sup> The momentum was increasing for states resisting the Soviet Union to require not only economic assistance from the U.S., but military assistance as well.<sup>104</sup> The foundations for the Mutual Defense Assistance Act (mentioned in the following period), which became the military counterpart to the Marshall Plan within the Truman Doctrine, were being established. The Cold War was militarizing.

*Korea in the context of the rules of the game*

Having examined the general lack of a stable “rules of the game” (with hints of the Consensus only emerging in late 1948), it is important to revisit America’s policy in Korea. The aforementioned eagerness of the War Department to withdraw from Korea makes better sense if the Cold War Consensus is considered as a whole. The War Department was particularly keen on withdrawing from Korea because the Department was expecting decreasing funds and manpower that would, in the very near future, result in the reduction of the Army's general capability of supporting existing programs.<sup>105</sup> Part of this was due to the increasing military demands elsewhere. Incidentally, this need to have to “choose” among programs when the Soviet Union’s capabilities were expanding triggered the push for the NSC 68. For the time being however, the Department explicitly stated that with its decreasing capability, it was essential to “review critically all programs with the realization that non-availability of means will force us to drop the least remunerative of them in the near future.”<sup>106</sup> Korea qualified as one of these programs. Thus, not only was the United States uninterested in the Far East in general in its policy against the

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<sup>103</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 14/1: The Position of the United States with Respect to Providing Military Assistance to Nations of the Non-Soviet World* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, July, 1948), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> "The Secretary of War (Patterson) to the Acting Secretary of State, Dated April 4, 1947," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 626.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

Soviet Union, but the U.S. found very few reasons to be interested in Korea at this particular time at all.

The desire to withdraw from South Korea, however, was not readily accepted by all. Whereas the War Department simply wanted out, the State Department saw greater value in Korea and was willing to give more aid because it was “worried about the perception of a U.S. 'strategic retreat' and considered South Korea, only a little over a hundred miles from Japan, worthy of Truman Doctrine protection.”<sup>107</sup> The different assessment of Korea’s value extended even to Congress, which rejected Acheson’s request for aid to Korea because it was deemed disproportionate to the peninsula’s strategic value.<sup>108</sup> The UN involvement in the Korean elections mentioned earlier was suspected to have been, in part, an effort to alleviate some of the State-War departmental tension. If the Korea Problem were submitted to the UN, the United States could prevent Soviet domination of the entire peninsula while “simultaneously withdrawing from what [was] rapidly becoming an untenable position.’ Although military opposition to the new policy remained substantial, the UN compromise became inevitable with congressional refusal to fund a big Korea program.”<sup>109</sup> Differing assessments on the value of Korea meant wildly differing policy recommendations. When this factor is combined with the U.S. preoccupation with assisting Western Europe, it is clear that a consensus to view Korea as a core interest (to confirm the realist explanation) did not occur at this time. Korea was simply one of many other problematic regions in the periphery.

At the same time, the United States also gave limited indication that it interpreted any signals emitting from the peninsula as hostile, or warranting an international response. Neither

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<sup>107</sup> Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War*, 325.

<sup>108</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Special Message to the Congress Recommending Continuation of Economic Assistance to Korea, Speech given on July 7, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

<sup>109</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 66 – 67.

the U.S.-USSR impasse to find a solution to the Korean problem nor the DPRK's close ties to the Soviet Union was viewed as hostile in the grand scheme of foreign policy. Even rebellions in South Korea that were specifically identified as violence caused by Communist sympathizers, such as the Jeju Uprising,<sup>110</sup> were not viewed as significant. There were signs that the rules of the game were stabilizing to view the Soviet Union as an aggressive threat, but the view was not cohesive enough that it had any significant impact in Korea.

### *Conclusion for Period I*

This period demonstrated two things. One, the U.S. policy in Korea was to establish a government and provide aid. At the same time, the strategic value of Korea was contentious, as demonstrated by the War Department's eagerness to get out of the peninsula. Two, there was no stable "rules" established, and American foreign policy's focus was securing European economic recovery, which was viewed as the optimal way to defend U.S. allies against Communism. The Soviet Union posed a threat, but it was yet unclear that it would be a military and expansive threat that it eventually became. As it applied to Korea, the lack of the Consensus meant there was no "correct" way of assessing its value, as evidenced by the State and War Departments' differing recommendations on what to do next in the peninsula. By the end of this period, the U.S. was in transition. The necessity for increased military capabilities, not only for the United States but also for her allies abroad, was becoming clearer. Leading into Period II, the underlying changes for the consolidation of the Cold War Consensus had begun.

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<sup>110</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, (New York: The Modern Library, 2010), 121 - 123.

## **Period II. (1949 – June 1950) Consolidation of the Cold War Consensus**

Period II examines the critical time frame between 1949 and the first six months of 1950 before the North Korean invasion. This section first studies the period's puzzling American policy in Korea: as Acheson advocated for the United States to devote further economic aid to the Korean peninsula, and despite the persistent view that North Korea was a puppet regime for the Soviet Union, the U.S. withdrew from its occupied area in South Korea and sent strong signals of disinterest. Afterwards, the section discusses the emergence of the rules of the game by examining the Cold War Consensus, which had consolidated to an unprecedented degree between 1949 and 1950. Three specific aspects of the Consensus are examined: first, the fundamental shift in perception to view the USSR as a military threat with the makings of becoming an *existential* threat; second, the reassessment in the scope of the Soviet threat, which indicated that its reach was becoming ubiquitous; lastly, how these shift in views were formally institutionalized. The section then examines U.S. policy in Korea in the context of these stabilizing rules of the game. By the end of the period, the USSR was an expansive threat whose very entity was antithetical to the U.S. and whose actions, if necessary, would require an "offensive" military response. The Cold War Consensus had emerged.

### *The Korea Policy*

The American policy toward Korea during this period was puzzling because it was a combination of two seemingly contradictory policies – one in which the U.S. became more involved with the Korean Peninsula by granting more economic aid, and another in which the U.S. displayed less dedication by plans of military withdrawal.

On the one hand, the United States devoted a great amount of aid to secure the Republic of Korea both before and after it was officially founded in 1948. The MDAP<sup>111</sup> alone set aside \$11 million for South Korea for the Fiscal Year 1950 because it was clear that its economy and survival was first and foremost held up by U.S. support.<sup>112</sup> When the House of Representatives rejected the Korean Aid Bill of 1949, Acheson (who had pushed for the Bill himself) stated: “The peoples of the Republic of Korea, the other peoples of Asia, and the members of the United Nations under whose observation a government of the Republic was freely elected, alike look to our conduct in Korea as a measure of the seriousness of our concern with the freedom and welfare of peoples maintaining their independence in the face of great obstacles. We have not only given the Republic of Korea independence; since then we have provided the economic, military, technical, and other assistance necessary to its continued existence.” By this account, the U.S. had failed the ROK, and something had to be done to remedy the situation.<sup>113</sup> True to his word, the United States poured \$250 million into South Korea by the end of 1949, which was nearly two-thirds of the amount spent for Greek-Turkish aid.<sup>114</sup>

Thus, it is puzzling, considering the lengths to which the U.S. went to secure economic (and even some military) aid for the ROK that simultaneously in 1949, the American forces withdrew from South Korea. While the U.S. did establish and leave behind a Military Advisory Group (K MAG) in Korea, effective midnight on June 30, 1949, the United States Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) was discontinued following the departure from Korea on June 29 of the last

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<sup>111</sup> Mutual Defense Assistance Program (Act); the ratification of this Act will be elaborated on in the following section.

<sup>112</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8/2: Position of the United States with Respect to Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, May, 1949), 1.

<sup>113</sup> The initial Korea aid requested \$600 million. Bruce Cumings’ note on Dean Acheson’s involvement in the Korean War, as mentioned in *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume I*. Aid figures come from: “Korean War,” *The Harry S. Truman Encyclopedia*, 201.

<sup>114</sup> Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War*, 325.



elements of that Command,<sup>115</sup> and the United States withdrew the 45,000 troops that had been stationed in South Korea.<sup>116</sup> The process of U.S. withdrawal, as mentioned in Period I, had actually been a long time in the making. In a confidential executive order dated January 1, 1949, five months before the U.S. withdrew, Truman declared the occupation of Korea terminated within the meaning of Public Law 793 and directed the Economic Cooperation Administrator (a civilian) to assume the responsibility of administering the funds to cover the rehabilitation programs in Korea from the Secretary of the Army,<sup>117</sup> But the U.S. withdrawal was nevertheless incomprehensible because Korea had not become a more secure region since the previous period. North Korea's ties with the USSR had certainly not diminished, and there were signs that the Korean peninsula could be a potentially threatening place. Just a year before, the U.S. had declared that it would "withdraw only after the creation of reasonably adequate native security forces, and under circumstances which will bequeath to the newly established government at least an even chance of survival."<sup>118</sup> By some official accounts, the ROK was ready; by other accounts, it was not.

In fact, there were several indicators to suggest there were *more* reasons to believe Korea had become unstable. First, there was the military and security aspect. In November 1948, the U.S. Special Representative in Korea had requested the postponement of final troop withdrawal for "several months' on the basis of his belief that 'under existing conditions only Army presence guarantees minimum Korean external and internal security which is indispensable for any attack

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<sup>115</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8/2*, 1 - 2.

<sup>116</sup> Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950 - 1953*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 39.

<sup>117</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8/1: Position of the United States with Respect to Korea* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, March, 1949), 7.

<sup>118</sup> "Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs (Butterworth) to the Secretary of State, Dated March 4, 1948," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VI* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1948), 1137.

on basic policy and economic problems for successful economic rehabilitation.”<sup>119</sup> The official South Korean government also submitted complementing requests. In February 1949, the intelligence community thought that U.S. withdrawal could be followed by a North Korean invasion, and that the South Korean security forces would not reach the sufficient strength to resist such an invasion until January 1950.<sup>120</sup> There were also guerrilla operations being done onto South Korea that were reflective of the “untiring efforts of the North Korea Communists, spurred by their Soviet masters to create terror and chaos in the south”; the ultimate objective of which was “unmistakably to ensure Soviet control of the South Korea peninsula and thus wipe out non-Soviet influence from the Asian mainland...”<sup>121</sup>

Second, the Soviet actions in the Korean peninsula were highly suspect. For instance, the persistent refusal of the USSR to cooperate “in good faith” with either the U.S. or the UN in creating a mutually acceptable “united and independent Korea,” made inescapable the conclusion that the predominant Soviet aim in Korea was to achieve eventual domination of the entire peninsula.<sup>122</sup> As a continued sentiment from the previous period, the U.S. believed that the Soviet Union had established a puppet government in the Soviet-occupied zone of Korea despite having technically withdrawn its troops in 1948.<sup>123</sup> The DPRK was seen as merely an extension of the USSR; if North Korea itself was not a threat, it certainly could be if it were a vehicle for the USSR.

Lastly, the domestic response in South Korea on just the *prospect* of American troop withdrawal was visceral. In May 1949, just a month before the departure of the U.S. from South

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<sup>119</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8/1: Position of the United States with Respect to Korea*, 5.

<sup>120</sup> President’s Secretary Files, *Consequences of U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Korea in Spring 1949, Dated February 28, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1949), 1.

<sup>121</sup> “The Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Secretary of State, Dated October 13, 1949,” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII, Period II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 1087.

<sup>122</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8/1: Position of the United States with Respect to Korea*, 10.

<sup>123</sup> Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Volume I*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

Korea, the CIA reported that, “the scheduled start of U.S. troop withdrawals produced so much official apprehension, publicly communicated, that symptoms of mass hysteria appeared.”<sup>124</sup> Similar reports were reported the following month.<sup>125</sup> To emphasize that the departure of United States occupation forces would not “constitute a lessening of United States interest” in South Korea, Acheson issued a statement about the assistance that had already been extended and the “further assistance” that was intended for the country.<sup>126</sup> However, this did not reverse the sentiment on the ground, which was clearly not one favoring U.S. withdrawal.

Despite all these concerns, the U.S. started its withdrawal efforts in South Korea by June 1949, arguing that factors that would have a decisive influence on the future course of events were *not* the presence or absence of United States troops.<sup>127</sup> Thus emerged an incomprehensible policy wherein the U.S. was finding it possible to withdraw from the region (although there were no signs that it had become more secure), while continuing its aid to the peninsula. To fully understand how this may have occurred, Korea needs to be placed in the greater context of what was happening with regards to the consolidation of the Cold War Consensus.

### *The Cold War Consensus*

Cold War Consensus consolidated at a remarkable rate in 1949, truly taking off from the transition that had been gaining momentum towards the end of 1948. Its consolidation was evidenced in three different aspects: first, in the changing perception of the type of threat the

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<sup>124</sup> The report goes on to project the possibility that the hysteria could “easily grow into panic”; nevertheless, because the South Korean armed forces were “at the least equal in number and superior in equipment to those of North Korea, an immediate test of strength [was] not likely.” U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation, Dated May 17, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1949), 5.

<sup>125</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated June 15, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1949), 1.

<sup>126</sup> The statement to which Acheson is referring was issued on 8 June 1949. U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 8, 2*.

<sup>127</sup> President’s Secretary Files, *Consequences of U.S. Troop Withdrawal From Korea in Spring 1949*, 7.

USSR posed; second, the expanding scope of the Soviet threat; and lastly, in the manifestation of these changes into specific programs, acts, and institutions. This section examines the three aspects in sequence.

The changing perception regarding the USSR was indicated in rhetoric. The first half of 1949 still exhibited characteristics of the previous period in which the Soviet Union had yet to pose an overt threat: "...the factors considered significant to the broad problem of security have expanded from specific strategic and political issues to include economic and psychological considerations, as well as proposals to improve the underdeveloped regions of the world."<sup>128</sup> Western countries were coping better with the Soviet Union because despite its covert nature, they understood that the Communist threat could at least be warded off with an economic response. In fact, European allies were regaining their strength because the American aid and defense plans mutually worked to recreate in Western Europe a more optimistic atmosphere.<sup>129</sup>

However, things changed quickly and significantly in August 1949 when the Soviet Union successfully detonated its atomic bomb. The USSR's rate of growth and militarization exceeded American expectations, and the bomb neutralized the only indisputable advantage the United States had over the USSR.<sup>130</sup> But its increasing militarization was also troublesome because the Soviet means of appealing to other countries were still relatively covert. They did not resort to outright violence, nor did they frame its success as an example of its power. Instead, its broadcasts were "unusually restrained."<sup>131</sup> Following its success, the Soviet Union, "after adjusting itself very slowly to the world publicity given the atomic explosion in the USSR, [...]"

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<sup>128</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated April 20, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1949), 1.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Beatrice Heuser, "NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat: A New Perspective on Western Threat Perception and Policy Making," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1991).

<sup>131</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated November 16, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1949), 2.

merely stressed the idea that the period of U.S. 'atomic blackmail' [was] over."<sup>132</sup> The Soviet tone implied that the balance of world power had shifted decisively away from the West to the USSR,<sup>133</sup> a thought that caused great distress for the United States. Matters only got worse in October when the Chinese Communists won over the American-supported Nationalists to take control of mainland China. The U.S. had "lost" China because "what was happening in China was more than a [civil] war"<sup>134</sup> – it was the indicator that the USSR was gaining more power by the month. The "Marshall Plan could not save the Nationalists in China as it did Western Europe,"<sup>135</sup> because the Soviet Union was posing a threat that needed a greater response than an economic aid package.

By the first half of 1950, the nature of the conflict with the USSR, as Acheson noted, had become a completely irreconcilable moral and existential conflict.<sup>136</sup> It was the Russian intention to affect the American ethos, to create confusion and hesitation in order to discourage American efforts to contain and retaliate, as well as to achieve "a spiritual result, the feeling of inevitability."<sup>137</sup> On a more practical level, the Soviet Union was more militarily capable. U.S. intelligence increasingly observed that the "Soviet behavior at nearly every point of contact with the non-Soviet world suggests that the USSR is mounting a new 'offensive' in the cold war. This behavior is a reflection of the aggressive, self-confident, even boastful Soviet attitude of recent months and is an effort to add new triumphs to the string of post-war Communist successes."<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> John Paton Davies Jr., *China Hand: An Autobiography* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Elsey Papers, *Secretary Acheson's Background Press Conference, Dated March 13, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 1.

<sup>137</sup> Elsey Papers, "Secretary Acheson's Background Press Conference," 6 – 7.

<sup>138</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated February 15, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1950), 2.

The Soviet Union’s actions reflected not only “a mounting militancy but [also] a boldness that [was] essentially new – and border[ed] on recklessness.”<sup>139</sup>

	Political/Ideological	Economic	Military/expansionist
<b>CIA Report</b>			
1949			
January – June (6)	—	33.3 (2)	16.6 (1)
July – December (6)	16.6 (1)	—	33.3 (2)
1950			
January – June (6)	—	—	33.3 (2)
<b>Harry Truman</b>			
1949			
January – June (14)	—	21.4 (3)	—
July – December (16)	6.3 (1)	6.3 (1)	12.5 (2)
1950			
January – June (17)	5.8 (1)	—	23.5 (4)
<b>Dean Acheson</b>			
1949			
January – June (5)	—	20 (1)	—
July – December (6)	—	16.6 (1)	16.6 (1)
1950			
January – June (10)	10 (1)	—	30 (3)

Table 3. What is the most urgent type of threat posed by the USSR?

As indicated in the table above, the threat facing the United States was now a militant and expansive Soviet Union, not one that merely resorted to covert methods. This perception consolidated to the point that by April 1950, the NSC 68 (further elaborated later) was submitted for Presidential approval. The NSC 68 called for an immense increase in U.S. defense budget as well as an explicit recalibration of security priorities against the Soviet Union. The report claimed that there was a “historical distribution of power” taking place, which required the United States to give serious consideration because the Soviet Union was “unlike [any] previous aspirants to hegemony.”<sup>140</sup> The USSR was motivated by a “fanatic faith” that was antithetical to the American values and sought to impose its authority over the rest of the world. This ideological difference combined with a successful atomic experiment gave an objective reason to

<sup>139</sup> Foot. *The Wrong War*, 39.

<sup>140</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 68*, 4.

fear the Communist menace. In other words, if it had previously been the Soviet *potential* that was the threat, by the end of 1949, its *actual* capabilities proved to be equally threatening.

*The expanding scope of threat*

The second noticeable indicator of a consolidating Consensus was the expansion of the scope of the Soviet threat. In the first half of 1949, the relative security position of the U.S., particularly regarding Western Europe, was improving compared to that of the USSR. In large part due to the Marshall Plan, Western Europe had made “positive advances,” which “benefited the U.S. conduct of the 'cold war' in Europe, [since] a spirit of resistance to Communist propaganda has developed and a clearer understanding of Communist has grown up. A general tendency to oppose the further spread of Soviet influence in Western Europe [appeared to have been] established.”<sup>141</sup> However, it was *because* things were going relatively well on the Western front that other theaters became a concern — for the USSR, Western Europe was “essentially a continuation of tactics that [had] already reached a point of diminishing returns.”<sup>142</sup> Thus, understanding the USSR’s *next* project was just as critical as securing the relative successes gained in Western Europe.

One particular example encapsulated how the U.S. was at a turning point. Following the Berlin blockade, the CIA noted the following:

The context of power relations in which the USSR has lifted the Berlin blockade and secured Western agreement to reconvene the CFM is such as to suggest that the USSR may intend to seek some sort of agreement. There is no evidence that necessity obliges the USSR to seek the agreement. [...] Analysis finds two basic alternative courses before the USSR. The first is to enter negotiations solely in order to attempt to delay and confuse Western policy. The second is to enter negotiations with the intention of reaching an agreement that would:

- a. At minimum, remove Germany as a 'bone of contention,' while permitting the East-West

<sup>141</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation, Dated April 20, 1949*, 1.

<sup>142</sup> U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *Review of the World Situation as it Relates to the Security of the United States, Dated May 17, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1949), 1.

struggle for the German potential to go on more slowly and through other channels.  
 b. At the maximum reach a *detente* with the West in Europe in order to permit the fuller exploitation of opportunities -- especially in the Far East.<sup>143</sup>

From the American perspective, the first alternative – to negotiate in an attempt to confuse the Western powers – seemed likely if the USSR intended to pursue its old policy of overtaking Western Europe. If, however, what the USSR intended was the second alternative, it would constitute “a genuine shift in the emphasis, timing, and direction of approach” of Soviet policy<sup>144</sup> and would require the United States to reassess its security priorities to match the shifting Soviet threat. This is exactly what happened.

	Western Europe	Southeastern Europe (includes Turkey)	Middle East	East Asia
<b>CIA Report</b>				
<b>1949</b>				
January – June (6)	16.6 (1)	—	—	—
July – December (6)	16.6 (1)	—	—	16.6 (1)
<b>1950</b>				
January – June (6)	—	—	—	33.3 (2)
<b>Harry Truman</b>				
<b>1949</b>				
January – June (14)	—	—	7.1 (1)	—
July – December (16)	6.3 (1)	—	—	—
<b>1950</b>				
January – June (17)	5.9 (1)	—	—	11.8 (2)
<b>Dean Acheson</b>				
<b>1949</b>				
January – June (6)	16.6 (1)	—	—	16.6 (1)
July – December (6)	—	—	16.6 (1)	33.3 (2)
<b>1950</b>				
January – June (10)	20 (2)	—	—	30 (3)

Table 4. Which region is the threat priority? (Figures shown in percentages).

The U.S. believed, as shown in the shifted views in the table above, that Asia was likely to be the site of the “new ‘offensive’ of the cold war.” In fact, the increasing attention given to Asia was noted when Louis Johnson, the Secretary of Defense who had previously been vocally against the expansion of U.S. involvement into the area, formally requesting for further appraisal

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Although the report provided the disclaimer that situations could change, it concluded that, “the second alternative is the more likely to be developed.” Ibid.



of the region.

A major objective of United States policy, as I understand it, is to contain Communism in order to reduce its threat to our security. Our actions in Asia should be part of a carefully considered and comprehensive plan to further that objective. I therefore request that the staff the National Security Council undertake as soon as practicable a study of the current situation in Asia to re-examine and correlate current policies and to appraise the commitments and risks involved in the various courses of action – political, economic, and military – which might be undertaken in support of the broad objective and recommend for the consideration of the National Security Council an appropriate plan of action outlining specific objectives to be achieved."<sup>145</sup>

Much of Secretary Johnson's apprehension stemmed from the success of Chinese Communism in the area (opposed to a situation between the Koreans). However, there were other countries in Asia that were increasingly becoming areas of vital interest. Japan became the central component of U.S. security in Asia because of its industrial war-making capacity; if the USSR gained access to such capacity, it would severely set the U.S. back in the region.<sup>146</sup> The Philippines, to which the United States prided itself as having endowed its independence, became the "symbol to the Far East, and, indeed, to the whole world" of freedom.<sup>147</sup> The U.S. also considered French-occupied Indochina "as the key to stability of the whole of Southeast Asia," because of its raw materials and natural resources.<sup>148</sup> The importance of these regions will be confirmed later when, upon the outbreak of the North Korean invasion, Truman sent additional troops to secure these areas specifically.

At the same time, the emergence of Asia as a strategically important region did not happen overnight, so American commitment in Europe did not cease immediately. On the contrary, the U.S. perceived a general lack of forces *because* the United States was still

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<sup>145</sup> U.S. National Security Council. *NSC 48: United States Policy Toward Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, June, 1949).

<sup>146</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, 40.

<sup>147</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Special Message to the Congress on Military Aid, Dated June 1, 1950*, (Independence: Truman Library Archives).

<sup>148</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, 40.

committed to its traditional allies in Europe while Asia was becoming more important. This phenomenon, as it will be elaborated upon shortly, explains the confusing policy in Korea in 1949. Overall, as the perception on the nature of the Soviet threat was changing, the scope of its threat was changing also. The Soviet threat was expanding.

*The stabilization of the rules: the emergence of the Cold War Consensus*

Whereas the USSR, before, had been a nebulous threat that strong economies could ward off, this was no longer the case in 1949. The Soviet threat specifically required a military response, and its reach was rapidly becoming global. This perception was reflected in the policies passed in 1949 and 1950 that militarized both the U.S. and her allies while simultaneously condemning any threats, direct or indirect, aimed at any state. As Dean Acheson testified before the House Armed Services Committee, “to remain free, the nations of the free world [had to] be strong, both economically and in terms of their defensive capabilities.”<sup>149</sup> This section focuses on the legislation that formalized the stabilizing rules of the game: the UN Resolution adopted in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty establishing NATO, the Mutual Defense and Assistance Act, and finally, the NSC 68. These policies either proved or further justified the crystallizing Consensus — that the Soviet Union was an existential threat — and exemplified the effort to strengthen “the ability of the free world to successfully resist aggression.”<sup>150</sup>

When the UN General Assembly met in December 1949, it produced a Resolution that articulated the “basic principles necessary for an enduring peace.”<sup>151</sup> The Resolution declared:

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<sup>149</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Statement of Secretary of State Dean Acheson Before the Armed Services Committee of the House of Representatives, Press Release No. 69, Dated January 25, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 1.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> United Nations, "Resolution adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations at its 261st plenary meeting on 1 December 1949," Adopted on the report of the First Committee (A2150), 1.

“disregard of these principles is primarily responsible for the continuance of international tension; and that it is urgently necessary for all Members to act in accordance with these principles in the spirit of cooperation on which the United Nations was founded”; it called upon every state to “refrain from threatening or using force contrary to the Charter” and “to refrain from any threats or acts, direct or indirect aimed at impairing the freedom, independence or integrity of any State, or at fomenting civil strife and subverting the will of the people in any State.”<sup>152</sup> Dean Acheson had made sure that this Resolution was in line with the domestic legislation within the United States. This Resolution, thus, formally articulated the American views against the Soviet Union in an international setting. When the United States ultimately intervened in Korea in 1950, it did so under the aegis of the UN using this rhetoric.

The United States also fostered the idea of collective security. A significant result of these efforts was the North Atlantic Treaty, which officially founded NATO on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1949. The Treaty reiterated the UN Charter in many instances, sometimes using the Charter as a way of legitimizing NATO itself. However, on its own, it was a treaty that tied “like-minded” states into a security bloc, which would not have been necessary if the Soviet threat were not deemed significant enough. NATO essentially created the right to fight on another’s behalf, especially if an adversary had made a breach. In a speech made directly after the signing of the Treaty, for example, Acheson declared: “Article 5 states that 'an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all [...] That invokes the right of collective self-defense, which is recognized and preserved by Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.’”<sup>153</sup> The Atlantic Treaty was both legitimate and necessary, since “twice in

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Since its inception, the UN Charter included Article 51 that stated that, “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and

recent years, nations felt the sickening blow of unprovoked aggression [referring to U.S.-USSR contention in Germany and Czechoslovakia],” and it was the government’s responsibility to “demand that these things shall not happen again.”<sup>154</sup> By creating NATO, the U.S. created the legal foundation for using military means for containment ends, and for fighting when one’s direct security was not at risk. The growing Communist threat had inspired and justified the need for it.

If the North Atlantic Treaty was about regional reciprocity and ensuring collective security, the Mutual Defense Assistance Act (MDAP) was about unilateral U.S. efforts to help secure her allies, in part to ensure that they could participate in collective security. MDAP, signed into law on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1949, provided the military aid to accompany the Marshall Plan.<sup>155</sup> The Act approved the furnishing of military assistance to foreign allies and even declared that the Congress favored the "creation by the free countries and the free peoples *of the Far East* of a joint organization [...] to establish a program of self-help and mutual cooperation designed to develop their economic and social well-being, to safeguard basic rights and liberties and to protect their security and independence."<sup>156</sup> When North Korea invaded in 1950, the initial U.S. involvement started with General MacArthur providing military equipment to the ROK Army as justified by this Act. The ratification of this Act demonstrated that the Marshall Plan (economic aids) alone no longer sufficed and that even the military strength of America’s *allies* was considered a direct security interest for the United States.

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security.” Acheson’s quote was from: United States Department of State, *Secretary Acheson Press Conference, Dated March 18, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), 3.

<sup>154</sup> Elsey Papers, *Address on the Occasion of the Signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, Dated April 4, 1949* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949).

<sup>155</sup> In operations, officials called it the “MDAP” to mean the “Mutual Defense Assistance Program.”

<sup>156</sup> My italics, noted to emphasize that the Far East, a region that had previously been excluded was now being taken into consideration. Department of State, "Bulletin referring to Public Law 329, 81st Congress, 1st Session (H.R. 5895)," *Department of State Bulletin, Vol. XXI, No. 538*: (Oct., 1949), 604.

Finally, there was the drafting of the NSC 68, the most comprehensive report that changed America's security priority from an economic threat to a military one. The NSC 68 not only requested an increase in the country's defense budget to an unprecedented degree (considering it was technically peacetime), but also used the irreconcilable nature of the U.S. and USSR to justify the increase. The report particularly highlighted the different roles of the military in the respective countries. Whereas the U.S. military largely served the national purpose by "deterring an attack [and creating] an environment in which free society could flourish," the Soviet Union did not and would not "hesitate to use military force aggressively if that course [were] expedient to the Kremlin design."<sup>157</sup> Since the "Kremlin design" was hardly moral and lacked the ideological soundness of the United States, the Soviet military was essentially an international bully — whereas the United States was the protector of peace, the USSR was an instigator of violence.

As a result, NSC 68 called for the United States to undergo a fundamental rewiring of how to respond to the Soviet threat, in particular requiring the U.S. to "possess superior overall power in ourselves or in dependable combination with other like-minded nations, since [in] the concept of 'containment,' the maintenance of a strong military posture is deemed to be essential..."<sup>158</sup> Furthermore, the NSC 68 drew two conclusions that strongly influenced American foreign policy in this period and the next:

"First, the Soviet Union is widening the gap between its preparedness for war and the unpreparedness of the free world for war. It is devoting a far greater proportion of its resources to military purposes than are the free nations and, in significant components of military power, a greater absolute quantity of resources. Second, the Communist success in China, taken with the politico-economic situation in the rest of South and Southeast Asia, provides a springboard for a further incursion in this troubled area."<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> National Security Council, *NSC 68* (Section I, Part V), 12.

<sup>158</sup> National Security Council, *NSC 68* (Section I, Part VI), 21.

<sup>159</sup> Emphasis were from the original report. National Security Council, *NSC 68* (Section I, Conclusion), 30.

Thus, not only was it necessary for the United States to increase its military capabilities to be, at the very least, on equal footing as the Soviet Union, but the U.S. also needed to consider other regions of the world as relevant to its own security because the USSR demonstrated that it was willing and able to attack them.<sup>160</sup>

The grim reality according to NSC 68 was that, “Conflict has become endemic and is waged, on the part of the Soviet Union, by violent or non-violent methods in accordance with the dictates of expediency. With the development of increasingly terrifying weapons of mass destruction, *every individual faces the ever-present possibility of annihilation* should the conflict enter the phase of total war.”<sup>161</sup> The Korean invasion was later observed as the initiation of this phase. Simply put, by 1949, the Soviet Union had all the makings of an existential threat.

In sum, the changed perception on the nature and scope of the Communist threat were reflected in U.S. policy on both the international and domestic levels. The UN Resolution, the formation of NATO, MDAP, and NSC 68 all contributed a salient Cold War Consensus that identified the USSR as a hostile, expansive, and even existential adversary; to counter such a threat, the United States had to become militarized and be vigilant about the possible places where the Soviet Union may display its aggression.

### *Korea in the context of the Cold War Consensus*

Keeping in mind the stabilized Consensus, the paper revisits the Korean policy. The United States’ problem with Korea was understanding its value in the grand scheme of American strategy. Where did it rank when there were other regions of concern and the United States was

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<sup>160</sup> Although Truman did not formally endorse the NSC 68 until 1951, the original version submitted for Presidential approval in 1950 nonetheless indicated that much of the Cold War Consensus, the rules of the game, had been consolidated by this time.

<sup>161</sup> My emphasis. National Security Council, *NSC 68* (Section I, Part I), 4.

on a limited budget to counter a rapidly expanding threat? This section examines how the settled rules of the game – the Consensus – explains the policy gap wherein the U.S. displayed signs of disinterest in the peninsula via troop withdrawal while continuing significant aid.

Before proceeding further, however, other signals that indicated that the United States' transient commitment to the Korean peninsula was coming an end are worth mentioning. In case the United States' forces leaving in 1949 did not send a strong enough signal, in January 1950, Dean Acheson "implied that the Korea Peninsula lay outside the all-important "defense perimeter" of the United States in a public speech, a statement that "some took to mean that the United States would not defend the ROK from Communist attack."<sup>162</sup> In the May 5<sup>th</sup> [1950] edition of the *U.S. News and World Report*, Senator Tom Connally, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee was asked whether he thought the suggestion to abandon South Korea was being seriously considered. He replied that he was afraid that it was, since it was going to happen whether the United States wanted it or not – "because Russia can overrun Korea just like Formosa when she gets ready to do it."<sup>163</sup> Asked explicitly whether Korea was an essential part of the U.S. defense strategy, Connally replied that it was not and that it had been testified before his committee that Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines composed the chain of defense vital to U.S. security interests.<sup>164</sup>

The State Department continued to claim that there were "obvious indications of American determination to continue aid to the Republic of Korea," but American actions also indicated otherwise. When the Joint Chiefs of Staff visited Tokyo in February 1950, the

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<sup>162</sup> Elsey Papers, "The United States Enters the Korean Conflict," *Journal of the National Council for the Social Studies*, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/korean-conflict/>.

<sup>163</sup> "Statements by Senator Connally Regarding U.S. Policy in Korea, Dated May 2, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 65 – 66. Actual article: "World Policy and Bipartisanship: an Interview with Senator Tom Connally," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 5, 1950.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

President of Korea invited them to visit Seoul, but none came. South Korea craved American visitors to the point that the U.S. Ambassador to Korea recommended: "I think it would be very helpful if the Department would adopt a general practice of attempting to persuade more high U.S. officials who make inspection trips to Japan to include Korea in their itinerary. Such visits would be helpful to the men concerned and so to the formation of policy by the Government, and would also be helpful to the Korean people and Government..."<sup>165</sup>

The United States also repeatedly refused the South Korean president Syngman Rhee's request to create a Pacific Pact as an Asian equivalent to the Atlantic Pact. As it became clear that the United States was fully intent on withdrawing from Korea following the USSR's withdrawal, Rhee made a speech claiming that, "in 40 years the United States had twice abandoned Korea. Theodore Roosevelt had done so the first time and Franklin D. Roosevelt had done so the second time at Yalta," and the Korean people had not forgotten.<sup>166</sup> Thus, Rhee asked, even though Americans liberated Korea, and "they give us aid, if the United States has to be involved in war to save Korea, how much could Korea count on the United States?"<sup>167</sup> The American response to Rhee's audacious questioning of U.S. commitment was that, "the United States had been aiding Korea, that it is aiding Korea at the present time, and that it proposes to continue aiding Korea in the future. The economic rehabilitation program we have in effect provides the basis for the economic well-being of the Korean people. The military assistance program now being finalized will make available arms, munitions, and equipment sufficient for assuring internal stability, and also enable South Korea to defend itself against hostile infiltration

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<sup>165</sup> "The Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk), Dated June 1, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 97.

<sup>166</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador in Korea (Muccio), Dated May 2, 1949," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 1004.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*



and any attack short of an all-out international conflagration.”<sup>168</sup> The assurances stopped short, however, of offering any possibility of a Pacific Pact.

The problem was that the United States faced real limitations with the increasingly expansive Soviet threat, as dictated by the consolidating Consensus: it was not just U.S. unwillingness to help the ROK, but “by the simple fact that the U.S. was confronted with worldwide demands for military assistance which far exceeded its capability to fulfill.”<sup>169</sup> The South Korean request for the U.S. to supply additional vessels and aircraft prior or within a reasonable time after withdrawal was “absolutely out of the question by virtue of non-availability in both equipment and funds with which to purchase it.”<sup>170</sup> It did not help that the United States was still tentative towards Asia because of commitments back in Europe.<sup>171</sup>

This is not to imply that the value of Korea was completely unappreciated. The survival of the Republic of Korea, for example, was of “considerable importance to the overall foreign policy objectives of the United States,” since the ROK was the only effective foothold of Western democracy in East Asia. Korea was also the “only area in the world in which democratic and Communist principles [were] being put to the test side by side”; and abandonment of Korea would “raise grave doubts in the minds of those Japanese who are trying to establish a democratic nation based on a sound economy.”<sup>172</sup> These recognized values of Korea, however, were lost when other regional obligations were considered simultaneously.

To be fair, the United States may have found it justifiable to withdraw for two other reasons not directly affected by the Consensus. One, the United Nations Commission on Korea

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> “The Secretary of State to the Embassy in Korea, Dated May 9, 1949” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 1015.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Foot, *The Wrong War*, 39.

<sup>172</sup> “The Acting Secretary of State to the Director of the Bureau of the Budget (Pace), Dated May 16, 1949,” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 1024.

(UNCOK) had been established, which, “aside from its moral responsibility,” served as a barrier to the Communist aggression.<sup>173</sup> The presence of the UNCOK had a profound influence on both sides of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and made the Soviets and North Koreans hesitant “to commit themselves to overt aggression against the Republic of Korea so long as the [UNCOK] was observing and reporting on the situation in Korea.”<sup>174</sup> Acheson, then the Chairman of the United States Delegation to the United Nations General Assembly, expressed his faith that the UN could “avert the potential threat of internal strife [*sic*] and explore further the possibility of unification. The authority of the Commission to observe and report on the actual facts may be sufficient to prevent open hostilities.”<sup>175</sup>

Additionally, it was the genuine belief of the Chief of KMAG that the South Korean forces, with the right military supplements from the United States, could fend for itself without American assistance. As late as June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1950, the South Korean ground forces were considered superior to the North Korean army in their "training, leadership, morale, marksmanship, and better small arms equipment," despite their lack of airpower. Therefore, the capacity of North Korean forces to conduct successful operations against South Korea would be heavily dependent on their capacity to overcome South Korea's "infantry superiority by undisputed command of air plus heavier artillery," which would be difficult to do.<sup>176</sup> So confident in the South Korean forces was the Chief of KMAG that just a week before the North Korean invasion, he requested a reduction of personnel from a total of 472 to 242 to the Department of Army, which he not only found acceptable, but could take effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1951 "without any appreciable impairment

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<sup>173</sup> “The Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Secretary of State, Dated August 20, 1949,” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 1068.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> "The Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Secretary of State, Dated June 14, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 105.

of the ROK Security Forces."<sup>177</sup> The Korean Army had made “enormous progress during the past year,” he claimed, and the “systems and institutions set up through the instrumentality of KMAG [were] such that reductions in advisory personnel could well be made.”<sup>178</sup> Thus, the U.S. would not have been reducing its engagement (even further) knowing the South Koreans would not survive on their own.

When one examines the U.S. policy in Korea in the context of the Cold War Consensus on the whole, it is apparent that the U.S. did not perceive Korea as a core threat any more so than the other countries in the region. On the contrary, there seemed to have been a consensus building in the opposite direction — Korea’s strategic value was being questioned because the Cold War Consensus required the U.S. to relocate its the troops where it could fight the Communist threat more effectively. Nor were any of the signals coming from Korea that could have indicated aggressive intentions by either North Korea or the Soviet Union — such as the Communist-inspired guerrilla incidents in Korea — being interpreted as such. In fact, the United States’ withdrawal served as the ultimate proof against the idea that Korea was intrinsically tied to the Soviet Union.

### *Conclusion for Period II*

This period first examined the incomprehensible American policy in Korea where its military commitment to the peninsula waned but its economic aid continued. Then this period studied how the Soviet Union emerged as a concrete military threat — a force to be reckoned with on an existential level — and how the rules of the game had stabilized into the Cold War Consensus. By the end of the period, the conditions for perceiving an invasion as an initiation of

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<sup>177</sup> This count excluded coast guards. Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> "Transmitting Plan for Reduction of KMAG Personnel, Dated June 23, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 121 – 122.

an expansionist Soviet agenda had been set up, though it remained unclear that this would start in Korea. The next section investigates the extent to which the Consensus influenced the U.S. policy in Korea after the invasion.

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### **Period III. (June 25, 1950 – December 1950) The DPRK invasion and American intervention**

"Some things were already becoming clear: a major invasion, and the South Korean forces were not fighting well. They would not be able to hold their own. After dinner, General Omar Bradley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who had favored pulling American combat troops back from Korea a year earlier because it would be such a terrible place to fight and because it was deemed of so little strategic value, was the first to speak. A line had to be drawn against the Communists, he said, and Korea was as good a place to do as any. Its value had changed overnight. Truman interrupted to say that he agreed completely. In that moment, the die was cast. Bradley added that, given the size of the attack, the Soviets had to be behind it."<sup>179</sup>

It is important to revisit the puzzle that the paper has been seeking to answer. By 1949, the United States was done in Korea in terms of direct occupation assistance. There was continuation of aid, but the U.S. withdrew and sent along with it other very strong signals that it was done in Korea. And yet, when the North Koreans invaded on June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1950, the U.S. was swift to intervene in the peninsula with an international coalition. So what had changed the value of Korea that the United States felt compelled to intervene on such a massive scale, especially when it did not display such interest before?

This section first examines the United States' Korea policy immediately following the invasion particularly highlighting the speedy reaction that sharply differed from the previous period's unenthusiastic commitment to the peninsula. Afterwards, the paper tries to determine how the Consensus was applied to interpret the event and the extent to which it shaped U.S. response. The paper argues that the stabilized rules of the game defined the invasion as the initiation of the expansionist Soviet plan. The earlier view that the Soviet Union would avoid full-scale wars was no longer acceptable because Korea proved its previous efforts to "build up

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<sup>179</sup> David Halberstam, "Part Three: Washington Goes to War, Chapter 6," *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2008), 94.

its own strength in anticipation of eventual war"<sup>180</sup> were finally coming into fruition. The invasion, in short, demonstrated the now “unmasked menace of Soviet strength,” which required a mobilization of manpower on a national scale.<sup>181</sup>

### *The Korea policy*

When North Korea crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the American response was two-fold. On a domestic level, Truman dispatched U.S. troops. On June 27<sup>th</sup>, two days after the invasion, Truman ordered American air and naval forces to the peninsula; three days later, he committed ground troops.<sup>182</sup> Even after the initial troop commitment, Truman quickly moved for more. If Truman, in all his fiscal conservatism, had been hesitant about increasing defense expenditures before, he no longer had such reservations: “the leaders of Communist imperialism have great military forces at their command. They have shown that they are willing to use these forces in open aggression, in spite of the united opposition of all the free nations”; as such, he stated that by June 1951, the U.S. would project to spend “at the rate of at least thirty billion dollars a year [opposed to the previous fiscal year’s fifteen billion].”<sup>183</sup> The U.S., after all, had to make absolutely sure that American economy turned out “the guns and planes and tanks and other supplies which are needed to protect the world from the threat of Communist domination.”<sup>184</sup> To respond to the invasion, Truman also approved the Department of Defense to exceed the budgeted strength of military personnel for the Army, Navy, and Air Force, and to expedite

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<sup>180</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation, Dated September 26, 1947*, 2 – 3.

<sup>181</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 77: National Manpower Mobilization Policy, Dated July 31 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 1 – 2.

<sup>182</sup> Cumings, “Korean War,” 202.

<sup>183</sup> In reality, this figure was actually increased to \$50 billion. Elsey Papers, “Statement by the President.” Increased defense spending found in: Cumings, “Korean War,” 202.

<sup>184</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Statement by the President, Dated September 9, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1950).

programs to procure supplies for Korea.<sup>185</sup> The Truman Administration's eagerness to combat the Communist threat culminated in the NSC 81, which in September 1950 authorized the "rollback" policy into North Korea so the international coalition from South Korea could drive the North Korean forces up to, then past, the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The rollback policy went beyond simply "containing" the Communist threat – it emphasized limiting Communist advance and *actively reducing it* when feasible.<sup>186</sup>

The second aspect of American response to the Korean invasion was the involvement of the UN. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, the same day the invasion took place, the U.S. requested a Security Council session and the Council passed a resolution calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities.<sup>187</sup> On June 27<sup>th</sup>, another Resolution was passed to recommend that the ROK be given aid to repel the Communist attack in the area.<sup>188</sup> On July 7<sup>th</sup>, the Security Council requested that the United States designate a "commander for all forces of the members of the UN flag," for which Douglas MacArthur was designated.<sup>189</sup> Truman particularly emphasized the lack of choice in his decision to get the United Nations involved. When the "Communist imperialism" attacked the Republic of Korea, the United States – and other "free and peace-loving nations" – had two possible courses of action. One course was to "limit our action to diplomatic protests, while the Communist aggressors went ahead and swallowed up their victim," which was a sure sign of appeasement; the other course was "the one which the free world chose: the United Nations made its historic decision to meet military aggression with armed force."<sup>190</sup>

The invasion demonstrated that the Soviet Union was clearly willing to go against the

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<sup>185</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents. *President Truman's Speech to the Congress of the United States of America, Dated July 19, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1950), 6.

<sup>186</sup> Cumings, "Korean War," 202.

<sup>187</sup> The Council technically convened on the same day as the invasion because of the fourteen-hour time difference (Korea is fourteen hours ahead). UN Security Council Resolution 82, Published June 25, 1950.

<sup>188</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 83, Published June 27, 1950.

<sup>189</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, "President Truman's Speech to the Congress," 3.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

international order, which only further legitimized the rules of the game. The attack was in defiance of the orders previously issued by the United Nations to preserve international peace and made 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.”<sup>191</sup> Truman’s request for UN participation in the crusade against Communism also indicated that the United States had understood the Soviet Union as a threat severe enough to require a legitimate multilateral effort.

*The Cold War Consensus: interpreting the Korean invasion*

By June 1950, as mentioned earlier, the “rules of the game” was no longer in flux — the Consensus had stabilized to define the USSR as an expanding and violent threat. The strategic value of Korea or its intentions were irrelevant because the Korean invasion was perceived in the context of this particular definition of the USSR; and since the threat could be existential, the event necessitated a massive military response. The USSR had *made* Korea important.

The Consensus’ influence on the interpretation of the North Korean invasion was evident in three ways: first, the U.S. immediately concluded that the USSR was behind the attack despite the absence of definitive evidence; second, the sheer magnitude of the American response to the North Korean invasion made it clear that the United States was indeed responding to what it perceived as an existential threat than a mere border dispute; and lastly, the opinions that deviated from the Consensus’ recommendation (i.e., intervene in Korea) were silenced. This section will examine these three aspects in sequence.

Firstly, the United States attributed the invasion to the Soviet Union despite a lack of objective evidence, and saw the event as proof of their expansionist agenda, if ever there had been a doubt. The CIA admitted that there was ambiguity regarding the USSR's specific role in the invasion, reporting that, “the world was still waiting for some firm indication of Soviet

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<sup>191</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Statement by the President, Dated June 27, 1950.*

intentions regarding not only Korea, but other countries on the Soviet periphery."<sup>192</sup> Despite the unclear role the USSR played, however, the State Department called North Korea's invasion "the most cynical, brutal, naked attack by armed forces, unprovoked in any way,"<sup>193</sup> whose perpetrator was unmistakably the Soviet Union. All the assessments that the USSR was building a puppet regime out of the DPRK from the earlier years came to light and confirmed this idea, and the fact that the North Korean military had always been heavily dependent on the USSR for everything including training and weapons,<sup>194</sup> left little room for doubt that the Soviet Union was behind the attack. Thus, the North Korean invasion was contextualized as first and foremost a threat from the *Soviets*, not the Koreans.

In fact, when North Korea invaded, the American decision makers thought that, "the Soviets now saw Korea as having 'great strategic value in neutralizing the usefulness of Japan as an American base.'"<sup>195</sup> The value of Korea was then reassessed accordingly because "Moscow would not take this risk unless it considered the 'liquidation of the South Korean Government' as essential to its global strategy."<sup>196</sup> In fact, as mentioned earlier, there were other regions that the United States was concerned about immediately following the invasion, indicating there was no consensus that Korea was a country important to defend independent of the rules of the game. If Korea became important to the United States, it was because the *Soviet Union* made it appear more important. Furthermore, it was not North Korea's hostile intentions that the United States

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<sup>192</sup> Even the CIA report was arguably framed taking it as a given that the USSR had been involved in the invasion in some capacity. It assumed, for example, that the USSR was only deliberately (and strategically) distancing itself from the conflict. In fact, as long as the North Korean forces were successful, the USSR could "remain aloof." The crucial moment would come "when and if the battle turns in favor of U.S. and South Korean forces. At that time, the USSR must decide whether to permit a North Korean defeat or to take whatever steps are necessary to prolong the action." U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The Korean Situation, Dated July 7, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Reports and Estimates, 1950), 2.

<sup>193</sup> Department of State, *Press Release No. 691, Dated June 23, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1950), 1.

<sup>194</sup> "Transmitting Plan for Reduction of KMAG Personnel, Dated June 23, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950).

<sup>195</sup> Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 631.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*



took into account when it decided to intervene, because the country was not as important as the significance of the invasion.

In an NSC report published a full month after the invasion, the Soviet Union still had not sent over major forces; in other words, there was nothing to clearly indicate that the USSR was behind the North Korean invasion.<sup>197</sup> But by this point in time, what the Soviet Union did was not as relevant as what the United States perceived were their intentions based on the established Consensus. Everything that happened following the invasion only confirmed the existing rules of the game that the USSR was a hostile, relentlessly expanding threat (as demonstrated in the table below, which indicates an increase from the previous period in the last column).

	Political/Ideological	Economic	Military/expansionist
<b>CIA Report</b> 1950			
July – December (6)	—	—	33.3 (2)
<b>Harry Truman</b> 1950			
July – December (12)	8.3 (1)	—	25 (3)
<b>Dean Acheson</b> 1950			
July – December (10)	20 (2)	—	40 (4)

Table 5. What is the most urgent type of threat posed by the USSR?

When Chinese “volunteer” forces came to fight alongside the North Koreans in mid-October 1950, it indicated “the fact that both the Chinese Communists and the USSR have accepted an increased risk of a general war [either because] the Kremlin is ready to face a showdown with the West at an early date or circumstances have forced them to accept that risk.”<sup>198</sup> The assessment only further validated the need to “contain” Korea<sup>199</sup> to prevent a global proliferation of the Communist threat. In 1947, the USSR had been viewed as unlikely to resort to open military aggression and to instead extend its influence using political, economic, and

<sup>197</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *NSC 77*.

<sup>198</sup> Elsey Papers, *Summary of Intelligence Estimates on Intervention by Chinese Communists in the Korean War, October 12 – November 24, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1950), 5.

<sup>199</sup> Cumings, “Korean War,” 202.

psychological methods.<sup>200</sup> The North Korean invasion, however, proved that the long-anticipated “eventual war” for which the Soviet war potential had been accumulated had finally come. Dean Acheson would later lament that, “If the best minds in the world had set out to find us the worst possible location in the world to fight this damnable war, the unanimous choice would have been Korea.”<sup>201</sup> And yet, the Cold War Consensus meant the U.S. had no choice but to intervene, as the North Korean invasion signified the start of a sinister Soviet agenda.

### *Magnitude of the American involvement*

The Cold War Consensus’ influence on how the North Korean invasion was interpreted was also evident in the sheer magnitude of the American involvement, which was not only substantial, but also committed, even after considering the dangerous consequences. One such consequence was the possibility that American participation would invite the Chinese into the fight. China’s involvement, considered a wild card at the time, could seriously hinder the chances of victory against Communism because of the scale of troops China could commit (that the U.S. could not). Nevertheless, in the end, the U.S. was committed to Korea to the extent that withdrawal was “completely unacceptable” and, “should Chinese combat forces become involved in active opposition to UN forces in Korea, sufficient power must be added to UN forces to ensure fulfillment of currently assigned missions.”<sup>202</sup> China’s participation was not going to affect American involvement because regardless of its decision, the United States was not going to let Korea fail.

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<sup>200</sup> CIA, *Review of the World Situation, Dated September 26, 1947*.

<sup>201</sup> United States Department of Defense, *Korean War Armistice Commemoration, Delivered July 27, 2012*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2012).

<sup>202</sup> “Memorandum of Teletype Conference, Prepared in the Department of the Army, Dated July 6, 1950” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 312.

The magnitude of the United States' structural change, both economic and military, was substantial and would not have been made unless the USSR was a significant enough threat to necessitate it (and it *was* the Soviet threat, not North Korean). First, the U.S. underwent an immense change in its economy's structure to pay for the intervention. The relative immediate superiority of the attacking Communist forces had to be overcome (the U.S. realized by now that it had grossly underestimated how rapidly the North Koreans could mobilize), not to mention the inadequate port facilities through which additional supplies would be transferred.<sup>203</sup> It was not merely about sending men and *matériel* to a country over 6,000 miles away. It was also about funding the faraway war in an economy that had concluded another massive war effort merely five years ago. Truman pragmatically laid out what an involvement in Korea called for: it meant increased taxation to compensate for the expenditure, restraint on credit expansion to safeguard against potential inflation, and increased production of goods needed for national defense.<sup>204</sup> Additionally, the need for collective security that had been validated with the attack meant the United States had to increase its military strength "not only to deal with the aggression in Korea but also to increase [the] common defense, with other free nations, against further aggression."<sup>205</sup> Thus, the willingness to undergo (and the implementation) of the United States' economic restructuring indicated that the invasion had been understood as a Communist threat. Nothing short of a possible existential crisis would have justified such dramatic restructuring.

In addition to its economy, the United States also restructured its forces in Asia. In a speech to Congress less than a month after the invasion, Truman warned that since the attack upon the Republic of Korea made it clear that the Communist threat was prepared to "use armed

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<sup>203</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *President Truman's Speech to the Congress*.

<sup>204</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *President Truman's Radio Speech, Delivered July 19, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1950), 5.

<sup>205</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *President Truman's Speech to the Congress*, 5.

invasion to conquer independent nations,” the “possibility that armed aggression may take place in other areas” also had to be recognized.<sup>206</sup> In fact, days following the invasion, the CIA reported that the Korean invasion “increased fears that the USSR will take aggressive action in other 'soft spots' on the Soviet periphery,” specifically naming the immediately affected areas “as Southeast Asia (particularly Indochina), Iran, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Germany.”<sup>207</sup> As the table below indicates, the regions under Soviet threat were relatively evenly laid out, indicating that the Communist threat was now ubiquitous (although East Asia was of greater relative importance).

	Western Europe	Southeastern Europe (includes Turkey)	Middle East	East Asia
<b>CIA Report</b> 1950				
July – December (6)	16.6 (1)	—	—	33.3 (2)
<b>Harry Truman</b> 1950				
July – December (12)	8.3 (1)	—	8.3 (1)	16.6 (2)
<b>Dean Acheson</b> 1950				
July – December (10)	—	—	10 (1)	20 (2)

Table 6. Which region is the threat priority? (Figures shown in percentages).

As a response, Truman ordered the forces in support of the Philippines to be strengthened, and for military assistance to be sped up to the Philippines Government, Associated States of Indo-China (both to the local governments as well as the French forces there), and to Formosa to prevent any potential attack to these areas.<sup>208</sup> The fear was that the violence would spread to other countries in the region – countries that had been held of higher value prior to the invasion. This action was a result of the Consensus framing the USSR as an expansive and overtly hostile threat, and making it plausible that the violence in Korea could expand to other areas. Thus, the Consensus defined the invasion as significant enough to require

<sup>206</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *President Truman's Speech to the Congress*, 4.

<sup>207</sup> CIA, *The Korean Situation*, 2.

<sup>208</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *President Truman's Speech to the Congress*, 4.

an enormous American response, including a substantial economic and military restructuring to compensate for the intervention.

### *The response to the invasion*

Lastly, the lack of variety in the acceptable reactions to the invasion demonstrated that the Cold War Consensus had stabilized and determined American policy in Korea. The War and State Department may have quibbled over what to do in Korea in previous years, but this was no longer acceptable. The Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, on July 5<sup>th</sup>, emphasized the two points necessary in making any decisions regarding the Korean situation henceforth. The first point was to be “unequivocally clear that we shall press the Korean issue through to a successful conclusion,” since without this basic determination, the necessary leadership required by the U.S. would be inhibited by timidity.<sup>209</sup> The second point was to ensure there was collective domestic support behind the decision to get involved in Korea, because such a policy could not be “acted upon with assurance by the Secretary of State unless all necessary *military and economic action [was] being taken in support thereof.*”<sup>210</sup> As mentioned earlier, the magnitude of American intervention was substantial, and this was in part because of this cohesion in opinion. There was now a “right” answer to how the U.S. should act with regards to the Communist threat. Thus, even an issue that would have been contentious before – like American involvement in Korea – was no longer disputable because opinions that did not view the North Korean invasion as the start of a Soviet agenda were largely ignored. It is worth exploring how different opinions were treated as an indicator for how consolidated the Cold War Consensus had become and how it ultimately influenced the Korea policy.

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<sup>209</sup> "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk) to the Secretary of State, Dated July 5, 1950," *FRUS 1950 Vol. VIII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 303.

<sup>210</sup> My emphasis. *Ibid.*

There were several people who opposed the United States getting involved in Korea. Philip Jessup, the Ambassador at Large under the Truman Administration, was one of them. A vocal opponent, Jessup even told the press about it:

"Mr. Jessup said that to meet successfully and at once an attack of the size launched by the North Koreans would have required the constant presence there of a large force of United States troops. 'To maintain such superior forces in all places in the world that might be subject to such attack would have required vast total forces on our part,' he said. 'No one in this country has seriously advocated that we should maintain enough forces to police the entire world.'"<sup>211</sup>

Jessup's criticism would be validated many decades later (after all, the United States forces exist in South Korea to this day), but his opinion was given limited consideration at the time, and Jessup later apologized to Truman for making such a statement publicly.

George Kennan posed another dissenting view. Kennan, who had been an Ambassador earlier and was considered to be the country's leading Kremlinologist at the time, was one of the chief architects of American foreign policy just three years prior to the invasion. When Kennan was approached by Acheson to evaluate whether or not the North Korean attack represented a greater threat, it was his assessment that, "the Soviets were not looking for a larger war with the United States, but they would be delighted to see the United States either bogged down 'in a profitless and discreditable war,' or standing on the sidelines doing nothing (and thus be discredited in the region) as the North Koreans conquered the peninsula."<sup>212</sup> Becoming involved in the Korean peninsula would be playing into the Communist hand and could lead to a lose-lose situation for the United States. Thus, Kennan was against intervening in Korea. Incidentally, Kennan was not invited to the Blair House meeting where Truman and his advisors devised the

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<sup>211</sup> "Jessup Abhors Idea of Bombing Russia: New Blow at Matthews Plan for 'Preventive War' Seen - Truman Gag Predicted," *The New York Times*, Column 2, August 28, 1950, 8.

<sup>212</sup> Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 95 – 96.

initial American response to the Korean invasion, so his opinion was absent.<sup>213</sup> There is debate as to how deliberate the decision had been to exclude Kennan from the meeting, but it mattered little because his opinion was marginalized even as the Korean War raged on. The Consensus, it turned out, was powerful enough to mute the recommendations of the man whose *Long Telegram* had heavily shaped the initial American perception of the USSR.

There were also some who were unapologetically against the involvement in Korea. So opposed was Senator Kenneth Wherry of Nebraska that he commented that, "the blood of our soldiers in Korea was on the shoulder of Secretary of State Acheson," which Truman rebutted was a "contemptible statement and beneath comment."<sup>214</sup> However, it was more common for those who were against getting involved in Korea to reverse their position. For example, General Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs who *was* at the Blair House meeting, was wary of committing ground troops to Korea because he was against the idea of a war in Asia when there were still other places that were important. In fact, it was his opinion that the USSR was not ready for war and that the Korean invasion was its attempt at "testing" the United States.<sup>215</sup> Part of his concerns coincided with those of the American allies in Europe; NATO allies felt Europe was being left behind.<sup>216</sup>

A greater part of his concern, however, was that "it would be militarily unsound for the United States to commit large forces against the USSR *in an area of slight strategic importance, as well as one of Soviet choice*" if the North Korean invasion were indeed a prelude to a global war.<sup>217</sup> In fact, if the USSR ever made its intentions explicit that it was willing to go to war

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<sup>213</sup> McCullough, *Truman*.

<sup>214</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *The President's News Conference, Press Conference No. 214. Dated August 17, 1950* (Independence: Truman Library Archives, 1950).

<sup>215</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 778 – 780.

<sup>216</sup> McCullough, *Truman*, 789 – 790.

<sup>217</sup> My emphasis. "Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Bradley) to the Secretary of Defense (Johnson), Dated July 10, 1950," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1950), 346.

against the U.S. (for instance, by moving troops or engaging combat units, etc.), Bradley recommended that the United States “prepare to minimize its commitment in Korea and prepare to execute war plans.”<sup>218</sup> There were other regions to be worried about, and Korea was not of the utmost concern. Ultimately, however, Bradley changed his opinion that Korea was “as good a place to draw the line as any”<sup>219</sup> and the United States went on ahead to commit troops. Even Senator Tom Connally, whose statement in May 1950 that Korea was not an essential part of U.S. defense strategy was mentioned earlier, stated, “If a burglar breaks into your house, you can shoot him without going down to the police station and getting permission.”<sup>220</sup> The consolidation of the Cold War Consensus had reached the point that differing opinions, unless it adapted quickly, had a very small audience.

The Consensus’s narrow definition of the Soviet threat thus limited the acceptable opinions on what to do next that had triggered lively debate before. While it was possible for the War and State Departments in 1947 and 1948 to hold different opinions about Korea and each were given serious consideration, this was no longer possible by June 1950 because American security was first and foremost measured using the existential Communist threat as the metric. And the invasion, using the metric, meant there was no other choice but to respond with an intervention.

### *Conclusion for Period III*

The CIA concisely described the situation in Korea, stating that “the Soviet-inspired invasion of South Korea and the prompt and vigorous U.S. reaction overnight changed the

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 94.

<sup>220</sup> Jesse Greenspan, “Eight Things You Should Know About the Korean War,” July 26, 2013. <http://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-should-know-about-the-korean-war>.



complexion of the Cold War..."<sup>221</sup> This section examined the American response to the North Korean invasion, both on the domestic and international levels — the United States had been "called upon to give of its leadership, its efforts and its resources, to maintain peace and justice among nations," and it was imperative to not fail.<sup>222</sup> This section also examined how the Cold War Consensus contextualized the invasion as part of an existential threat to justify the massive American response, as demonstrated in the U.S. attributing the invasion to the Soviet Union; the U.S. willingness to restructure its economy and force posture; and the concentration of opinion. Without the stabilization of the rules of the game, it is unclear if the United States would have intervened in the same manner given its reluctant engagement in the peninsula and its history of disregarding the signals of tension.

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### *Periodization Conclusion*

The three periods tracked how the stabilization of the rules of the game — the Cold War Consensus — influenced the American policy in Korea from 1947 to 1950. The purpose of the periodization was to determine how, if at all, the consolidation of the Cold War Consensus affected the United States' Korea policy, including the decision to intervene in the peninsula following the invasion. In Period I, the rules of the game had not stabilized; restoring Western European economies took priority over all, and the Soviet threat was not a threat requiring a military response. The extent of American attention to Korea was in its efforts to form a native national government. The strategic value of Korea was being debated, but any signals that could have indicated the peninsula to be potentially explosive was lost to more pressing regions. In

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<sup>221</sup> CIA, *The Korean Situation*, 2.

<sup>222</sup> Public Papers of the Presidents, *Radio Speech by President Truman*, 6.

Period II, the rules began stabilizing. The Soviet capabilities, which had previously been described merely in terms of “potential,” were actualized in the successful atomic experiment and the USSR became a rapidly expanding, existential threat that provoked the United States to militarize in response. Thus emerged the Cold War Consensus. Finally, Period III observed how the stabilization of the rules of the game interpreted the North Korean invasion, and how this explained the swift American reaction — a complete reversal of the reluctance with which the U.S. had engaged the peninsula earlier. The following chapter explores this argument further.

### Chapter III

#### *Analysis*

In light of the empirical research, it is important to return to the threat perception literature to determine which offers the most compelling explanation for the vacillation of U.S. policy in Korea. What determined American policy in Korea, and why did the United States intervene in the peninsula that was considered of little strategic value just three years prior?

The realist explanation posited that the U.S. saw an opportunity to confront the USSR, so the U.S. led an international coalition to respond to the North Korean invasion. Realists such as John Mearsheimer would argue that the United States, as the world's sole hegemon, would have felt compelled to intervene in Korea as a way to assert its power and dominance against the USSR, a potential hegemon. Thus, conflict would have been inevitable. This explanation was convincing in that the United States and the USSR fit into the existing-challenging hegemon dichotomy. Indeed, the perception of the Soviet Union as a threat could have arguably been explained using power theory. However, if conflict were inevitable, there were no signs that it had to occur in Korea.

As examined throughout the three periods, although its location as America's only "foothold" into Asia was appreciated, there was no time in which a consensus developed to view Korea as a core threat for U.S. security any more so than the other countries in the region. In January 1950, it was even left *out* of the defense perimeter by Acheson. The American decision to intervene was beyond the scope of the realist predictions of what the U.S. would constitute as a threat — that is, defining threat based on power. The research showed limited evidence that if the United States were anticipating an inevitable conflict with the USSR, that that conflict would occur in Korea. Therefore, the realist account only gives a limited explanation for the U.S. policy

in Korea because it cannot identify the mechanism that forced the U.S. to believe that what happened in the Korean peninsula was a security concern of the United States.

The perception of threat explanation, much like the first, only offers a partial explanation for American policy towards Korea. It can, for one, explain why the United States intervened in Korea in 1950 — the North Koreans had exhibited aggressive intentions by invading another country. However, this explanation fails to describe why the same signals that were ultimately used to identify hostile intentions in 1950 were not interpreted as so in 1947. The United States had always known that Korea was a place where the Soviet Union had set up a “proxy” government. U.S. officials knew North and South Korean relations were not always peaceful. There were South Korean requests for postponement of U.S. troop withdrawal and even a plea for a joint security pact, both of which indicated a fear of the north and neither of which were granted. And yet, these were the same indicators that were later used to justify the American need to intervene. Even arguing that the United States had found the very act of an *invasion* threatening is limited because just three years earlier, the United States did not respond with a massive military coalition to a similar situation in Greece. Furthermore, even if aggressive intentions were not detected, there was no need for the United States to go to such lengths to distance itself from Korea as it did in 1949. Thus, the perception of threat argument cannot explain the United States’ *vacillation* in policy – it only offers a possible explanation for why the U.S. intervened in 1950 without the explanation for why the U.S. withdrew in the first place.

Finally, the third explanation argued that the U.S. policy in Korea was actually contingent on the stabilization of the rules of the game — or what became known as the Cold War Consensus. When the rules were unsettled, the United States policy was inconsistent or even contradictory. The lack of a Consensus also meant the United States did not devote massive

forces *anywhere*, much less in Korea. When the rules were settled, however, and the United States understood the USSR as a growing military, global, and existential threat, all its actions were interpreted through this framework, including the invasion.

This explanation actually accounts for the vacillation in the Korea policy, as well as the U.S. decision to send a massive response. When the rules were yet unsettled, the United States had no compelling reason to stay in South Korea, especially because it could devote its troops elsewhere. The “unsettledness” was demonstrated in the various opinions that contributed to forming policy, including the debate on the value of Korea. Furthermore, the Soviet Union did not pose as significant of a military threat, so the American occupation forces could justify withdrawing in 1949 when there was no assurance that the peninsula had become more secure than before. Korea became important when rules settled and the Cold War Consensus emerged. So strong, in fact, was the Consensus that when North Korea crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the U.S. had little choice but to see it as an initiation of the USSR’s expansion that could have global ramifications if the United States did not intervene. All the signals that had indicated that the region was an insecure area (and potentially explosive) were given new meaning because they were understood, in hindsight, as the lead-up to the Soviet Union’s attack. For example, the North Korean government was long seen as a “creature” fashioned by the “Soviets in typical Communist monolithic disciplined mould and that [...] Kim Il Sung, Stalin's prototype in North Korea, [had] been carefully nurtured by the Soviets...sedulously built up a Korean 'hero' and [completely] subservient and loyal to Soviet Union.”<sup>223</sup> This view existed well before the invasion, but the American policy towards Korea was one of lessening involvement prior to the engagement. After the invasion, the same observation was used as evidence to believe that the

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<sup>223</sup> "The Chargé of the American Mission in Korea (Drumright) to the Secretary of State), Dated February 16, 1949," *FRUS, Korea, Vol. VII, Period II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), 962.

USSR was behind the attack. The signals that were being sent out from the Korean peninsula had had no interpretable value until the U.S. established the Consensus first.

This finding offers a legitimate rebuttal against one popular school of thought, which argues that the North Korean invasion could have been understood as an initiation of a civil war and in fact should have been left as one.<sup>224</sup> The argument focuses on the domestic politics of Korea and suggests that the invasion was the result of having two headstrong, hypernationalistic leaders in both Koreas, Kim Il-Sung and Syngman Rhee, who were both eager to incorporate the other half of Korea into their side.<sup>225</sup> This concept of not intervening in Korea actually existed since 1945 when some argued that the United States ought to just leave “Korea to its own devices [for] an inevitable internal upheaval for its self-purification.”<sup>226</sup> In this “purification” process, Koreans would decide their political and economic orientation through civil war independent of Soviet or U.S. involvement. The implication of this view is that, as it is the nature of civil wars, the North Korean invasion would have been an isolated incident with no further future repercussions.<sup>227</sup> Had it been treated like a domestic dispute, the U.S. would not have had to pay the price it did in blood and treasure.

However, this argument, just like the explanation of intentions, is only made possible when viewing history in retrospect. The American decision makers at the time had not way of knowing if the North’s invasion would stop with South Korea, or cause a greater spillover effect

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<sup>224</sup> One scholar who provides an excellent overview of the “evolution of Western thinking” is Beatrice Heuser in her work, “NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat: A New Perspective on Western Threat Perception and Policy Making,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1991): 17 – 40.

<sup>225</sup> For the record, Acheson refuted any allegations that aggression was initiated by the ROK by “likening such charges to Nazi claims in 1939 that Poland had started hostilities by attacking Nazi Germany.” U.S. Department of State, *Daily Bulletin, Dated July 17, 1950* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 87. The argument referred to is in Robert Simmons, *The Strained Alliance: Peking, Pyongyang, Moscow, and the Politics of the Korean Civil War* (Michigan: Free Press, 1975).

<sup>226</sup> “American Military Government in Korea, Dated December 16, 1945,” *FRUS, Korea, Vol. V* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1945), 1144 – 1148.

<sup>227</sup> Simmons, *The Strained Alliance*. Also see: Bruce Cumings, *Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943-1953* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1983), in which John Merrill has an article: “Internal Warfare in Korea, 1948-50: The Local Setting of the Korean War,” 133 – 162.

in the Far East. In fact, they had reasons to believe the latter. Defining North Korea's invasion as a civil war (as the conflict in Greece or China had been) was a foregone conclusion by June 1950 because the rules of the game limited the U.S.'s perception. It was not even about the Communist leaders miscalculating the possible reaction of the Western leaders "whose view of national security had been molded by World War II," to whom "the North Korean action stirred memories of another moment at the beginning of another war, when the democracies had permitted the crossing of a border and failed to act."<sup>228</sup> It was about the North Korean invasion confirming the initiation of a global war the United States had been anticipating.

Finally, the rules of the game explanation offers an answer to the question mentioned earlier: could it be possible that the United States intervened in Korea because the invasion was, in itself, an act of aggression? On the one hand, the United States may have intervened to enforce the ROK's legal territory. But by crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the DPRK had done more than infringe upon the sovereignty of the ROK. It had sparked, in the United States' belief, the Communist expansion agenda that could produce a domino effect. The Consensus had changed the *significance* of the invasion so the Korean invasion was not just civil unrest, or a local dispute. It was the beginning of a potentially existential conflict between the United States and the USSR.

In sum, the American policy in Korea was contingent upon the stabilization of the rules of the game, which provided the framework in which events were interpreted and guided the perception of the Soviet threat. With the invasion, Korea's strategic value could no longer be debated (it had been forced to become important) and its intentions were irrelevant because the Consensus indicated that the existential conflict with the USSR had begun. Thus, the U.S., regardless of what it did in the Korean peninsula earlier, had to intervene. The rules of the game

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<sup>228</sup> Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 90.

explanation, therefore, gives the most plausible and holistically satisfying explanation for the vacillation in U.S. policy in Korea from 1947 to 1950.

### *Implications*

The paper's argument that the rules of the game significantly influenced the American policy in Korea, including its decision to intervene, has two major implications. For the international relations scholarship, it means states need not perceive threat in terms of power, intentions, or other seemingly objective metrics to make a critical decision such as an immense intervention. In the specific case of Korea, this may not please some revisionists who question how much the Soviet Union was actually involved in the initial invasion.<sup>229</sup> The quest for who *really* started the war has limited utility in terms of understanding how decisions are made in reality because they are done with documents that were declassified decades after the event. When North Korea invaded in 1950, decision makers like Truman and Acheson had to go on "autopilot"; they had to resort to the rules that had been established by then to understand what to do next. They did not have the time nor the access to the different kinds of documents some of these revisionist scholars had. In other words, while it is important to conduct research in pursuit of the objective truth, it is equally important to acknowledge that policies are very rarely based on the truth, even if the truth were available. As much as it would be comforting to believe that policies are derived rationally, they are actually derived from what is *perceived* as reality based on the existing rules of the game at the time.

The paper's finding also has contemporary significance. More than sixty years after the Korean War, there are still many Cold War parallels that can be drawn between East Asia and

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<sup>229</sup> William Steuck, "Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 72 – 73.



the United States. For one, the United States' relationship with the Republic of Korea remains remarkably similar. Certainly, the identified value of South Korea has become more pronounced in 2014 than in 1950, and Korea has been lauded as a strong political and economic partner to the United States. But in other aspects, the same debates from 1947 are ongoing with surprisingly little change: there are still American 28,500 troops in South Korea today;<sup>230</sup> U.S. support to the ROK (military or otherwise) can come very reluctantly as it did in the 1940s, even amounting to discussions of a U.S. withdrawal;<sup>231</sup> and finally, there are still those who debate the “value” of Korea in American foreign policy. Charles Armstrong, professor of Korean Studies at Columbia University, argues that, "in terms of military strategy, it's not really a military advantage to have U.S. soldiers on the ground [in Korea]. If there is a war between North and South, Americans would be in harms way."<sup>232</sup>

As for the other actors from the Cold War era, China could be an adequate substitute as the new Soviet Union. China is comparable to the USSR because it is the only actor to feasibly challenge the United States and the fear its projected power has struck in some scholars is astonishing.<sup>233</sup> Additionally, the complicated alliance system the United States is currently bound by is analogous to all the places the U.S. was committed to in the 1950s,<sup>234</sup> ranging from Europe to Asia — all questioning the U.S. ability to carry through its commitment, and most fearing

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<sup>230</sup> United States Department of Army, “Eighth Army: History,” Eighth Army Official Website, Accessed October 2013. <http://8tharmy.korea.army.mil/history.asp>.

<sup>231</sup> Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld explored the possibility of withdrawing American troops in the early 2000s. Although this may have been in part because of the increased interest in the Middle East or a wave of anti-American sentiments in South Korea, the debate occasionally flares up to this day. David Ensor, "U.S. 'May Withdrawn from South Korea,'" *CNN*, March 6, 2003. <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/03/06/korea.us.troops/>.

<sup>232</sup> "U.S. to Maintain Military Presence in Korea, Says Hagel," *Aljazeera America*, October 1, 2013. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/10/1/us-to-maintain-symbolicmilitarypresenceinkorea.html>

<sup>233</sup> One such scholar is Mearsheimer, who has a very grim outlook on China's rise. See: John J. Mearsheimer, "China's Unpeaceful Rise," *Current History*, (Apr., 2006), 162.

<sup>234</sup> The tense relationship among the Asian states (in rhetoric and in practice), as well as the complex bilateral agreements the U.S. is bound by, have created a diplomatic minefield in East Asia. Here, I am referring in particular to the territorial disputes among the East Asian countries, including China's unilateral establishment of the Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) around the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in 2013, and the South Korean/Japanese rejection of it.

being left out of its protection. Of course, the world has become a lot more complicated since 1950 and many actors have changed in their capabilities (including North Korea), but the general Cold War dynamics fits; and since it does, it is worthwhile to note that power or intentions may not be the greatest factor to influence what the United States ultimately believes is the threat. It is plausible that the United States might get involved in another conflict in Asia irrespective of treaties or economic benefits (although those certainly help) since its policies would depend on how a particular event is defined by the rules of the game. Further research on how the Cold War dynamics apply to modern East Asian politics would be a rewarding effort.

### *Conclusion*

The American policy in Korea from 1947 to 1950 only produces puzzles when examined in isolation — it was inconsistent, contradictory, and inexplicable. However, when the policies are examined in the context of a stabilizing set of “rules of the game,” it becomes clear what drove U.S. policy, why the United States believed that the outcome of what happened in Korea was intimately tied to its own national security, and why an intervention was ultimately necessary.

Two explanations offered plausible reasons for why the United States led an international coalition into Korea in 1950. The realist explanation viewed power as the main motivation, but research showed little indication that a conflict with the Soviet Union had to occur in the Korean peninsula any more than the other countries in the region. The perception of threat explanation offered the possibility that the U.S. had gotten involved because it perceived hostile intentions from the peninsula. However, there were *always* signals that could have been interpreted as hostile; they just were not. Both explanations offered partially plausible accounts for what

motivated U.S. policy in Korea, but fell short on explaining why the American policy in Korea vacillated so dramatically during this time period.

The rules of the game explanation, however, could explain the policy fluctuation. When the rules of the game was yet to be stabilized, the threat posed by the USSR was not one that required significant militarization. The value of Korea was contentious at best and neglected at worst. Then, in 1949, the rules of the game began to stabilize and thus emerged the Cold War Consensus that called for increased militarization and wariness of a hostile and expansive Soviet Union. The increased need to respond to the USSR on a global scale while grappling with the vestiges of the previous period's ambiguity led the United States to maintain an incomprehensible policy of devoting huge amounts of aid to Korea while lessening its military presence. By the time North Korea crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the Consensus gave the United States little choice but to see the invasion as an initiation of the Soviet expansionist policy.

Studying the implications of why the United States acted the way it did in Korea can shed light on how critical decisions are made, and how the current way the political dynamics in East Asia is being framed may be fallible because it does not give enough credit to how actors, including the United States, perceive and act upon self-constructed ideas of threat.

The Consensus was by no means finished in its consolidation by 1950. Many more significant events that would contribute to its formation had yet to come, and some argue that the Korean War itself served as a learning experience to further develop the Consensus.<sup>235</sup> What is clear, however, is that the rules of the game had stabilized enough to change the value of the

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<sup>235</sup> For example. Ronald Krebs argues that the Consensus “did not coalesce until well into the 1950s, and arguably, the politics of the failed Korean War helped facilitate the consolidation of the consensus.” Ronald R. Krebs, “Military Conflict and the Politics of Narrative: the Rise and Fall of the Cold War Consensus.” Presentation at PIPES (University of Chicago, 2012), 2.

events that happened in the Korean peninsula — and the implications of such power is still worth studying today.

### *Final thoughts*

The American decision to fight in Korea has been (and continues to be) called the “wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time”<sup>236</sup> — a criticism that arises because it is unclear, intuitively, why the U.S. decided to fight the Communist threat in Korea and not anywhere else. The decision is indeed puzzling if policies are believed to be wholly contingent on power or even perception of intentions. As this paper notes, however, policy is not always – if ever – based on objective truths, but rather on how certain events are contextualized and *believed* as truths. This means that international relations cannot be as structured or predictable as some would like to believe. More importantly, it reminds us that international relations scholars must always leave room for the subjective — some could even argue “human”— aspects of how the world really works.

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<sup>236</sup> Omar Bradley first coined this term in his testimony before the U.S. Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations. “Military Situation in the Far East,” *82<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951), 732.

## Appendix 1

### Document questionnaire

Sources: Harry Truman Press Conferences, Dean Acheson Press Conferences

These were questions applied to the documents in addition to the two questions organized into tables in the paper (What is the most urgent type of threat posed by the USSR? Which region is the threat priority?).

What kind of threat is North Korea?

- I. Long- or short-term?
  - a. More long-term than short-term
  - b. More short-term than long-term
- II. Military or ideological?
  - a. More military than ideological
  - b. More ideological than military

How critical a threat does North Korea pose to the West?

- I. Not critical
- II. Critical, but Europe (including Balkans) still takes priority
- III. More critical than Europe
- IV. Critical above all else, including Europe, Formosa, or even Middle East

Is North Korea one of many conflicts to come?

- I. Yes; this conflict will create a spillover effect in the region
- II. No; it was a limited operation, which was also thought to be possible Soviet tactic (Beatrice Heuser)

Is North Korea seen in the context of the Soviet Union?

- I. Yes; it cannot be separated from the USSR
- II. Sort of; the USSR is referred to, but in the scope of reminding the audience of the geopolitical context
- III. No; North Korea is referred to as threat in and of itself

What is the effect of *not* getting involved in North Korea?

- I. Negative; North Korea is only one of many more conflicts to come, so this problem must be nipped in the bud
- II. Neutral; North Korea intervention will not have a significant impact either way on U.S. interests
- III. Positive; allies are losing faith in America because increased forces around the Korean Peninsula means less resources allocated to Europe, so non-involvement could be positive

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