

U.S.-China Relations and Taiwan in 1950: Grand Strategy or Historical Accident?

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Summary

Described as America's "Forgotten War," the Korean War receives less attention than other twentieth century conflicts.¹ Although Korea was a critical, "hot" battlefield in the Cold War, its memory is sometimes squeezed out by the heroic triumphalism of World War II and the devastating tragedy of Vietnam. Because of this relative neglect, many of the Korean War's most important questions remain unanswered and understudied. The conflict spurred the international community into an unprecedented mobilization, resulting in the death of more than 54,000 American troops. The massive effort saved South Korea from communist domination, but failed to resolve the tensions that led to war in the first place. Sixty years have passed. The Cold War is over, the Berlin Wall has toppled, and the Soviet Union has collapsed; yet the demilitarized zone at the 38th parallel remains, a stark reminder of the World War II compromises that led to the Cold War. It is unlikely that some new piece of evidence – an uncovered archive or declassified document – will fully resolve historical debates, but current international security issues in East Asia necessitate a reexamination of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

This paper focuses on the events of 1950, and examines a key strategic question that confronts students of the Korean War: Why did the Truman Administration, shortly after the North Korean invasion, order the U.S. Navy's Seventh Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Strait? The answer may seem obvious. Today, Taiwan appears firmly within America's security umbrella. Ensuring that the island's political status not be decided by force is a core part of U.S. grand strategy in East Asia. Yet by 1950, Truman had decided that, although a Chinese Communist invasion of Taiwan was imminent, the U.S. would no longer support Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists. Therefore, Truman's decision to interpose the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait

¹ The description of Korea as the "Forgotten War," has probably outlived its usefulness, but is included here because of what it suggests about the perceived legacy of the War.

appears to be a sudden policy reversal, as well as a remarkable stroke of luck for Chiang. What caused this change? Did Taiwan's strategic value change overnight, or did domestic politics force Truman's hand? Was Taiwanese independence essential to the war effort? How has this decision shaped U.S.-China-Taiwan relations in the decades since the Korean War?

These questions are not simply historical curiosities. They reflect complex political interactions and strategic decisions forged in midst of crises. The goal of this work is to examine how the Truman Administration's conceptual understanding of the world – largely developed through history and ideology – informed its wartime decisions during the critical period from June to December 1950.² Understanding this period will help inform the strategic basis for current U.S. foreign policy in East Asian and the Pacific.

Introduction

Contemporary U.S.-China relations are characterized by uneasy cooperation, and the increasingly common prediction of inevitable conflict. Many Policy-makers, scholars, and pundits view China's military and economic development as a challenge to U.S. hegemony. This speculation – most often described as America's "decline" and China's "rise" – is not a new feature of international politics. It is merely the most recent iteration of a historical and cyclical process of competition between great powers. As Thucydides writes, the real cause of the Peloponnesian War was "[the] growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta."³ Alarm, or fear, remains one of the primary causes of great power conflict. In fact,

² My original plan entailed two research questions. The first, as noted above, was to evaluate Truman's decision to send the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. Second, I planned to juxtapose this decision, which seems to predict Chinese aggression, with the Administration's failure to foresee Chinese intervention in the Korean Peninsula. I believe these two questions have much in common, and they should be examined together; unfortunately, I could not satisfactorily address both questions in this project.

³ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), 16.

modern political science has built a wide body of literature on this phenomenon, predicting the likelihood of war using metrics like the relative distribution of power, the extent to which the rising power is expected to change the nature of the international system, and the distribution of global resources.⁴ Therefore, to understand this dynamic in the context of current U.S.-China relations, scholars and policy-makers must consider both capabilities and intentions.

Judging capabilities and intentions is a difficult task, however. A glistening missile parading past Tiananmen Square may or may not constitute a deployable weapons system, and the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) insular nature makes it difficult to gauge China's long-term political objectives. One way to circumvent this problem is to evaluate the history of U.S.-China relations. Historical analysis may not lead to ironclad predictions, but it can help reveal the factors that led to past successes and failures.

The Korean War is an ideal case for informing contemporary foreign policy study because it exemplifies the importance of strategic judgments. Although the Truman Administration quickly and effectively responded to the North Korean invasion of South Korea by rallying the international community to fulfill the United Nation's collective security mandate, the execution of this "police action," as it was understood, was anything but decisive. In July 1950, U.N. forces arrived in Korea. They expected to rout the North Korean army and return home by winter, but the brutal battles of that first summer and fall dashed those early hopes, and China's massive intervention in November caused the war to drag on for several years, easily besting even the most pessimistic predictions. The Truman Administration made two strategic errors that were partly responsible for this divide between expectations and outcomes. First, Truman and his advisors failed to understand the enemy's capability and

⁴ Robert Gilpin, "The Theory of Hegemonic War," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, No. 4 (1988).

resolve. Second, they failed to establish and communicate their own strategic priorities.⁵ These mistakes help explain Truman's approach to the Korean War, as well as the complex relationship between the United States, China, and Taiwan, which remains a source of tension.

The Truman Administration failed to understand its enemy in several ways. First, Truman and his advisors ascribed too much power and influence to the Soviet Union. This was, in part, a natural consequence of NSC-68, a strategic document written just a few months before the war. NSC-68 asserted that the Soviet Union was "animated by a new fanatic faith, antithetical to our own," and that it sought to "impose its absolute authority over the rest of the world." The Administration portrayed international communism as a monolithic movement orchestrated by the Kremlin, denigrated China and North Korea's distinct national interests, and created the perception that the Korean Peninsula was merely the newest front in Moscow's quest for global domination. Second, the U.S. policy-makers underestimated the capability and resolve of its principal adversaries, China and North Korea. The North nearly captured the entire Korean peninsula before U.N. forces could intervene, while China's human wave attacks, aptly described as "having more soldiers than your enemy has bullets," allowed it to compete effectively despite America's vast technological superiority.⁶

The Truman Administration, despite the guidelines set forth in NSC-68, also failed to clearly establish and communicate its strategic objectives. Because it did not clearly distinguish between America's security interests and the United Nations' institutional credibility, the Administration overcommitted its resources and strayed from its political and strategic objectives. Truman's belief that a forceful, international response to North Korean aggression

⁵ "Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril." See, Sun Tzu, *The Illustrated Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 125.

⁶ Drew Thompson, "Think Again: China's Military," *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2010.
http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/02/22/think_again_chinas_military

was essential to the survival of not only South Korea, but also the United Nations, suggests that there was no geographical limit to America's responsibility to maintain international security.⁷ Yet this commitment was never clearly communicated. In fact, some of the Administration's public statements directly undermined this broad definition of U.S. national interests. An ideal collective security agreement deters future aggression through the credible promise of swift retribution. Because the United States failed to communicate the extent of its commitment, communist leaders did not expect the North Korean invasion to elicit a forceful U.S. response. Similarly, the Administration also failed to convince China that its intentions were limited to the restoration of the pre-war border between the two Koreas. Once the U.N. mission was redefined, and General MacArthur was given permission to push north of the 38th parallel, China could not afford to believe America's assurances.

With this framework in mind, we now turn to the events of 1949-1950. This paper begins by exploring the importance of the Truman Doctrine in post-World War II U.S. foreign policy. Section two highlights some of the domestic political pressures the Truman Administration faced, including public support for Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist regime, fierce criticisms from Republicans that the Administration's response to the spread of communism was weak, and the claim that the U.S. was in danger from both enemies abroad and subversives at home. Section three covers the Administration's approach to foreign policy and international security, as expressed in the Truman Doctrine and NSC-68. Section four explores China's capabilities and interests, specifically as they relate to Soviet strategy and the Korean War. Section five looks at the Truman Administration's response to the Korean War as it progressed from North Korea's invasion in June to China's in November. This portion relies heavily on primary documents,

⁷ Truman said, "What I want you to know is that this is not a decision just for Korea. It's a decision for the United Nations itself." Merle Miller. *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*. (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1974), 279.

including declassified conversation transcripts, personal notes, and Central Intelligence Agency memoranda. The final section analyzes the strategic lessons of U.S. involvement in the Korean War, and offers suggestions for understanding the relevance of these historical events for contemporary U.S. foreign policy.

As a final prefatory note, the story of the Korean War is incomplete without reference to the tactical and operational components of the U.N. effort. MacArthur receives well-deserved praise for the Inchon landing, but his hubris in dismissing the threat of Chinese intervention led to a sloppy advance into North Korea that the Chinese later exploited to great effect. On the other hand, U.N. troops were able to recover from China's intervention and eventually hold the 38th parallel against overwhelming numbers. The soldiers and Marines that repulsed the Chinese invasion and ultimately secured the South Korean border are a stunning reminder of U.S. military valor under the most horrendous conditions.⁸ Although his paper will make only passing reference to these issues, they remain critically important to the outcome of the Korean War.

I. The Truman Doctrine

President Harry Truman's March 12, 1947 speech before a joint session of the U.S. Congress laid the groundwork for what would become known as the "Truman Doctrine." Truman asked Congress to agree to Greece and Turkey's desperate requests for financial assistance to stabilize their crumbling economies and governments. The Administration feared that without this assistance, Greece and Turkey would be unable to quell domestic unrest, making them easy prey for Soviet expansion. Yet Truman's words carried implications far beyond the immediate circumstances. He argued passionately for a broad definition of U.S.

⁸ For one of many stirring, personal accounts of the conflict in Korea see, James Brady. *The Coldest War: A Memoir of Korea* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, St. Martin's Griffin, 1990).

foreign policy: “it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or outside pressures.”⁹ The U.S. would take greater responsibility for leadership within the U.N. to strengthen the role of the international community in supporting freedom. This leadership, however, did not necessarily entail a newfound willingness to use military force abroad.¹⁰ Like the Marxist-Leninist ideology it confronted, the Truman Doctrine built on an economic understanding of international and domestic politics: “The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grow in the evil soil of poverty and strife. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died. We must keep that hope alive.” For Truman, only the United States could fulfill this role.

One of Truman’s legacies is his tendency to speak his mind, simply and directly. He retained his convictions, as well as a principled, and perhaps obstinate, outlook despite his tumultuous years as President. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Truman Doctrine reflected the President’s true beliefs about the world and American power. He believed that U.S. power could help “organize the moral forces of the world” and “overcome the force of tyranny.”¹¹ By placing U.S. foreign policy within a moral framework, Truman transformed the impetus for action; resisting tyranny – in a sense, winning the Cold War – was not just a core component of U.S. national interest, but a moral duty created by the intersection of capability and opportunity.¹²

⁹ “56. Special Message to the Congress on Greece and Turkey,” March 12, 1947, Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman 1945-1953, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=2189&st=truman+doctrine&st1=>

¹⁰ Gaddis is likely correct in arguing that the Truman Doctrine does not represent a radical departure from previous American foreign policy, particularly the commitment to maintain the balance of power on the European continent. However, by focusing on the lack of visible policy changes during the events of 1947-1950, Gaddis too easily dismisses the importance of Truman’s speech. Although the speech did not immediately change the practice of American foreign policy, it set the groundwork for a more robust and assertive posture that culminated in the decision to use military force on the Korean Peninsula, see Gaddis, John L. Gaddis, “Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?” *Foreign Affairs* 52, No. 2 (1974).

¹¹ William Inboden. *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2008), 145.

¹² In 1967, Kennan publically complained that the Truman Doctrine was too “universalistic”; committing the U.S. to oppose Communism anywhere and everywhere, and misinterpreting his position in the “X Article” published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947. However, as Frazier notes, Kennan’s criticism ignores his role in drafting Truman’s speech. When asked to comment on a draft

Because Truman declared that, “our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid,” the Truman Doctrine did not guarantee an expansion of U.S. military commitments. But world events would soon push the Administration in that direction.

II. Navigating Domestic Political Pressures 1949-1950

Truman won the 1948 presidential election by narrowly defeating challengers Thomas Dewey on the right, and Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond on the left. The fragmentation of the Democratic Party symbolized deep national divisions on a range of issues from foreign policy to civil rights. Despite these uncertainties, Truman viewed the previous three years as “filling out the fourth term of Roosevelt,” and believed that in order to carry out his own ideas he had to win re-election.¹³ The dramatic changes to the international system that followed Truman’s election would test whether the President would be able to shape events abroad or merely react to them.

The U.S. honeymoon after victory in World War II did not last long. The political settlement that ended the war ensured that the Soviet Union would dominate Eastern Europe, becoming America’s chief political and ideological rival for more than four decades. As the U.S. destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated, the U.S. nuclear arsenal provided a strategic edge over the Soviet Union. That advantage vanished in August 1949 when the Soviets successfully test their own nuclear weapon. Still reeling from the devastation of the previous decade, Europe was once again on the brink of war, brought on by a an adversary seen as

of the speech, he did not express any major reservations about the scope of America’s future commitment, see Robert Frazier, “Kennan, ‘Universalism,’ and the Truman Doctrine,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, No. 2 (2009).

¹³ Miller, *Plain Speaking*, 249.

secretive and suspicious, and whose aggressive behavior could not be permanently moderated until the internal nature of its power was changed.¹⁴

The Soviet nuclear test set off a fierce debate within Truman's Administration. By 1947, the Administration had accepted that the Soviets would eventually develop a nuclear capability, but Truman never developed a plan for dealing with that eventuality.¹⁵ Moreover, U.S. officials were shocked by the speed at which the Soviets bridged the nuclear gap, an accomplishment that beat American projections by as much as twenty years.¹⁶ Several members of the Administration wanted to accelerate the U.S. nuclear program with the intention of creating a super bomb – a hydrogen-based device detonated by nuclear fusion – to restore America's technical advantage.¹⁷ Others, including George Kennan, argued that further nuclear development would only fuel U.S.-Soviet competition, the danger of which would nullify the advantage created by a new bomb.¹⁸ Kennan lost the battle for influence, and was eventually replaced as Director of Policy Planning at the State Department by Paul Nitze, signaling an intellectual shift toward a more aggressive foreign policy. Truman adjusted U.S. nuclear strategy by expanding the production of nuclear weapons and commissioning efforts to build the super bomb.¹⁹

Unlike the Soviet nuclear program, the Administration was prepared for the Communist Party's victory in the Chinese Civil War. For at least the year prior, it was clear that the Nationalist leadership, under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, had so terribly managed the war effort that there was little chance that the tide would turn. In a memorandum to the President on July 20, 1948, Central Intelligence Agency Director Admiral Hillenkoetter reported that, "the

¹⁴ George Kennan, *American Diplomacy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 122.

¹⁵ John L. Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 91-92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁷ Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1986), 486.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 487-488.

¹⁹ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 100-101.

Chinese National Government is now so unstable that its collapse or overthrow could occur at any time.”²⁰ Mao Zedong’s army continued its march south, its string of victories sapping the Nationalist’s will to fight. By the end of 1948, Mao was decimating the Nationalist’s defenses around its final stronghold in Nanjing. Chiang could only hold out a few more months, at best, if he could “retain the loyalty and will to fight of an effective number of his troops.”²¹ Within a year, the Communist Party gained the dominant position on the mainland, forcing the Nationalist’s to retreat to Taiwan.

The combination of the Soviet nuclear test and Mao’s victory in China fueled the perception that the United States was losing the Cold War. Influential American public figures largely targeted their criticism toward Truman’s Secretary of State, Dean Acheson. Senator Joseph McCarthy famously called Acheson “a pompous diplomat in striped pants,” and alleged that the State Department was infiltrated by hundreds of communist sympathizers and outright traitors.²² By 1950, Senator McCarthy’s accusations had become a national sensation, and the pitched battle between the White House and the Senate soon deteriorated into a “political squabble” that, if allowed to continue, would make it so that “the only party that will gain any advantage is the Communist Party.”²³

Truman and Acheson relentlessly combated accusations that they had failed to provide sufficient support Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists. In hindsight, the criticism that the Administration “lost China” has become even less credible. While it is difficult to identify the

²⁰ R.H. Hillenkoetter, Director, Central Intelligence Agency, to Harry S. Truman, President, July 20, 1948 (Hillenkoetter to Truman); Memoranda for the President, May 28, 1948 to August 31, 1950 – File 3/3 (Memos 1948-1950, 3/3); SMOF – National Security Council Files CIA Box 2 (NSC Files CIA Box 2); Truman Papers, Truman Presidential Library, Independence, MO (TPL).

²¹ Hillenkoetter to Truman, November 24, 1948; Memos 1948-1950 3/3; NSC Files CIA Box 2; Truman Papers, TPL.

²² “The Cold War Files, Interpreting History Through Documents: Dean Acheson,” The Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, <http://legacy.wilsoncenter.org/coldwarfiles/index-32083.html>

²³ Elmer Davis Broadcast, March 22, 1950; Scrapbook – Items Concerning Acheson Record as SoS; GENERAL CORRESPONDENCE File - Pacific Policy – Correspondences, Notes, and Reports 1945-1951; Box 59; Acheson Papers, TPL.

single factor responsible for the collapse of Chiang's government, Acheson probably came as close as anyone in 1950:

The broad picture is that after the war, Chiang Kai-Shek emerged as the undisputed leader of the Chinese people...and four years later what do we find? We find that his armies have melted away. His support in the country has melted away...he is a refugee on a small island off the coast of China with the remnants of his forces...What has happened in my judgment is that the almost inexhaustible patience of the Chinese people in their misery ended. They did not bother to overthrow this government. There was really nothing to overthrow. They simply ignored it throughout the country...when that support was withdrawn, the whole military establishment disintegrated. Added to the grossest incompetence ever experienced by any military command was this total lack of support in both the armies and in the country, and so the whole matter just simply disintegrated.

China was reeling from a century of humiliation and conflict, and its people were looking for a leader that would break the cycle of oppressive governance. Chiang squandered his opportunity to seize this chance because he ignored the moral elements of leadership and war.²⁴ As Truman remembered it, "The Generalissimo's attitude and actions were those of an old-fashioned warlord, and, as with the warlords, there was no love for him among the people."²⁵ Nothing in the Truman Doctrine could be construed to suggest that the U.S. would intervene in a domestic civil war on the side of a government that had clearly lost public support.

The outcome of the Chinese Civil War was not determined by a lack of U.S. support for the Nationalists. Under the provisions of the China Aid Act of 1948, the U.S. provided as much as \$115,800,000 worth of military equipment, an enormous figure that does not account for other substantial economic, diplomatic, and political support.²⁶ The fact that the Nationalists were losing the war and public support, despite this tremendous support, demonstrates the validity of Acheson's claim.

²⁴ Had he been a student of Clausewitz, Chiang Kai-shek might have learned this important lesson: "The physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade." See, Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 185.

²⁵ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman, Volume Two: Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 90.

²⁶ Department of State, Summary of United States Government Economic and Military Aid Authorized for China Since 1937; China; Subject File (Foreign Relations C-H); Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

After the communist's victory, however, Truman held out little hope that the regime on Taiwan would survive. Truman had sent George Marshall to China in 1945, with the hope that, as Truman put it, "one of the greatest military strategists in history" could broker a peace between the Nationalists and the Communists.²⁷ Despite Marshall's efforts, Chiang proved totally unwilling to negotiate in good faith. The chance for a political settlement in China had long passed, and both Taiwan and the pro-Nationalist "China Lobby" in the U.S. had become a liability for Truman. Senior U.S. officials considered at least one drastic solution: "eliminating the Generalissimo and making Taiwan a U.N. trusteeship."²⁸ While it makes for an interesting counter-factual, it does not appear that Truman seriously considered this option. Even before fleeing the mainland, Chiang seemed to be the only one holding China and the Nationalist government together, and his departure would only increase an already chaotic situation.²⁹ In addition to its waning support for Chiang, the Administration determined that even if the Soviet Union exerted a commanding influence over China, it would not "upset the overall balance of world power," and that China was "more likely to be a swamp than a strongpoint for whoever controlled it."³⁰ Nevertheless, the Administration was clearly looking for a way to extricate itself from the Chinese conflict. Supporting the Nationalists in an effort to retake the mainland seemed neither feasible nor desirable, and Truman was steadfast in his determination to keep the United States from becoming further enmeshed in China's civil war.

²⁷ The Administration was pushing for a Nationalist-Communist "rapprochement" to quell the conflict in China. See, Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1990), 486; Margaret Truman, *Harry S. Truman* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), 410; Truman, *Memoirs*, 90.

²⁸ Nancy Tucker, *The China Threat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 62.

²⁹ Steven Phillips, "Building a Taiwanese Republic," in *Dangerous Strait*, ed. Nancy Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 51.

³⁰ Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 61-62; Some officials within the Department of State had recognized this problem as early as 1949: "The United States could not take over the Chinese Government and administer its economic and military affairs... Any such direct involvement in China's internal affairs almost inevitably would lead to the employment of American armed forces in the civil war in China. This would constitute in effect an unlimited commitment of United States resources, with no assurance that we would be able to bring about any permanent solution acceptable alike to us and the Chinese people." See, "Information Memorandum No. 50," May 24, 1949, The Office of Public Affairs, Department of State; China; Subject File (Foreign Relations C-H); Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

III. NSC-68 and The Prospect of Military Force

Written just before the Korean War, NSC-68 specifically and unequivocally defined the U.S-Soviet conflict in stark terms, demanding a forceful response to Soviet provocation anywhere in the world. This more muscular foreign policy position was driven by the Administration's perspective of Moscow as intent on using force to expand its global influence. Since "any substantial further extension of the area under the domination of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled," it was critical that the U.S. more forcibly confront communist expansion, making no distinction between "vital and peripheral interests."³¹ In a sense, the authors' analysis and prescription updated the Truman Doctrine to account for the threat of a nuclear-armed Soviet Union and a communist China. It also sought to establish greater coherence within the Administration's foreign policy. The result was, in Gaddis's words, "just the sort of study Kennan had resisted: a single, comprehensive statement of interests, threats, and feasible responses."³² By firmly dedicating the energy of the United States toward the threat of Soviet expansion, NSC-68 sought to expand the Truman Doctrine to create more room for the use of force.

The U.S. military lacked the resources to meet its expended commitments under NSC-68. In this sense, the document was "as much a work of advocacy as of analysis."³³ NSC-68 overestimated Soviet strength, concluding that U.S. "military strength was dangerously

³¹ "A Report to the National Security Council - NSC 68", April 12, 1950; President's Secretary's Files; Truman Papers, TPL. Also see, Isaacson and Thomas, *The Wise Men*, 498.

³² John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005): 88.

³³ John L. Gaddis and Paul Nitze, "NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat Reconsidered," *International Security* 4, No. 4 (1980): 168.

inadequate”, and arguing for a military Keynesian approach to U.S. fiscal policy.³⁴ Conferring with British military advisors and Leon Keyserling, a member of the Council of Economic Advisors, Nitze decided that the U.S. needed – and could afford – to increase defense-related spending to between \$40 and \$50 billion.³⁵ Truman was careful not to allow federal spending to grow too quickly, and he intended to keep the defense budget at \$12.5 billion.³⁶ Because of his resistance to increased military spending, Truman was reluctant to accept NSC-68’s prescriptions.

Without more dramatic crises than those of 1949, therefore, it was unlikely that the Truman Doctrine and NSC-68 would have led to a significant increase in the use of American power. Despite the shift in tone and language, the Administration did not see its commitment to resisting Communist expansion as unlimited. Even a military budget of \$50 billion would not be sufficient to support open-ended, global commitments. Truman wanted to remove all doubt about America’s policy toward Taiwan: “The United States Government will not provide military aid or advice to the Chinese forces on Formosa...the resources on Formosa are adequate enough to enable them to obtain the items which they might consider necessary for the defense of the Island.”³⁷ Acheson tried to further clarify the Administration’s position in a – now infamous – January 12, 1950 speech before the National Press Club in Washington. He argued that by disarming Japan, the United States had assumed the burden of guaranteeing Japan’s security. He then specifically defined the U.S. defense perimeter as running “from the Ryukyus to the

³⁴ Robert Jervis. “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, No. 4 (1980): 577.

³⁵ Isaacson and Thomas, *The Wise Men*, 496.

³⁶ In part, Truman thought the U.S. could defend itself at a low cost by dispersing its nuclear arsenal among an “independent air force of seventy air groups.” Alan R. Millet, *The War for Korea 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas 2010): 55.

³⁷ Truman gave this speech on January 5, 1950. The source used here is a reprint of the President’s remarks. See, “United States Policy Toward Formosa,” Statement by President Truman, January 16, 1950. The Office of Public Affairs, Department of State; China; Subject File (Foreign Relations C-H); Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

Philippine Islands.”³⁸ This definition clearly excluded both Taiwan and South Korea, reinforcing the claim that the Administration had given up on defending Taiwan, and indicating that the U.S. commitment to Korea ended after the establishment of the Republic of Korea government under Syngman Rhee. Members of the Administration, including John Foster Dulles, argued passionately that Taiwan should be kept within the Perimeter in order to resist a Communist invasion. As shown above, there was little appetite left for this kind of commitment.³⁹

IV. China in 1950: Interests, Capabilities, and the Treaty with the Soviets

The Administration’s overriding concern in 1950 was preventing a war with the Soviet Union. Ideological and political battles were raging everywhere, but Europe and the Middle East were the most likely flashpoints for military conflict. The Administration believed that any conflict in Europe would escalate to the point of nuclear exchange, and there was little strategic planning for “limited warfare.”⁴⁰ News of a Sino-Soviet treaty, however, raised fears about the possibility of war in Asia.⁴¹ The Treaty, negotiated in the last months of 1949 and signed in February 1950, committed China to invade Taiwan sometime the following spring. For their part, the Soviets agreed to provide overt support to the Chinese offensive if the United States formally sent troops to defend Taiwan.⁴²

Truman had sufficient warning to expect a Chinese attack on Taiwan. The President received a CIA memorandum in mid-November 1949 noting the possibility that China was strengthening its formal ties to the Soviet Union. This intelligence came from a statement by

³⁸ “Crisis in Asia – An Examination of U.S. Foreign Policy,” The Office of Public Affairs, Department of State; China; Subject File (Foreign Relations C-H); Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

³⁹ Gaddis and Nitze, “NSC 68,” 174.

⁴⁰ Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War,” 571-572.

⁴¹ Officially, “The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance.”

⁴² Hillenkoetter to Truman, January 4, 1950; Memo 1948-1950 2/3; NSC Files CIA Box 2; Truman Papers, TPL; Hillenkoetter to Truman, March 16, 1950; Memos 1948-1950 2/3; NSC Files CIA Box 2; Truman Papers, TPL.

CCP Premier Zhou Enlai suggesting that it was necessary for China to ally with the Soviet Union to counter-balance the perceived American support for Chiang Kai-shek. But Zhou explicitly raised the possibility that U.S.-CCP relations could improve over time: “The Chinese Communist Party cannot afford two enemies at one time, but there is nothing to keep them from more than two friends.”⁴³ In hindsight, this statement foreshadows the kind of overtures that led to the establishment of U.S.-China relations more than twenty years later. In fact, the Communist conquest of Taiwan may have been the Administration’s favored outcome. The Nationalist’s collapse would remove Chiang from the picture, quiet the Administration’s domestic critics, and allow for “resumption of relations with a viable regime in China.”⁴⁴

The CIA provided Truman with further evidence of an impending Chinese attack on Taiwan. An assessment written in early 1950 predicted the Communists would likely invade using a “small force of highly-trained and well-armed commando-type troops, embarking in modern high-powered landing craft and assigned the mission of securing one or more initial beachheads on the coast of Taiwan.”⁴⁵ The memo also noted that the Chinese Communists did not have the numerical superiority necessary to overwhelm the Nationalist defenses, but that any defensive advantage would probably not compensate for the Nationalist’s “lack of firm determination to fight, of reliability... and of professional competence.”⁴⁶

While China and the Soviet Union were forging a new partnership, the North Korean leader, Kim Il-Sung, was agitating for war. In 1949, Kim began shuttling back and forth between Pyongyang and Moscow trying to secure the support of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Premier, for an

⁴³ Hillenkoetter to Truman, November 22, 1949; Memos 1948-1950 2/3; NSC Files CIA Box 2; Truman Papers, TPL.

⁴⁴ Nancy Tucker, *Patterns in the Dust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 183.

⁴⁵ “Intelligence Memorandum No. 312: Chinese Communist and Chinese Nationalist Intentions and Capabilities with Respect to Taiwan,” Central Intelligence Agency; NSC Files CIA Box 1; Truman Papers, TPL.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

invasion of South Korea. North Koreans controlled the most industrialized portions of the Korean Peninsula, and Kim boasted that he could easily overrun South Korea's forces. Stalin, however, was reluctant to support to Kim's plan. Stalin feared that the U.S. would not sit idly by and watch the South Korean regime collapse, particularly so soon after America's "lack of success in China."⁴⁷ Contrary to the Truman Administration's expectations, Stalin was eager to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States. Yet Kim persistence paid off. After hosting Kim for a month in Moscow in the spring of 1950, Stalin acquiesced to a North Korean invasion of the South under two conditions: Kim's guarantee that America would not intervene, and Mao's endorsement.⁴⁸ It is unclear what prompted Stalin to change his mind. In a telegram to Mao May 14th, 1950, Stalin simply explained that, "in light of the altered international situation, we agree with the proposal of the Koreans to move toward unification."⁴⁹ Mao agreed. By the summer, Kim had all the support he needed.

The Korean Peninsula had immense strategic value for the Soviets. Inchon and Pusan would provide Stalin with access to Pacific warm-water ports, greatly increasing the Kremlin's ability to project power in Asia.⁵⁰ But phrase "altered international situation," suggests that Stalin, like the Truman Administration, was most concerned with the international political environment. Most likely, Stalin based his strategic shift on a number of factors. First, the Sino-Soviet Treaty gave Stalin another important ally in Asia, and China would shoulder most of the burden if the North Korean invasion went poorly. Second, the Americans seemed unwilling to

⁴⁷ Millet, *The War for Korea*, 48.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ For a summary of scholarly interpretations of what Stalin may have meant by "altered international situation," see Shen Zhihua, "Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War: Stalin's Strategic Goals in the Far East," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2, No. 2 (2000): 44-68.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 58.

intervene. The Soviet Union's chances of expansion would improve dramatically if the U.S. chose to sit on the sidelines.

V. The War for Korea

On Saturday, June 25, 1950, North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea. Truman was in Missouri, but Acheson and other members of the Administration immediately began working with the United Nations Security Council to call an emergency meeting. Initially, it was unclear whether the North Korean military was launching a full out attack, but by the second day, Acheson phoned Truman and told him the attack was taking place “all along the parallel.”⁵¹ This was no mere skirmish. For Truman, the attack validated his strategic understanding of the conflict with Communism. A CIA memorandum written two days after the invasion expressed the sentiment of the entire Administration: “The invasion of the Republic of Korea by the North Korean Army was undoubtedly undertaken at Soviet direction...By choosing Korea as the area of attack, the U.S.S.R. was able to challenge the U.S. specifically and test the firmness of U.S. resistance to Communist expansion.”⁵² Truman believed that the Soviets were merely testing America's resolve. He instinctively drew an analogy between the current Korean crisis and the international community's failure to stand up to German, Italian, and Japanese aggression in the 1930s. The lesson was clear: if the U.S. stood firm, the Soviets would back down.⁵³ As Truman put it, “I thought over the fact that what the Communists, the North Koreans were doing was nothing new at all...The only thing new in the

⁵¹ Miller, *Plain Speaking*, 273.

⁵² “The USSR and the Korean Invasion: Intelligence Memorandum No. 300,” Central Intelligence Agency, Central Intelligence Agency; NSC Files CIA Box 1; Truman Papers, TPL.

⁵³ In a private conversation with George Elsey, Truman waived off Elsey's concern about a possible attack on Taiwan or an escalation of the Korean War: “If we are tough enough now, if we stand up to them like we did in Greece three years ago, they won't take any next steps.” See, “President Truman's Conversations with George M. Elsey,” Memorandum of Conversation; China; Subject File (Foreign Relations C-H); Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

world is the history you don't know."⁵⁴ At no point in the first weeks of the Korean War did anyone in the Administration raise the possibility that North Korea was operating, to any degree, independent of Moscow's directions, or that Kim Il-Sung was dead set on making good on his promise to unify the Korean Peninsula.

Back in Washington, Truman acted swiftly to meet North Korean aggression. Acheson successfully gathered the U.N. Security Council, which passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire and the reestablishment of the border at the 38th parallel. On the night of June 26, Truman met with senior staff at the Blair House to determine further options. By this time, U.S. forces were already providing material support for the Republic of Korea Army.⁵⁵ Acheson was the first to suggest that the Seventh Fleet be given orders to "prevent an attack on Formosa;" Truman quickly agreed.⁵⁶ This decision was then passed to MacArthur via teleconference, but the original order was expanded: "Seventh Fleet was to prevent any attack on Formosa, or any offensive from Formosa against the mainland."⁵⁷ The Administration's primary concern was containing the conflict to the Korean Peninsula, and they were aware that Chiang might use the conflict, and the greater U.S. military involvement entailed, as a pretext for restarting the Chinese Civil War.

Truman believed that war could be avoided if America demonstrated firm resolve. In his first public statement after the North Korean invasion, Truman praised U.N. Resolution 82, which demanded the immediate withdrawal of North Korean troops, and declared, "The United

⁵⁴ Miller, *Plain Speaking*, 273.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, General MacArthur ignored chain of command and ordered the delivery of munitions without receiving Truman's authorization. George Elsey explicitly commented on this "initiative" in a handwritten note. "Note – this, the first military action by U.S. was taken on Mac's initiative, & not on orders from Washington." See, "Joint Chiefs of Staff Secret Briefing Book for Senate Committees," April 30, 1951; China; Subject File (Foreign Relations C-H); Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

⁵⁶ "Blair House Meeting," Department of State, Memorandum of Conversation, June 26, 1950; Subject File: Korea June 26, 1950; Subject File; Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

⁵⁷ "Teleconference with MacArthur," June 26, 1950; Korea June 26, 1950; Subject File; Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

States will vigorously support the effort of the Council to terminate this serious breach of the peace.”⁵⁸ In a secret meeting on June 27, Truman and several advisors briefed a small group of Senators and Congressmen. The mood was tense. Truman’s words were punctuated by periods of silence as the audience processed the dramatic events of the past few days. The fear of nuclear war seemed to loom just far enough above the minds of those present that no one mentioned it. Truman promised the group that the United States would, in full accordance with the United Nations, act decisively to respond to events on the Korean peninsula; however, he requested that everyone avoid referring “to Soviet Participation or involvement in the Korean crisis.”⁵⁹ If the Soviet Union was directly implicated, Truman feared, they might feel pressured to increase their support for the North Korean offensive, “as a matter of prestige.”⁶⁰ Therefore, all the Administration’s initial decisions regarding the conflict in Korea, including the order to the Seventh Fleet to patrol the Taiwan Strait, were designed to deescalate the situation and discourage aggression.

Truman decided not to make a public statement about the movement of the Seventh Fleet until the ships arrived in the Taiwan Strait about two days after the Blair House meeting.⁶¹ To many outside observers Truman’s decision signaled strong support for Chiang, a perception that General MacArthur deliberately encouraged. Truman tried to clarify the Administration’s purposes numerous times, including a public statement on July 19: “The present military neutralization of Formosa is without prejudice to political questions affecting that island. Our desire is that Formosa not become embroiled in hostilities disturbing to the peace of the Pacific

⁵⁸ “172. Statement by the President on the Violation of the 38th Parallel in Korea,” June 26, 1950, Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman 1945-1953, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=799&st=&st1=>

⁵⁹ “Very Important Meeting on Korea,” Memorandum of Conversation; Korea June 27, 1950; Subject File; Box 59; Elsey Papers, TPL.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 334-335.

and that all questions affecting Formosa are to be settled by peaceful means as envisaged in the Charter of the United Nations.”⁶² Clearly, using the Seventh Fleet to “neutralize” the conflict suggested that the U.S. was now committed to intervening in China, but Truman viewed this action as a short-term solution necessitated by the security situation in East Asia. A renewal of the Chinese Civil War would further destabilize the region at a time when the Administration was focused on securing peace as quickly as possible.

Despite his best efforts, Truman had a difficult time keeping the Administration’s message consistent. On August 26, MacArthur sent a message to the Veterans of Foreign Wars comparing Taiwan to an “unsinkable aircraft carrier.” This directly contradicted the Administration’s intentions, and conveyed the message that the United States planned to use the Nationalist regime to project power into East Asia. MacArthur’s timing was as damaging as his insubordination. Just a day before, Truman had guaranteed U.N. Secretary general Trygve Lie that the U.S. had “no desire to incorporate Formosa within the American defense perimeter.”⁶³

The Chinese Communists were unmoved by Truman’s promises to keep the U.S. out of the Chinese Civil War. Instead, they viewed the Administration’s actions as evidence of hostility toward China. At a meeting of Party leaders on June 28, Mao declared, “there is absolutely no ground for the United States’ intervention...it was only on January 5 of this year that Truman announced that the United States would not intervene in Taiwan. Now he himself has proved that statement to be a [pack of lies].”⁶⁴ The United States appeared to be perpetuating the Western imperialistic policies that had defined China’s “century of humiliation,” beginning with the

⁶² Truman, *Harry S. Truman*, 476-477.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 478.

⁶⁴ Guang Zhang Shu, *Mao’s Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War 1950-1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 56.

Opium Wars of the 1840s. Mao promised that this time would be different, and he “exhorted his fellow citizens to strengthen their bodies so that they could stand up against the foreigners.”⁶⁵

By late summer 1950, U.N. forces had suffered a series of embarrassing military defeats and were in danger of being pushed off the Peninsula entirely. Truman authorized a renewed offensive, culminating in MacArthur’s stunningly successful landing of the 1st Marine Division and the Army’s 7th Infantry Division at Inchon Harbor. MacArthur was rewarded with a new military objective, “the destruction of the North Korean Armed Forces,” which eventually permitted operations north of the 38th parallel.⁶⁶ From this point, the war turned sharply in America’s favor, and it looked like the troops would be home before the New Year.

For Mao and the CCP, MacArthur’s confident march toward the North Korea-Chinese border at the Yalu River served as a confirmation of their assumptions about America’s imperialist intentions.⁶⁷ Yet the Administration, assuming that the Chinese would believe their publically stated position not to stop at the Yalu, continued to ignore warnings that China was preparing for war.⁶⁸ By the first week of November, it was clear that as many as 200,000 Chinese troops had joined forces with the North Korean Army.⁶⁹ This was an entirely new war. Yet the Administration was slow to grasp the gravity of the situation. During a National Security Council meeting on November 28th, 1950, General Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, argued “that the reports which were coming in over the press and radio about the strength

⁶⁵ Ibid., 253.

⁶⁶ Truman, *Memoirs*, 359-360.

⁶⁷ During a CCP Politburo meeting on August 4, Mao warned his colleagues: “If the U.S. imperialists win [the war with Korea], they may get so dizzy with success that they may threaten us. We therefore must come to [North] Korea’s aid and intervene in the name of a volunteer army, although we will select the best timing [to do so].” Guang Zhang Shu, *Mao’s Military Romanticism*, 63.

⁶⁸ A CIA memorandum on 1 November stated, “The Chinese Communists probably genuinely fear an invasion of Manchuria despite the clear-cut definition of UN objectives.” See, “Subj: Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea,” Central Intelligence Agency; Memoranda For the President – Korean Situation and Daily Korea Summary/Bulletin September 1, 1950 to March 30, 1951 (1/2); NSC Files CIA Box 2; Truman Papers, TPL.

⁶⁹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 376.

and momentum of the Chinese communist offensive might well be exaggerated,” and that it was “entirely possible that the Chinese offensive might not go very far because of the extremely difficult terrain and because the Chinese communists had a difficult supply situation.”⁷⁰ During that same meeting, Acheson reminded everyone that the Soviet Union “had always been behind every move... we must all think about what happens in Korea as a world matter.”⁷¹ Even at this most perilous moment, the Administration was unable to move past its strategic assumptions, which led to a misidentification of its true enemy and his intentions. The Administration assumed that China’s hostility was “evidence of underlying Chinese enmity springing from a desire to harm U.S. interests,” rather than a reasonable response to a perceived danger.⁷²

China’s entry into the war prompted the Administration to reevaluate its position on Taiwan. The President publicly addressed the rapidly deteriorating situation in Korea at a press conference on Thursday, November 30th:

The Chinese communist leaders have sent their troops from Manchuria to launch a strong and well-organized attack against the United Nations force in North Korea. This had been done despite prolonged and earnest efforts to bring home to the communist leaders of China the plain fact that neither the United Nations nor the United States had any aggressive intentions toward China... We hope that the Chinese People will not continue to be forced or deceived into serving the ends of Russian colonial policy in Asia. I am certain that, if the Chinese people now under the control of the communists were free to speak for themselves, they would denounce this aggression against the United Nations.⁷³

According to Marshall, Taiwan was of little strategic importance to the United States, but “it would be of disastrous importance if it were held by an enemy;” all the U.S. could do was maintain its defensive position, providing valuable time to “gather strength on all fronts.”⁷⁴ Thus, Truman’s attempts to avoid involvement in the Chinese Civil War were undone by the decision

⁷⁰ “Special Meeting with the National Security Council,” November 28, 1950, Transcript of Conversation; Korea, (July 19 – Nov. ’50); Subject File; Box 72; Elsey Papers, TPL.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War,” 583.

⁷³ “Statement By the President – Press Conference,” Thursday, November 30, 1950; Korea, (July 19 – Nov. ’50); Subject File; Box 72; Elsey Papers, TPL.

⁷⁴ Truman, *Memoirs*, 408.

to send the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait. As the war continued, the status quo hardened, and the Administration's options were increasingly restrained by the need to appear tough on communism. Assisted by the China Lobby's successful campaign to build American support for Chiang and the Nationalists, Taiwan eventually crept into the U.S. defensive perimeter from which it had once been excluded.

VI. Historical Interpretation and Policy Implications: Learning from the Past

While contemporary challenges in U.S.-China relations seem unprecedented, the Korean War provides valuable lessons for current policy. When Truman was elected in 1948, the United States faced serious international security threats, a domestic political climate rife with division, and general uncertainty over the appropriate role of U.S. power after World War II. Yet Truman was decisive. The Administration built a foreign policy around two specific goals: containing Soviet expansion – as expressed in the Truman Doctrine – and building the capacity of the United Nations to resist aggression through collective security. This grand strategy established clear priorities, laying the groundwork for the active use of American power and leadership. Yet just a few years later, America was locked in a difficult war against determined opponents.

The strategic vision that brought cohesion to the Administration's foreign policy also blinded it to possibilities that laid outside its understanding of the world. This myopia was demonstrated in two ways. First, the Administration's exaggerated view of the Soviet Union's strength and influence caused it to underestimate the capability and resolve of its principal adversaries, China and North Korea. Second, the Administration failed to clearly prioritize and communicate its strategic objectives and interests. One scholar has argued that, "Truman's decision to extend the United States' Far Eastern defense perimeter to include South Korea and

Formosa represented a forward type of defense thousands of miles from the nation's shores."⁷⁵ This assertion misrepresents the situation. Truman never wanted to incorporate South Korea and Taiwan into the U.S. defensive perimeter. Yet he also felt duty bound to support the U.N.'s collective security mandate, which, by definition, could not be geographically pre-determined. This aspect of the Administration's foreign policy was caught perilously between competing definitions of national interest. Because the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea assumed that America's foreign policy would follow the dictates of national interest. Because Taiwan held little strategic value for the United States, they all mistakenly assumed that the United States would avoid going to war in Korea.

Truman's decision to send the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait further exemplifies the tension within his foreign policy. Before the Korean War, the Administration had clearly decided that Chiang Kai-shek was a corrupt and unreliable partner. The Nationalists commanded little loyalty from ordinary Chinese citizens, and Chiang's army had been thoroughly beaten by a far less sophisticated adversary. Truman thought the Seventh Fleet's presence would neutralize the China-Taiwan conflict and prevent the Korean War from spreading. While Truman achieved this goal, he also laid the groundwork for another sixty years – and counting – of deep U.S. involvement in the unsettled question about Taiwan's political fate. In fact, Truman's decision became a model for future Presidents. The Seventh Fleet has been used several times – as recently as 1995 – to demonstrate America's support for the peaceful resolution of Taiwan.

America almost won the Korean War in the winter of 1950, but China's intervention prolonged the conflict for another two and a half grueling years. By the time it was finished, the Democratic Party had lost the Presidency, and more than 54,000 American servicemen had lost

⁷⁵ Dennis D. Wainstock, *Truman, MacArthur, and the Korean War* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999): 30.

their lives. Hindsight makes it easy to criticize Truman and his principal advisors. Yet it is clear that they were making difficult decisions under tremendous pressures. It's possible that once Truman made the decision to commit forces to Korea, a clash with China was simply inevitable. For Taiwan, however, the consequences of Truman's decision to send the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait could not have been greater. Without that assistance, it is almost certain that the Chinese Communists would have conquered Taiwan in 1950 or shortly thereafter.