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# EXTENDING THE CONTAINMENT PERIMETER IN KOREA: OCTOBER 9, 1950

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HISTORY

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The Korean War marked one of the few times the United States tried to take territory from a communist state, and it exemplifies the failure of American rollback policy. The incursion into North Korea departed from President Harry Truman's containment policy, which used military and economic means to halt the expansion of the Soviet Union. Containment was essentially a defensive policy, establishing a perimeter along Soviet territory and asserting that the boundary could not be crossed by Kremlin forces. If the USSR or one of its satellites attacked the United States or one of its allies, the US would respond with military force. So when on June 25, 1950, Soviet-backed North Korea violated this boundary by attacking America's South Korean ally, Truman quickly deployed US troops to beat back the attack. But the United States subsequently expanded its aims, looking to occupy North Korea and unite the two Koreas.

As distinct from containment, rollback policy aimed to capture new ground for the non-communist world and reduce the amount of territory under Soviet influence. The Truman administration saw rollback as a risky policy because of its potential to provoke the Soviet Union, which was North Korea's patron and neighbor. Even if the Soviets did not intervene with their own soldiers, they could send those of their supposed satellite, the People's Republic of China. The US believed China was a Kremlin surrogate, and since China also shared a border with North Korea, it could easily be pressed to intervene in the fight. But intervening could spark world war three, and in the nuclear age this was a frightening prospect. US planners wanted to avoid such an escalation of the conflict, but balanced this risk against the potential gains of rollback. Considering this, the US decided to invade North Korea only if the Chinese or Soviets did not intervene.

According to standard historical interpretations, the US implemented this rollback policy on October 7 by crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the border between North and South



Korea. General Douglas MacArthur led an aggressive and reckless invasion, historians say, going far into North Korea and driving his troops to the Sino-Korean border. This worried MacArthur's superiors, who nevertheless did not challenge the general's actions. According to this view, their fears were realized after October 25, when China intervened in the war. MacArthur decided on his own initiative to drive his troops into battle with the Chinese, launching a massive offensive in late November that ended with an unexpected Chinese victory. Faced with China's challenge, the US then retreated south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The American rollback policy had failed.

But I will argue that only days after implementing rollback, the Truman administration decided the invasion had succeeded. Thinking North Korea had essentially been taken from the communists, the president extended containment policy to cover the entire Korean peninsula. Truman's orders changed the rules of engagement for US troops, calling for MacArthur's forces to take action against further Soviet-inspired aggression anywhere in Korea. So when US troops came upon Chinese soldiers just south of the Sino-Korean border, MacArthur followed containment policy and engaged them in strength.

### **One: How the US Decided China Was a Satellite, January-June of 1950**

The Truman administration did not see China as a Soviet satellite until June 1950, when it began to write policy as if the PRC were a Kremlin puppet. Six months earlier the US thought China might become a Soviet antagonist despite its communist ideology. This reversal was primarily driven by reports from State Department officers stationed in Mainland China, who saw increasing Soviet influence over the country.

On January 5, 1950, Truman acted on his belief that China was not a satellite, announcing a new hands-off policy towards the country in hopes of Sino-American rapprochement. That morning, reporters filled Truman's office to hear him say the US



would no longer “pursue a course which will lead to involvement” in China, and it would stop giving “military aid” to the PRC’s opponents on the island of Taiwan.<sup>1</sup> During the Chinese Civil War between the communists and Kuomintang, the US had sided with the KMT, spending billions to support them and their leader Chiang Kai-shek. But the KMT had lost the war, and now Truman wanted to cut his losses.

By setting this policy, the president sought to make peace with the newly founded People’s Republic of China. He knew the PRC was planning to capture Taiwan as the last battle of the civil war, and by withdrawing US support Truman had basically accepted this. Now that the communists were in power in China, he hoped they would become antagonists of his real enemy, the Soviet Union. Truman administration officials in January 1950 thought there was a difference between communists and Soviets. The Soviet Union’s totalitarianism, not the ideology of communism, threatened US security. Truman did want to contain the spread of communism and the Soviet influence that might come with it, but John Lewis Gaddis, a leading historian of the Cold War, insists the Truman administration did not set “out on an anti-communist ideological crusade.”<sup>2</sup> Instead, it recognized the Soviets did not have complete control over communists abroad. Communist states could push back. A clear example was Tito’s communist government in Yugoslavia. Established without Soviet help, it did not follow Stalin and in fact caused him trouble. Truman saw communist infighting as a potential boon, a challenge to the Soviets from within their own ideological camp. This was “a precedent to be encouraged elsewhere,” including China.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “The President’s News Conference, January 5, 1950.” *Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, hereafter HST*, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=574&st=&st1=> (accessed 1/14/11).

<sup>2</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford University Press, Inc., 1982), 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.



The US preferred not to see communism spread, but the CCP's takeover in China was not necessarily a disaster. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson thought Chinese communists under Mao could become a foil to the Soviet Union like Tito's Yugoslavia. He insisted Mao was not Stalin's puppet:

[T]he Chinese Communists are Marxists who regard the Soviet Union as their great and only friend. . . [There] exists the seed of inevitable conflict between China and the Soviet Union. Mao *is not a true satellite* in that he came to power by his own efforts and was not installed in office by the Soviet army.<sup>4</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Acheson here made a strong distinction between communists and Soviets. Chinese communists could oppose the Soviets. But any American threats to the PRC would drive them closer to the USSR; if the PRC and Soviets shared a common US enemy, they might become stronger allies. Historian Chen Jian observes Acheson wanted to “drive a wedge between Chinese Communists and the Soviets. . .”<sup>5</sup> But if Acheson hoped to achieve better relations with China, he needed to end US policies hostile to the PRC. The American policy that most aggravated the Chinese was the support of Chiang Kai-shek. The US continued to assist him on the island of Taiwan, which Chiang used as a base of operations against the mainland.

Acheson wanted to cut Chiang loose, but he faced resistance from Chiang's supporters in Congress and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The JCS, who regarded Taiwan as an important air station in the event of world war, wanted to continue financing and arming Chiang.<sup>6</sup> In the same camp as the JCS were a number of Congressional Republicans, notably Senators William Knowland and Robert Taft. Acheson, however, maintained that Taiwan

<sup>4</sup> “Memorandum of Conversation by the Secretary of State, Washington, December 29, 1949.” *United States Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, hereafter FRUS*, 1949, Volume IX, 466.

<sup>5</sup> Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 113.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War*, (Oxford, 2006), 197.



was a point of friction between the US and PRC. If any rapprochement between the two were to be achieved, the Taiwanese thorn needed to be removed. On this objective he won the support of President Truman. Acheson's success was embodied in a National Security Council paper called NSC 48, which made it US policy to "exploit . . . any rifts between" China and the USSR.<sup>7</sup> The paper was part of the administration's larger containment policy, and following Acheson it did not call China a Soviet satellite.

Truman and his Secretary of State wanted a long-term peace between the US and China. They believed Sino-American rapprochement would help the US in its struggle against the Soviets, and they took the view that the PRC was not a Soviet surrogate and could become an antagonist to Stalin.

### **Truman's Eyes in China: From Asian Tito to Soviet Satellite**

Despite Acheson's success in defending his policy from critics in the military and the China Lobby in Congress, State Department officers soon began to challenge his thesis that China might become an Asian Yugoslavia. Two of the biggest drivers of the eventual volte-face in US policy were Walter McConaughy and Edmund Clubb, consular officers in Mainland China. The two sent dispatches frequently to Acheson, and in 1950 they watched for signs of Chinese Titoism.

At first, McConaughy and Clubb agreed with Acheson's thesis. They insisted that a power struggle was underway in China between pro- and anti-Soviet factions of the CCP. The Chinese were suspicious of imperialism in any guise, they said, and Clubb elaborated on the rift between CCP leadership in reports to Acheson.<sup>8</sup> He said there was a clear split in

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy 1945-1950*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 273-4.

<sup>8</sup> Clubb to Acheson, 1/22/50, 793 File, Department of State Central Decimal File 1950-1954, Record Group 59; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. Hereafter RG 59, NA.



Beijing between the two factions, and the prospect of a treaty with the Soviet Union was driving the tension. In early 1950, Mao was in Moscow working on an accord with Stalin. Where exactly Mao fell in these camps was questionable, but it appeared he was resisting strong Soviet influence in treaty negotiations. He had been in the city for more than a month, and the US took this to mean he was not following the routine of "uncomplaining acceptance by a satellite leader of Kremlin dictation."<sup>9</sup> If Mao completely followed the Soviet line, he would probably have simply complied with Stalin. But he had been in Moscow too long, and in the meantime things in China were deteriorating politically and economically.

McConaughy thought an "important group of CCP leaders [were] definitely opposed to Moscow control, which group, although thus far unable to dictate major policy, has considerable potential power."<sup>10</sup> This group included a PLA general named Chen Yi, a decorated Chinese veteran. McConaughy's sources were sending word. Over a drunken exchange at a dinner party, one contact said "if America ever wants a Tito, Chen Yi is the man."<sup>11</sup> McConaughy and Clubb also reported that the Chinese people generally did not welcome Soviet influence. McConaughy had a long list of contacts in China, from cooks to poets and professors, and his reports often attempted to gauge popular views. The CCP might have had enormous power, but there were still 400 million Chinese people to consider. McConaughy did not think they would willingly join Stalin's camp, noting in early February there was "serious concern" among communist leaders about the popular "nationalist indignation against [the] USSR's encroachment" and domination.<sup>12</sup> He had even heard rumors that students had laid on the railroad tracks to stop Chinese Foreign Minister

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<sup>9</sup> Kirk to Acheson, 1/3/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>10</sup> McConaughy to Acheson, 2/4/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>11</sup> McConaughy to Acheson, 1/3/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>12</sup> McConaughy to Acheson, 2/7/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.



Zhou Enlai from heading to Moscow. For his part, Acheson believed that Stalin was pushing to exert control over China. According to his sources, Stalin was pressing to introduce "advisers" into China as part of the Sino-Soviet treaty that he was negotiating with Mao.

On February 14, 1950, the PRC and Soviet Union signed a 30-year Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance. Under the treaty, the Soviets were to provide large loans to the PRC, and the two countries also entered into a military alliance. Clubb and McConaughy accepted that the Soviets had probably won some influence, however, they had not expected the treaty to go over well with factions of the CCP and with many of the Chinese people. In the months after the treaty was signed, however, Americans in China began to report increasing Soviet influence. On March 2 Clubb wired that a Chinese-government contact had said the "Moscow agreements were confirmation close relationship between China and USSR. Anticipated no important changes would occur China in near future after return Mao."<sup>13</sup> Throughout March, McConaughy and Clubb observed that Soviet influence was growing in strength. Clubb cabled on March 16 that Soviet officers had begun to walk the streets of Beijing in uniform.<sup>14</sup> McConaughy later said he saw thousands of Russians arriving in Shanghai that spring. His agents gathered one story from a cook at a Shanghai airfield who said ninety Soviet engineers had arrived at the base, and word was the Soviets were there "giving active aid to [the] CCP in attack on Taiwan as result [of the] Moscow agreement."<sup>15</sup> In Manchuria, sources said the Soviets had "control of the majority of commercial and political institutions and activities" and many Soviet "advisers" were

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<sup>13</sup> Clubb to Acheson, 3/2/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>14</sup> Clubb to Acheson, 3/16/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>15</sup> McConaughy to Acheson, 2/27/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.



operating there.<sup>16</sup> In a meeting on March 28, Acheson learned of evidence showing Beijing's "pro-Soviet orientation," and that "a large number of Russian advisors . . . have appeared throughout China."<sup>17</sup>

Since 1948, the State Department had been trying to secure the release of American servicemen Elmer Bender and William Smith from a CCP prison, where they had been sent after crashing into CCP territory.<sup>18</sup> Nothing had worked, but on March 28 Acheson decided to try a completely new approach to the Smith-Bender affair. He drafted a memo to the US ambassador in Moscow:

You are requested arrange interview [with Soviet foreign minister] Vishinsky soonest in order request on behalf [of the Secretary] his intercession . . . with Chinese COMMIES on behalf Smith and Bender. You SHLD state US GOVT of course realizes these are not matters which directly concern SOV GOVT . . .  
. . . Friendly relations SOV GOVT with . . . Chinese COMMIES leads [Secretary] to hope good offices Vishinsky might result in release these men.<sup>19</sup>

Acheson seems to have agreed that the Soviets were exerting increased control over the PRC, or at least enough influence to get the release of the two Americans. For years, the State Department had tried to secure the release of these men. Never before had they asked the Soviets to help. But now things were different, as Acheson recognized.

But the Secretary of State would soon stop receiving reports from Mainland China. Following a dispute over US government property rights in Beijing, the US withdrew from the mainland, leaving itself blind and deaf to the thoughts of the PRC. By April, McConaughy and Clubb would return to Washington.

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<sup>16</sup> Memo for Division of Chinese Affairs from Hong Kong, 3/20/1950, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>17</sup> Material for Butterworth on the "General Situation in Communist China," 3/28/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>18</sup> New York Times, May 9, 1950, "Chinese Reds Set to Free US Fliers; Release Reported by Chinese Reds."

<sup>19</sup> Acheson to American Embassy Moscow, 3/28/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.



### Sino-American Post-Mortem: Titoism is Dead

On June 1 McConaughy delivered a post-mortem on Sino-American relations to 22 officials from the Army, State, Treasury, and other agencies. Acheson's Tito thesis, he argued, needed to be discarded: "Reports of deviationism among the Chinese Communists on the Titoist model should be discounted. No break between Peiping and Moscow is in the offing."<sup>20</sup> He and his colleagues had reported Soviet experts in Chinese cities, airfields, and industrial installations, especially in Manchuria. In Shanghai alone, he observed the arrival of 3000 Russians before he left the country. McConaughy's lecture foreshadowed the Truman administration's new conviction that China was a Soviet client, a "satellite" as American memos put it.

At 9:30 p.m. on June 24, 1950, scarcely three weeks after McConaughy's talk, the State Department received an urgent cable from the American Ambassador to Korea:

North Korean forces invaded ROK territory at several points this morning. Action was initiated about 4 a.m. Ongjin blasted by North Korea artillery fire. About 6 a.m. North Korean infantry commenced crossing parallel in Ongjin area, Kaesong area, Chunchon area . . . North Korean forces, spearheaded by tanks, reportedly closing in on Chunchon . . . It would appear from nature of attack and manner in which it was launched that it constitutes all out offensive against ROK.<sup>21</sup>

Truman and his advisors rapidly concluded that the attack was part of a larger Soviet plot. The president met with top cabinet officials to discuss where the communists might strike next.<sup>22</sup> They agreed the US would need to contain communism in Korea by deploying US forces, but they feared a larger war was possible. Following UN resolutions on June 27

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<sup>20</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VI, 352.

<sup>21</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc, 1969), 405.



that recommended UN members help South Korea "to repel the armed attack,"<sup>23</sup> Truman deployed US ground forces. Their mission was limited to repelling the Korean communists, and they were not authorized to invade North Korea. Shortly afterward, the UN approved General Douglas MacArthur as commander of UN forces in Korea.<sup>24</sup>

### **Designing Korean War Policy On a Bedrock of Bad Assumptions**

By the time US troops deployed into the Korean peninsula, the NSC had begun to assume that China should be treated as a Soviet stooge. Philip Jessup, State's main representative at the NSC and one of Acheson's top advisors, explicitly made this point. Walter McConaughy,<sup>25</sup> who became Jessup's assistant on his return from China, had already been representing this view in his cables home. Now Jessup and the NSC shared this view. Writing to another senior State official two weeks after the Korean War began, Jessup made a disclosure:

We are proceeding on the assumption that the Chinese Communists are fully and irrevocably committed to supporting the Soviet strategy in Asia. I believe that the evidence supports this assumption.<sup>26</sup>

US policymaking would employ this presupposition unquestioningly. The NSC staff had to answer a limitless amount of major policy questions, and regarding China their approach was firmly established.

<sup>23</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 211.

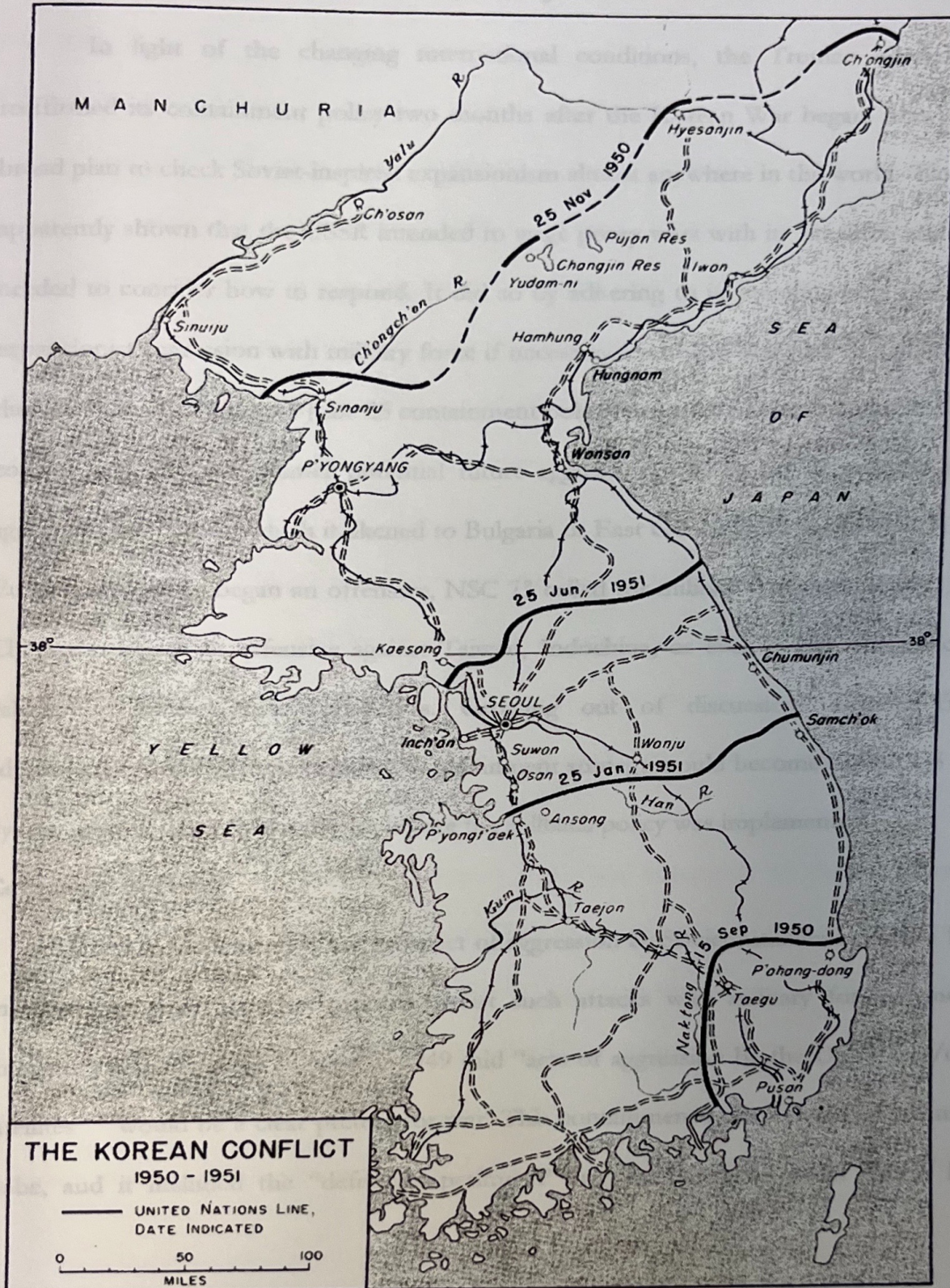
<sup>24</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 712.

<sup>25</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol., VII, 641.

<sup>26</sup> 7/11/50, 793 File, RG 59, NA.



# Two: Reaffirming Containment, Post-June 25





## Two: Reaffirming Containment, Post-June 25

In light of the changing international conditions, the Truman administration reaffirmed its containment policy two months after the Korean War began, drawing up a broad plan to check Soviet-inspired expansionism almost anywhere in the world. Korea had apparently shown that the USSR intended to wage proxy wars with its satellites, and the US needed to consider how to respond. It did so by adhering to its standing plan of stopping expansionist aggression with military force if necessary, codifying that plan in a policy paper dubbed NSC 73. This post-June 25 containment policy identified Soviet satellites and set out courses of action to counter potential future aggression. On its list of possible satellite aggressors was China, which it likened to Bulgaria or East Germany. If one of these Eastern European satellites began an offensive, NSC 73 called for military countermeasures. And if China too began an offensive against Taiwan, Indochina, or even Korea, the policy also called for military countermeasures. Growing out of discussions among Truman administration staff, this post-June 25 containment strategy would become official US policy by late August, more than a month before the rollback policy was implemented.

### Containment Policy

The US had imagined the prospect of aggression by Soviet satellites since the 1940s, and standing policy was to generally resist such attacks with military force. America's emergency war plans for Europe in 1949 said "acts of aggression by the USSR and/or her satellites"<sup>27</sup> would be a clear pretext for war. This containment policy extended around the globe, and it included the "defensive perimeter" in East Asia. So when North Korea

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, eds., *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy 1945-1950*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 325.



attacked South Korea on June 25, 1950, Truman responded by sending US troops to intervene.

### Containment Post-June 25

Four days after the attack, President Truman ordered the State Department to reassess the policy of containment in light of events in Korea. Nobody doubted that the USSR had begun a proxy war just as planners had theorized, and Truman wanted an overall “review of United States policy relating to the perimeter around the USSR.”<sup>28</sup> What should the US do if further satellite or direct Soviet attacks began? George Kennan, the father of containment policy, was one of several men charged with answering the president’s questions.

Meeting with officials from State and the Joint Chiefs on June 29, Kennan asserted that despite Korea, “the USSR has no intention of provoking war at this time; we must ask, what is the USSR likely to do?”<sup>29</sup> A conversation with Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko led US ambassador Alan Kirk to assume the Soviet Union had no other adventures in mind, at least for the moment.<sup>30</sup>

Still, Kennan thought Kirk’s report was “not reassuring in that it showed a determination by the USSR to involve the US with the Soviet satellites.”<sup>31</sup> He and his colleagues discussed potential flashpoints. Tito’s Yugoslavia was one, as was West Germany. The eastern bloc countries all posed a threat. But China loomed large as a potential satellite aggressor. Kennan and his colleagues agreed military assistance to Asian allies would be necessary to stave off Chinese attacks. In discussions with planners from the JCS and State

<sup>28</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. I, 325

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 326.

<sup>30</sup> Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War*, (Cornell University, 1985), 76-77.

<sup>31</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. I, 327.



Department, Kennan said that "if we caught Chinese Communists in South Korea we could go north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and even bomb Manchuria . . . [I]f they interfered with our mission in Korea we would take any necessary action." These conversations were the background for NSC 73, which asserted that the outbreak of the Korean War

requires many measures designed to enable the free world to regain the initiative, to deter further aggression, and to increase ability to defeat aggression if it occurs . . . [T]he United States should take the action set forth in the following paragraphs in response to such further Soviet or Soviet-inspired moves as may occur in the next two or three months.<sup>32</sup>

Truman's experts did not think the Soviets wanted global war and would not push to make one happen. Kennan, Kirk, and many others contributed to the view that the USSR would not make trouble. US containment policy, as espoused in NSC 73, was thus most concerned with potential satellite and local action.

Pursuant to the president's request, the NSC recommended overall responses for scenarios of satellite aggression. The purpose of their paper was to determine courses of action to contain further expansionist aggression, and their recommendations were designed to serve this purpose. The NSC proposed responses in case of aggression in Europe and the Middle East, and it also had a prescription Chinese aggression. The PRC was capable of attacking a number of places in East Asia, so the NSC delineated responses to potential attacks on Indochina, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even Korea:

In the event of the overt use of organized Chinese Communist forces in Korea:

- (1) The United States should not permit itself to become engaged in a general war with Communist China.
- (2) As long as action by UN military forces now committed or planned for commitment in Korea offers a reasonable chance of successful resistance, such action should be continued and extended to include authority to take appropriate air and naval action outside

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<sup>32</sup> NSC 73, Office Administrative Secretary Correspondence Control Section Decimal File, July to December 1950, CD 092, Korea Folder 2-4, Box 180, RG 330, NA.



Korea against Communist China. The latter action should be continued pending a review of US military commitments in the light of conditions then existing to determine further US courses of action.<sup>33</sup>

The US would contain any further expansionist aggression “in Korea,” just as it would in Turkey, Greece, West Germany, or a number of other places along the Iron Curtain. In State Department conferences that August, a staffer summarized its meaning: “NSC 73 takes the position that if the Chinese Communist forces have entered the fighting we continue our operations as if we were still fighting North Koreans[.]”<sup>34</sup> As memos clarified, “in Korea” referred to South Korea. Post-June 25 containment policy still drew a defensive perimeter at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

But if the Chinese did enter the fighting in South Korea, US operations might be “extended to include authority to take appropriate air and naval action outside Korea against Communist China.” This followed the same containment guidelines that the US used when responding to North Korea’s invasion of South Korea; if China invaded south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the US would repel the Chinese aggression but would not authorize ground attacks against the aggressor. The NSC’s recommendations regarding China fit squarely into the containment mold both in theory and in recommendations.

A full meeting of the council on August 24, with Truman presiding, approved NSC 73. Containment policy would apply to Chinese aggression as much as it would to Bulgarian or East German expansionism. The US would fight to defend its perimeter, to halt expansion, and to maintain its security. The blanket of containment logic continued to cover

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 647.



South Korea against Chinese action, affirming that the American defensive perimeter along the Pacific cut straight through Korea at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Hardly any historians discuss NSC 73 except Rosemary Foot. She correctly sees the document as evidence that the administration considered bombing China, and she also concludes that the policy covered MacArthur's continued action after the Chinese first intervened. But she also sees no dissonance between NSC 73 and rollback. Here I disagree.

### **Three: The Plan for Rolling Back Soviet Influence in Korea**

On July 17, only weeks after the fighting in South Korea began, President Truman asked the NSC for recommendations on what to do if US troops succeeded in containing the North Korean attack. Truman was essentially asking whether the US should try to rollback communism by counterattacking north and unifying the two Koreas. The NSC delegated the task of providing answers to mid-level experts in the Far Eastern Affairs division of the State Department working under the direction of John Allison, director of the Northeast Asian office.<sup>35</sup> From the beginning of their discussions, Allison's group established an axiom in the logic of rollback policy: North Korea was not worth the price of a major war.

Writing on July 22, staffer George Butler recommended that the US not attempt to unify Korea unless it were to be unopposed. He made a simple cost-benefit analysis, saying the "risks of bringing on a major conflict" appeared "to outweigh the political advantages."<sup>36</sup> He warned that the Soviets had a strategic interest in the Korean peninsula, and that it was "extremely unlikely" they would let it go. Highlighting the difficulties and risks of pursuing rollback, Butler wanted the US to stay committed to "repelling aggression," that is,

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<sup>35</sup> Memorandum From Dean Rusk, Subject: Future US Policy with Respect to Korea, 7/22/50, 795 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>36</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 453.



containment. Unless the North Korea army “complete[ly] disintegrat[ed]” and the Kremlin and China made no move, the US could not expect to take North Korea.

Director Allison did not want to rule out crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and rolling back communism in Korea. He believed the risks of such a move were high, but he argued that Korea was strategically critical to the US, given its proximity to Japan. Moreover, he did not want to see the aggressor go unpunished: “The aggressor would be informed that all he had to fear from aggression was being compelled to start over again.”<sup>37</sup> If the US merely pushed North Korea’s army back across the border, it could strike again in the future. Allison argued that only a long-term solution like rollback could truly bring an end to Soviet-inspired aggression in Korea. Besides, he noted, it had been UN policy since 1947 to help bring about a united and independent Korea, and so far the General Assembly had been unable to follow through. Because of these reasons, he suggested that the risks of rollback might be worth the reward. So considering Butler’s cautionary paper, Allison and his colleagues agreed to wait-and-see:

[T]he need for additional information which depends upon political and military developments in the near future . . . make[s] it impossible to take decisions now regarding our future course of action in Korea.<sup>38</sup>

The wait-and-see strategy derived from the rollback axiom that seizing communist territory was not worth a major war. Staffers agreed that MacArthur’s forces could invade North Korea only if the Soviets or Chinese did not intervene. But since the Truman administration could not know what its opponents might do, it would need to postpone implementing rollback for as long as possible; the US would have to wait until its troops reached the North Korean border at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel before deciding to attack. Many

<sup>37</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 459.

<sup>38</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 473.



historians have interpreted the Allison-Butler discussion as a dispute between a fierce rollback proponent and a dissenter, in which Allison carried the day.<sup>39</sup> Allison did at first say Butler's ideas stank of appeasement, but the two men ultimately agreed. The Allison group's wait-and-see conclusion became central to rollback policy.

Dean Acheson later noted that "a difference of opinion developed, which . . . led to a wait-and-see attitude."<sup>40</sup> Wait-and-see's prominence in the policy draft actually surprised White House officials. NSC executive secretary Jimmy Lay responded that "the president had asked for policy recommendations on what we do when we reach the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel," and he could not see how "we could reply to the president merely stating that we have no policy recommendations at this time."<sup>41</sup> But if the US was not willing to fight a war for North Korea, what other approach could be taken?

The US predicated its wait-and-see policy on Soviet intentions. The Soviets could "select" to start a war between the US and China, and at the very least Soviet "foreknowledge and approval" would be required for Chinese action. In short, staffers in the Far Eastern Affairs office saw Chinese intentions as being completely yoked to Soviet intentions: "military intervention of this nature would broaden the potential field of conflict by committing the resources of another satellite to the Korean battle . . . [the USSR] could be counted upon to have weighed the risks and laid its plans accordingly."<sup>42</sup> The assumption China was a Soviet satellite, prepared to subordinate its own national security interests to Soviet strategic aims, had become embedded in US policy. Once US policymakers convinced themselves the Soviets would not intervene in Korea, they decided China would not

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<sup>39</sup> Beisner, *Dean Acheson: A Life in the Cold War*, 398; David Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, (Hyperion, 2007), 329; Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, (Princeton University Press, 1990), 710.

<sup>40</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, (New York: WW Norton & Company Inc, 1969), 451.

<sup>41</sup> Memorandum to Mr. Jessup, 8/24/50, 795 File, Box 4267, RG 59, NA.

<sup>42</sup> Rusk to Matthews, Memo Re: Effects of Overt Large-Scale Chinese Intervention, 8/29/50, 795B File, RG 59, NA.



intervene, either.<sup>43</sup> By the end of August, 1950, three main ideas underpinned the Allison-Butler rollback policy: Chinese or Soviet intervention, were it to happen at all, would occur before US troops reached the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel; absent intervention, the US could occupy North Korea; a final decision could not be made until the US reached the border.

On August 24 NSC assistant staffers met to consider how far into North Korea the US should advance, were it to advance at all. They agreed that moving UN forces close to the Manchurian or Soviet borders would provoke the USSR.<sup>44</sup> Nobody said that approaching the border of Manchuria might provoke the Chinese as well. Not wanting to agitate the Soviets, the "question was raised as to whether there might not be some intermediate line north of 38° but short of" the borders.<sup>45</sup> The idea that UN forces might have a stopping point inside North Korea caught on in subsequent rollback policy drafts.

In the last discussions of rollback policy before it received presidential approval, staffers discussed contingency plans in the event that the Soviets or Chinese did become involved relative to the parallel crossing. Intervention would clearly cause the US to abandon plans for invading North Korea. But even if the Soviets and Chinese sent troops to North Korea before the US could begin rollback, the NSC decided that its containment goals would still obtain. A State Department meeting with NSC rep Phil Jessup on August 25, the group decided that the original goal of repelling aggression and protecting South Korea would not be deterred by Soviet intervention:

It was agreed that we could not make a war issue with Russia out of [a potential] announced intention re-occupy North Korea, but that we should continue to destroy North Korean troops south of the 38<sup>th</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Foot, *Wrong War*, 82 ; Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War*, (Modern Library, 2010), 24.

<sup>44</sup> Emmerson to Rusk, 8/24/50, 795 File, Box 4267, RG 59, NA.

<sup>45</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 642.



parallel and demand assurances that they would be disarmed north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>46</sup>

Containment goals still stood, though if the Soviets came down into South Korea it would be a different matter altogether. That would probably mean global war was imminent, and then the US would need to begin full mobilization. But that was not at all expected, and general containment policy was otherwise undaunted. It would also extend to Chinese intervention, about which the group said NSC 73 would apply. Chinese movement into Korea would not obstruct the goal of repelling aggression from South Korea, though it would stop a US advance into North Korea. And if the Chinese deployed into South Korea, that aggression would be repelled too.

The final draft of rollback policy, named NSC 81, quoted NSC 73 regarding Chinese intervention. The US would continue fighting to contain expansionist aggression "south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel," and it would resist a Chinese attack on South Korea. The US would not move into North Korea if the Chinese or Soviets intervened, but according to the rollback policy it "should reoccupy Korea up to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel."<sup>47</sup> Rollback would be pursued based on Soviet and Chinese moves, but containment would be pursued no matter what.

### Implementing Rollback

President Truman signed NSC 81 on September 11, making clear among his staff that the US would attempt to unify Korea unless it faced serious resistance:

It would be expected that the UN Commander would receive authorization to conduct military operations, including amphibious and airborne landings or ground operations *in pursuance of a rollback* in Korea north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, for the purpose of destroying the North Korean forces, provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet

<sup>46</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 647.

<sup>47</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 716.



or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea. [Emphasis added.]

General MacArthur's forces would be allowed to enter North Korea for the purpose of rollback. The ultimate goal would be to capture the country and unify the peninsula. The Truman administration had decided it would take North Korea if it met no opposition, and at this point they began to wait-and-see.

On September 11, US forces were still trapped in South Korea, hundreds of miles from the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, and North Korea was winning the war. But four days later, Operation Chromite landed thousands of marines at Inchon in South Korea, only a few dozen miles from the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. They quickly recaptured the South Korean capital at Seoul. MacArthur's daring amphibious assault behind enemy lines completely reversed the momentum war. North Korean leader Kim Il-sung later wrote Stalin "As a result [of the attack] the units of the People's Army that are still fighting [south of Inchon] are torn into pieces . . . After taking over Seoul completely, the enemy is likely to launch a further offensive into North Korea."<sup>48</sup>

### **Chinese or Soviet Intervention Should Come Before the Parallel Is Reached**

With the Inchon landing the Americans began watching their opponents carefully. In a memo to Acheson a month earlier, George Kennan had suggested

when the tide of battle begins to change, *the Kremlin will not wait for us to reach the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel before taking action*. When we begin to have military successes, that will be the time to watch out. Anything may then happen—entry of Soviet forces, entry of Chinese Communist forces, new strike for UN settlement, or all three together.<sup>49</sup> [Emphasis added.]

<sup>48</sup>"Ciphered Telegram, DPRK leader Kim Il Sung to Stalin (via Shtykov), 9/29/50," *CWTHP*. [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=CEAA18EB-DF96-2BF7-5A17521C95FFB046&sort=Collection&item=Korean%20War](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=CEAA18EB-DF96-2BF7-5A17521C95FFB046&sort=Collection&item=Korean%20War) (accessed 3/18/11).

<sup>49</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. I, 363.



Kennan's opinion was widely accepted within the administration. Having assumed China was a Soviet satellite, the Americans waited to see how the Soviets would respond. US intelligence agencies knew that hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers had moved into Manchuria on the north side of the Sino-Korean border, but made little of it.<sup>50</sup>

When the Soviets failed to respond to the Inchon landings, State Department officer and former China Hand John P. Davies suggested on September 22 that the USSR might have given up on Korea. He speculated that after Inchon the Soviets must have realized North Korea would lose the war. The Kremlin, he argued, had two choices:

The first is that, if the Kremlin is determined to retain North Korea, its present course involves a deliberate acceptance of increasing risks of war with the United States. The second is that *the Kremlin is prepared to accept the loss of North Korea . . .*<sup>51</sup> [Emphasis added.]

The thrust of Davies' note was that the Soviets might sit still while the US pursued rollback, and Soviet behavior post-Inchon appeared to corroborate this view. After Inchon, diplomats from the USSR approached Americans at official functions, acting "uncharacteristically friendly and talking openly of the need for a peaceful resolution[.]"<sup>52</sup> The Soviets did not appear to be taking a hard stand in support of North Korea. Could the Chinese be far behind?

### Orders to MacArthur

On September 27, less than two weeks after Inchon, the Joint Chiefs of Staff cabled MacArthur that he could continue operations north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. His objective would be "the destruction of the North Korean armed forces," with the understanding that Korea

<sup>50</sup> Robert Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea*, (US Government Printing Office, 1983), 200 ; Cumings, *The Korean War*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> FRUS 1950, Vol. VII, 753-5.

<sup>52</sup> William Stueck, *The Korean War*, (Princeton University Press, 1995), 88.



would be unified if things went well. No movement north was to be made if the Chinese or Soviets moved into the country. In line with NSC 73, he was also told that if the Chinese sent troops south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, "you should continue the action as long as action by your forces offers a reasonable chance of successful resistance." As has already been established, this meant for MacArthur to continue fighting to retake South Korea up to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, his original containment objective. MacArthur was told that "as a matter of policy, no non-Korean ground forces will be used in the northeast provinces bordering the Soviet Union or in the area along the Manchurian border." This directive reflected the NSC's discussions in August, including its emphasis on not provoking the Soviets. Non-Korean troops would not be allowed to go into the northeast provinces near the USSR, but with respect to China this injunction only mentioned the vague "area" along its border.<sup>53</sup> Other historians have called these orders "ambiguous"<sup>54</sup> and their expectations "naïve,"<sup>55</sup> but a better descriptor is *flexible*. The Truman administration wanted to take North Korea if the price was right, and its orders to MacArthur reflected this ambition.

Things moved quickly in the days following September 27. After ghostwriting a British resolution to move north, on October 7 the Americans mustered a 47-5 vote in the UN General Assembly approving the march across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The UN goal, the resolution read, was a "unified, independent and democratic Government in the sovereign State of Korea[.]"<sup>56</sup>

Even before the UN approved this resolution, MacArthur's Korean forces began crossing the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. On September 29, Secretary of Defense George Marshall sent an

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<sup>53</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 781.

<sup>54</sup> Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 331.

<sup>55</sup> Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 454.

<sup>56</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 904.



addendum to MacArthur's previous orders. In an "eyes only" cable, Marshall said: "We want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel."<sup>57</sup> Still, MacArthur awaited passage of the UN resolution before taking American troops north.

### Last Moments

US planners were certain China would not join the war because they were certain China was a Soviet satellite. Bruce Cumings summarizes the logic: "Moscow wouldn't intervene because it would fear global war; Beijing wouldn't either, because Moscow dictated to its leaders."<sup>58</sup> On the question of Chinese intentions, the US was totally blind. The United States maintained diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union throughout the war. The American ambassador in Moscow Alan Kirk consistently argued on the basis of his information that the Soviets would not intervene, and he turned out to be right. But with China, the US had ended all diplomatic contact before the Korean War began. Desk-bound in Washington, McConaughy and Clubb could no longer chase leads in Shanghai and Beijing. Lacking contacts within Mainland China, the US could only turn to operatives like James K. Wilkinson, the Consul General in Hong Kong. Wilkinson offered his assessment to Acheson: "It seems most unlikely USSR could afford to risk political dangers involved in pushing its most important satellite into devastating war unless fully prepared to back it with Red Army, particularly in view of Sino-Soviet treaty."<sup>59</sup> But the US already believed the Soviets had no intention of using the Red Army. Nobody asked whether China might intervene defensively, reacting to an American army approaching its border.

So when K.M. Panikkar, the Indian ambassador in Beijing, began suggesting the Chinese might intervene, the US wrote off his warnings. Intervention at this point would

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<sup>57</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 826.

<sup>58</sup> Cumings, *The Korean War*, 24.

<sup>59</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 913.



stand in the face of all the administration's assumptions. Some of these first reports came in late September, yet Ambassador Kirk, from Moscow, suggested the Chinese were "hoping to bluff UN on 38<sup>th</sup> parallel issue." Days later, Panikkar reported that Zhou Enlai had told him China would intervene if US troops crossed the parallel.<sup>60</sup> The news, however, did not alarm the Americans. Because they assumed the Chinese would intervene, if they intervened at all, before the parallel was reached, they wrote off remarks like Zhou Enlai's as either bluff or propaganda.<sup>61</sup> They could not be credited as real.

#### Four: China's Military Leaders and Their Defensive Considerations

But China did intervene in the war. Its decision to do so, however, was a defensive response to US encroachment on the Sino-Korean border, and it came roughly two weeks after MacArthur's troops crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The intervention was undertaken reluctantly and despite the misgivings of China's military leadership, who had good reason to be concerned. They doubted "whether or not we should fight . . . [or] can fight."<sup>62</sup> China had no air force, and its army suffered from shortages of essential equipment like rifles and vehicles. Chinese soldiers also feared the US nuclear arsenal. Many Chinese commanders wanted to address China's pressing domestic needs, and they did not look favorably on the prospect of fighting American troops in Korea.<sup>63</sup>

Chinese soldiers wanted to know "whether or not we can fight" in Korea, and their questions betrayed their low morale. General Du Ping recalls that 10 percent of PLA soldiers openly complained that "to resist America and aid Korea is like poking our nose into other

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<sup>60</sup> KM Panikkar, *In Two Chinas*, (George Allen & Unwin, 1955), 110.

<sup>61</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, (Doubleday, 1956), 362.

<sup>62</sup> Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millet, and Bin Yu, trans. and eds., *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>63</sup> Shuguang Zhang and Jian Chen, eds., *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy and the Cold War in Asia*, (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1996), 173.



people's business" or "to draw fire against ourselves."<sup>64</sup> These men, says Ping, were "scared of American troops and nuclear weapons" having heard rumors that a single American shell "could kill an entire company."<sup>65</sup> In addition to foot soldiers, division commanders echoed their soldiers' concerns about poking their noses into other people's business. China, they believed, needed to look inward. The senior PLA commander Peng Dehuai expressed the views of his colleagues:

One opinion argues that we should not dispatch our troops . . . The reasons for this argument are as follows: (a) our own war wounds are yet to be healed; (b) the land reform has yet to be completed; (c) we have not eliminated all domestic bandits and [the GMD's] special agents; (d) the military preparations and training have not been completed; and (e) some soldiers and civilians are afraid of war.<sup>66</sup>

Lin Biao, commander of one of the PLA's best armies and the head of the regional government in Central-South China, opposed intervention and rejected Mao's request that he command a possible intervention. In his memoirs Chinese Field Marshal Nie Rongzhen recalled that "Lin was so fearful of this task that he gave the excuse of illness and obstinately refused to go to Korea."<sup>67</sup> But Lin was not the only reluctant warrior. General officers throughout the army openly questioned the idea of going to war.<sup>68</sup>

Stalin's lieutenants had been putting out feelers on the prospect of Chinese intervention since summer. The strategic catastrophe of the Inchon landings gave urgency to the prospect, and on October 1 Stalin put the question directly to Mao Zedong: "I think that if in the current situation you consider it possible to send troops to assist the Koreans, then

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 67.

<sup>66</sup> Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, 173. GMD here means KMT. Guomindang is the pinyin transliteration, whereas Kuomintang comes from the Wade-Giles system.

<sup>67</sup> Xiaobing et al., *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, 42.

<sup>68</sup> Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, 173.



you should move at least five-six divisions toward the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel . . .”<sup>69</sup> Given the PLA’s state of unpreparedness, the PRC was in no position to intervene in Korea. On October 2, 1950, Mao declined Stalin’s invitation:

In the first place, it is very difficult to resolve the Korean question with a few divisions (our troops are extremely poorly equipped, there is no confidence in the success of military operations against American troops), the enemy can force us to retreat . . . Many comrades in the [Central Committee of the Communist Party of China] judge that it is necessary to show caution here.

Of course, not to send out troops to render assistance is very bad for the Korean comrades, who are presently in such difficulty, and we ourselves feel this keenly; but if we advance several divisions and the enemy forces us to retreat; and this moreover provokes an open conflict between the USA and China, then our entire plan for peaceful construction will be completely ruined, and many people in the country will be dissatisfied (the wounds inflicted on the people by the war have not yet healed, we need peace).<sup>70</sup>

Mao’s message is a round-up of army concerns. They are poorly equipped, lacking an air force, rifles, and vehicles. Their intervention might provoke a bigger war. It also defers to the views of army commanders who wanted to give precedence to domestic concerns. Mao plainly admits that he is not the only person at the helm; *many comrades* in the CCP were not on board.

Historians like Chen Jian and Jung Chang have suggested that perhaps this note was Mao’s way of manipulating Stalin to get more Soviet military support for China’s coming intervention, but that cannot be the case.<sup>71</sup> Mao did not suggest more support would do the trick, and instead downplayed the loss of Korea, even saying it was only “temporarily

<sup>69</sup> “Ciphred telegram, Filippoc [Stalin] to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, October 1, 1950.” *CWTHP*. [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=DCC184DB-F902-7A35-3BC63F7BCA211865&sort=Collection&item=Korean%20War](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=DCC184DB-F902-7A35-3BC63F7BCA211865&sort=Collection&item=Korean%20War) (accessed 2/5/11).

<sup>70</sup> “Ciphred telegram from Roshchin in Beijing to Filippov [Stalin], October 3, 1950, conveying October 2 1950 message from Mao to Stalin.” *CWTHP*.

[http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=DCCCE073-0565-053B-7E5BAB8C7F0345F2&sort=Collection&item=Korean%20War](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=DCCCE073-0565-053B-7E5BAB8C7F0345F2&sort=Collection&item=Korean%20War) (accessed 1/29/11).

<sup>71</sup> Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 363.



suffering defeat.” Stalin took Mao’s rejection seriously too, with the Soviet foreign minister ordering a full evacuation of Soviet personnel from North Korea after learning that China would not intervene; Stalin did not think Mao was bluffing. In addition to these points, Mao’s October 2 dispatch was also accurate. It precisely summarized the concerns of his colleagues, and it cannot be written off as mere deception.

Three weeks after Mao’s October 2 note to Stalin, however, China began sending troops into Korea. One month after that, it aggressively engaged US forces. Why did the Chinese change their minds?

### **Moving Toward Defensive Intervention**

Once US troops crossed the 38th parallel on October 7, Chinese leaders began to take a different approach toward intervention. Between October 8 and October 19, Chinese officials repeatedly issued and canceled orders sending troops into North Korea. China’s decision was thus made in a piecemeal fashion, with objections from military leaders continuing all the while. As US troops moved north, Central Committee officials began to lean towards war. After weeks of vacillation, the last intervention order came on October 19. Chinese troops began small-scale crossings of the Yalu River into North Korea that day, but as recently as the 10<sup>th</sup>, commanders had pressed for answers on the question of air cover. By the 16<sup>th</sup>, resistance to intervention had grown so much that Peng Dehuai had to call an assembly of divisional generals to convince them of the need to fight. Even on the 17<sup>th</sup>, these same generals were writing to commanders in Beijing telling them they should not fight.<sup>72</sup> Responding to these questions, committee leaders—who were also less than certain about intervention—responded that China had no choice. As Lieutenant General Du Ping

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<sup>72</sup> Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, 178.



later wrote, morale among the troops was at rock bottom as they ventured into Korea.

### Five: Crossing the Parallel and Supposing the War Is Over

US experts had assumed that Chinese or Soviet intervention, were it to take place, would occur before American forces crossed the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. When none did, even after the Americans had advanced beyond it, President Truman concluded the war was won and rollback had succeeded. The administration began wonder: were the factories, roads and railroads intact? What should be done with North Korean war criminals? How should the UN host new elections? These were the questions of occupation, the kind asked after a war is won. MacArthur quickly began to say "the war is over" and that combat operations would be finished by the end of the month. In light of these assumptions, Truman changed MacArthur's standing orders. On October 9, he extended the US containment policy to cover all of North Korea, shifting the defensive perimeter north to Sino-Soviet-Korean border. NSC 73, which had covered only areas south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, would now apply to the entire Korean peninsula. Expansionist aggression would no longer be tolerated in North Korea.

In the days after October 7, MacArthur reported that the North Korean People's Army could at best offer "a semblance of organization." On the east coast, UN troops advanced north at a rate of 15 miles per day, and "their attacks were so rapid and relentless that the enemy was never able to organize coordinated resistance."<sup>73</sup> Wonsan, a major port city roughly 100 miles north of 38° latitude, was quickly captured. MacArthur boasted that his biggest problem was how to capitalize on all the strategic opportunities presented by "the spectacular collapse of the Communist invasion force in South Korea." According to the

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<sup>73</sup> Report of the United Nations Command Operations in Korea, undated, 795B File, Box 4307, RG 59, NA.



general, the Inchon landing had cut off at least half the North Korean army in the southern end of South Korea. From the Soviets and Chinese nothing was heard. The US had crossed the parallel and was rolling up the Soviets' North Korean satellite like a carpet. The *New York Times* summarized the Truman administration attitude with remarkable accuracy two days after the American invasion of North Korea began:

Today General MacArthur has armed strength at his command to complete the job unless the Chinese or Russian armies intervene. At the present stage this is considered unlikely. The failure of the two Powers to move while opposition was weak, and the Soviet attitude during the recent debate, when charges of 'illegality' against the UN and of 'aggression' against the United States were not accompanied by even a threat of action, suggests that the Kremlin is writing off the Korean business as a miscalculation.

. . . *Supposing the military struggle is nearly won*, there looms ahead the more complex and difficult task . . . to step into the void and create order. [Emphasis added.]

Like MacArthur, the *Times* supposed the fighting was over. Administration documents from the days following the crossing show a nearly total preoccupation with the domestic management of a new Korean state. John Muccio, US ambassador to Korea, contacted Washington on October 8 about the use of South Korean currency in the areas north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>74</sup> On October 11 Acheson asked Muccio how soon might elections be held. The State Department began crafting a new directive to MacArthur about how the occupation should be conducted so quickly that Phil Jessup barely had time to comment on it.<sup>75</sup> Even the logistical effort to support war operations began to wrap up. Before October 10, Air Force Acting Executive Secretary KR Kreps wrote Acheson that the "favorable military situation now developing in Korea has reduced the demand for cargo shipping . . . in direct support of the military effort. Consequently, there is no immediate need for the

<sup>74</sup> Muccio to Acheson, 10/10/50, 795 File, Box 4268, RG 59, NA.

<sup>75</sup> Jessup to Allison, undated but probably before 10/9/50, 795 File, Box 4268, RG 59, NA.



Unified Command to solicit this type of aid from other nations.”<sup>76</sup> The war was concluding, and there was no need for more freighters loaded with war material. Within days, the US command began planning to tell UN members that they no longer needed to send combat troops either.

### October 9, 1950: From Rollback to Containment

Two days after US troops crossed the parallel, Truman took a decisive step in his plans to unify the two Koreas. The Truman administration had been hastily writing orders to MacArthur for how the occupation should be run, and on October 9 it transmitted a working policy paper for his use in conducting the occupation. About North Korea, its orders to MacArthur were direct and unambiguous:

You will dissolve the Democratic Peoples [sic] Republic of Korea, its supporting communist party and all other subversive and totalitarian groups inimical to the occupation.<sup>77</sup>

North Korea would cease to exist. A UN military administrative zone would be established in its place, and General MacArthur would be the “Military Governor of that part of Korea which lies North of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.” MacArthur announced his intentions the same day he received these orders:

. . . I call upon all North Koreans to cooperate fully with the United Nations in establishing a unified, independent and democratic government of Korea, assured that they will be treated justly and that the United Nations will act to relieve and rehabilitate all parts of a unified Korea. Unless immediate response is made by you . . . I shall at once proceed to take such military actions as may be necessary to enfor[c]e the decrees of the United Nations.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Kreps to Acheson, 6/10/50, 795B.5 File, RG 59, NA.

<sup>77</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 856.

<sup>78</sup> Text of General MacArthur’s Message of 9 October 1950, 795B File, RG 59, NA.



John Foster Dulles had said the US could not commit itself publicly to unifying Korea as long as the Chinese or Soviets stood in the way.<sup>79</sup> In light of MacArthur's announcement, the US became publicly committed to unification. On the same eventful day of October 9, President Truman sent MacArthur a directive that extended containment policy to "anywhere in Korea:"

Hereafter in the event of the open or covert employment anywhere in Korea of major Chinese Communist units, without prior announcement, you should continue the action as long as, in your judgment, action by forces now under your control offers a reasonable chance of success. In any case you will obtain authorization from Washington prior to taking any military action against objectives in Chinese territory.<sup>80</sup>

This order derived from NSC 73, the post-Korea containment assessment Truman had ordered in June. This was a significant departure from the rollback policy, which had called for a halt in operations should China intervene in North Korea. NSC 73 had originally applied only south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, where the US was already fighting for containment. After October 9, however, the defensive perimeter stretched to the Sino-Soviet-Korean borders. By extending US containment policy north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, the new interpretation of NSC 73 drastically altered MacArthur's rules of engagement.

Historians have read the October 9 order to mean that Washington considered attacks on China,<sup>81</sup> but wanted to keep MacArthur from acting on his own.<sup>82</sup> This is to misunderstand the rollback policy, the timing of the order, and NSC 73, from which the directive was drawn. MacArthur's rollback orders had explicitly enjoined him from fighting

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<sup>79</sup> FRUS, 1950, Vol. VII, 751.

<sup>80</sup> Directive to MacArthur Signed by Harry Truman, 10/8/50, Office Administrative Secretary Correspondence Control Section Decimal File, July to December 1950, CD 092, Korea Folder 2-4, Box 180, RG 330, NA.

<sup>81</sup> Foot, *Wrong War*, 84

<sup>82</sup> Foot, *Wrong War*, 84 ; Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur's War*, (Free Press, 2000), 180 ; Stueck, *The Korean War*, 106 ; Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, 404 ; Pogue, *George C. Marshall*, 457-8.



the Chinese in North Korea. Moreover, the order came alongside a massive shift in the thinking of the administration, which had just that day begun to act as if they had successfully captured North Korea. And if one understands NSC 73, which was explicitly cited in the papers sent to the president to authorize the October 9 order, one would see that the directive was designed for the purpose of containing expansionist aggression.

Except for Rosemary Foot, historians scarcely mention NSC 73, let alone its decisive role in shaping Truman administration policy. The October 9 addendum is at best mentioned in passing. But by October 9, North Korea was under MacArthur's de facto and de jure control. After that date Chinese intervention "anywhere in Korea," North or South, would not be tolerated. Truman had extended the containment shield to the entire peninsula. As MacArthur put it to his subordinates: "gentlemen, the war is over. The Chinese are not coming into this war."<sup>83</sup>

This statement is more than just evidence of MacArthur's overconfidence. Considering the actions of Truman and his advisers, it seems they held this view as well; it seems MacArthur was not the only one who thought the war was done. Rollback appeared to have succeeded, and it was leading to the dissolution of North Korea. Victory was only a millimeter out of reach while MacArthur finished rolling up the last of the stubborn North Korean resistance. Looking ahead to the reconstruction of Korea, Truman arranged to meet MacArthur on an island in the Pacific. The agenda was rehabilitation and East Asian policy. Possible intervention would hardly be discussed.

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<sup>83</sup> Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 388. Halberstam uses this quote to show the arrogance and overconfidence of MacArthur, as opposed to the reasonable fears held by others that China could intervene.



## The Wake Island Conference: A Window Into October 9

The Wake Island Conference between President Truman and General MacArthur is best remembered for Truman's question to MacArthur about the likelihood of Chinese intervention, to which the general responded there was "very little" chance. MacArthur has often been portrayed as the general who gave bad advice to the president. Others have insisted Truman and his advisers shared MacArthur's optimism. But the real value of the October 15 meeting lies in its capacity to shed light on the decisions of October 9.

Truman went to Wake Island for the purpose of discerning the road ahead in Korea, Japan, and East Asia generally. He and his staff wanted to know MacArthur's opinion on new elections, paying for rehabilitation, and signing a long-awaited Japanese Peace Treaty. The many annotations of "laughter" in the transcript suggest the mood of the meeting was upbeat, and the conversation ranged widely over many East and South Asian issues.

Eventually conversation turned to the usefulness of increasing the number of non-American forces in Korea. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Omar Bradley asked "with regard to the offers of additional troops from the United Nations, are not some of them more trouble than they are worth militarily . . . as General MacArthur expects to have concluded military operations by November[?]"<sup>84</sup> MacArthur agreed with Bradley that they would be "useless from the military point of view." The war was over. The Truman administration had turned its attention to rebuilding the country it had just occupied.

Truman asked only one question about outside threats: "What are the chances for Chinese or Soviet interference?" Might China interfere with the US rehabilitation of Korea? MacArthur's unequivocal reply comported perfectly with NSC 73: "Very little . . . We are no

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<sup>84</sup> "Substance of Statements Made at Wake Island Conference, October 15, 1950," *HST*, [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/koreanwar/documents/index.php?pagenumber=13&documentdate=1950-10-15&documentid=ki-9-4](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/koreanwar/documents/index.php?pagenumber=13&documentdate=1950-10-15&documentid=ki-9-4) (accessed 3/4/11).



longer fearful of their intervention . . . They have no Air Force. Now that we have bases for our Air Force in Korea, if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter." MacArthur appears to have meant that Chinese intervention was not to be worried about because the US would merely fight and win. The US was occupying, rebuilding, and unifying the two Koreas, and Chinese expansionist aggression would not stop them.

Truman flew home to give a speech at the San Francisco Opera House on October 17. He looked to the future, scarcely noting any fighting was still underway in Korea, and he did not even mention China. US soldiers had "now turned back the tide of aggression" and his administration would maintain its vigilance.

### Toward New War

As Truman spoke, Chinese decision makers were finishing their plans to intervene in Korea. Two weeks earlier they had decided not to fight, but the approach of US troops changed the argument. The Americans had now announced the entire Korean peninsula would be occupied, and their armies were near. On October 16, General Peng Dehuai spoke to an assembly of junior generals who still had doubts about fighting. He told them that "if the US imperialists are allowed to occupy *the whole of Korea*, we will be put under direct threat."<sup>85</sup> As Field Marshal Nie later remarked: "[T]he Americans had already brought the war to our borders. What could we do without fighting back?"<sup>86</sup> By October 19, Chinese troops began to mobilize.

Their orders, however, were defensive. Mao explained the strategy in a telegram to Zhou: "During the next six months, our troops will not initiate an attack on Pyongyang or

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<sup>85</sup> Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, 174. Emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> Xiaobing, *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, 41.



Wonsan if the enemy remains in those two places and does not take the offensive.”<sup>87</sup> Chinese troops would go to North Korea, but they only would wait in the northern mountains to see whether US troops ventured nearer. Such a defensive intervention might have stopped an American advance under the rollback policy, but Korea north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel was now regarded as UN territory, and according to NSC 73 the movement of Chinese troops into it would be an act of aggression.

After the Wake Island conference, MacArthur ordered his troops to advance throughout North Korea, leading many historians to charge that he violated his September orders not to send Americans too far north,<sup>88</sup> or at least “stretched” them.<sup>89</sup> Yet within the context of the decisions made on October 9, which reflected the Truman administration’s conviction that the war was all but over and the time to begin rebuilding North Korea was at hand, MacArthur’s orders seem unexceptionable. The general would later respond to critics in part by saying his advance was covered by the Wake Island conference, which seems to be a sound retort. Given the circumstances, MacArthur’s actions appear congruent with what Truman wanted.

On October 25, UN troops made their first contacts with the Chinese in the North Korean mountains. The engagements broke off after a few days but then were renewed with greater intensity. MacArthur was undaunted by the encounter. In line with his directives from NSC 73, the general fought hard against Chinese troops in Korea. He did not disengage, instead continuing northward in November. To everyone’s surprise, including the

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<sup>87</sup> Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, 171.

<sup>88</sup> Lee, *The Korean War*, 50.

<sup>89</sup> Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 462 ; Stueck, *The Korean War*, 107 ; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 332 ; Weintraub, *MacArthur’s War*, 201 ; Beisner, *Dean Acheson*, 406.



Chinese, MacArthur's forces subsequently lost major battles with the Chinese. Retreating in the face of China's resistance, the UN armies had before long fled south of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

Historian William Stueck suggests that "[h]ad UN forces halted in the area of Pyongyang and Wonsan, a major clash with the Chinese could have been avoided for several months."<sup>90</sup> In that time, he says, diplomacy might have prevented a Sino-American war. Yet in light of NSC 73 and the October 9 orders, this seems unlikely. Containment policy prescribed MacArthur's rules of engagement. The presence of Chinese units "anywhere in Korea" was enough to justify a counterattack that might even have included air strikes against China itself.

## Six: In Conclusion

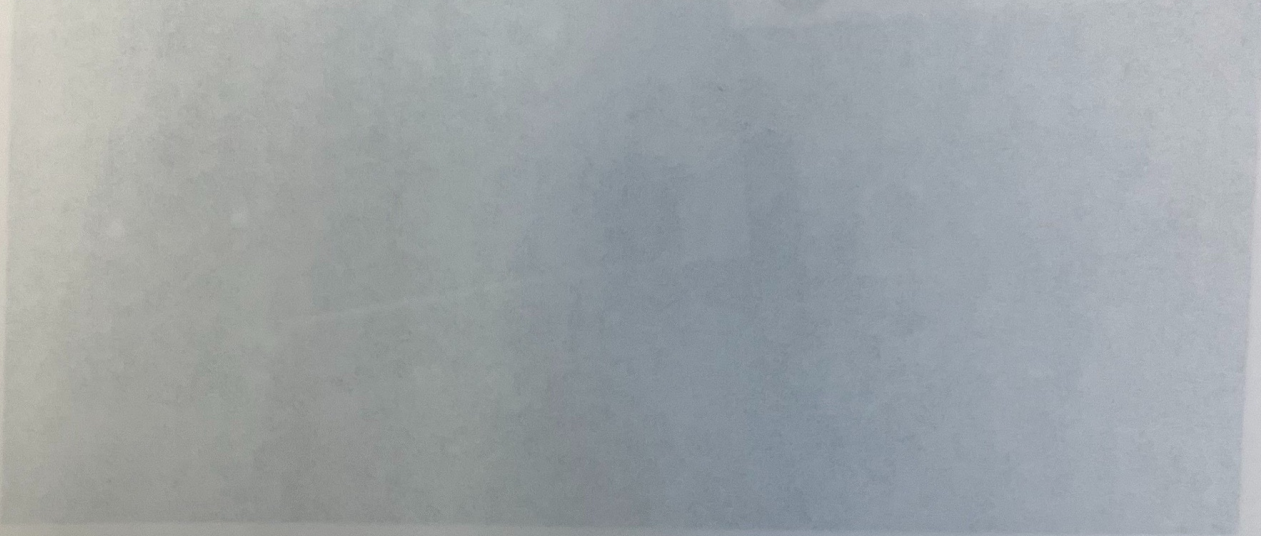
The rollback policy in Korea was a failure. Its outcome stemmed from the Truman administration's conviction that the US had won the war, taken North Korea, and could extend its defensive containment policy to cover the entire peninsula. Rollback policy rested on the flawed assumption that China was a Soviet satellite that would do as the Kremlin asked. Imagining the PRC in a Cold War context, in which the Soviet Union was bent on world domination, President Truman and his advisers failed to consider China as a state with interests of its own. Once the Truman administration decided it was safe to cross the parallel, they concluded there was almost no chance of Chinese intervention and stretched the containment blanket to cover all of Korea. This was a catastrophic miscalculation, for which the civilian leaders are responsible. Finding Chinese forces in Korea, MacArthur followed presidential directives and engaged his opponents. The United States tried to rollback communism in North Korea, but it was instead rolled back to South Korea by the

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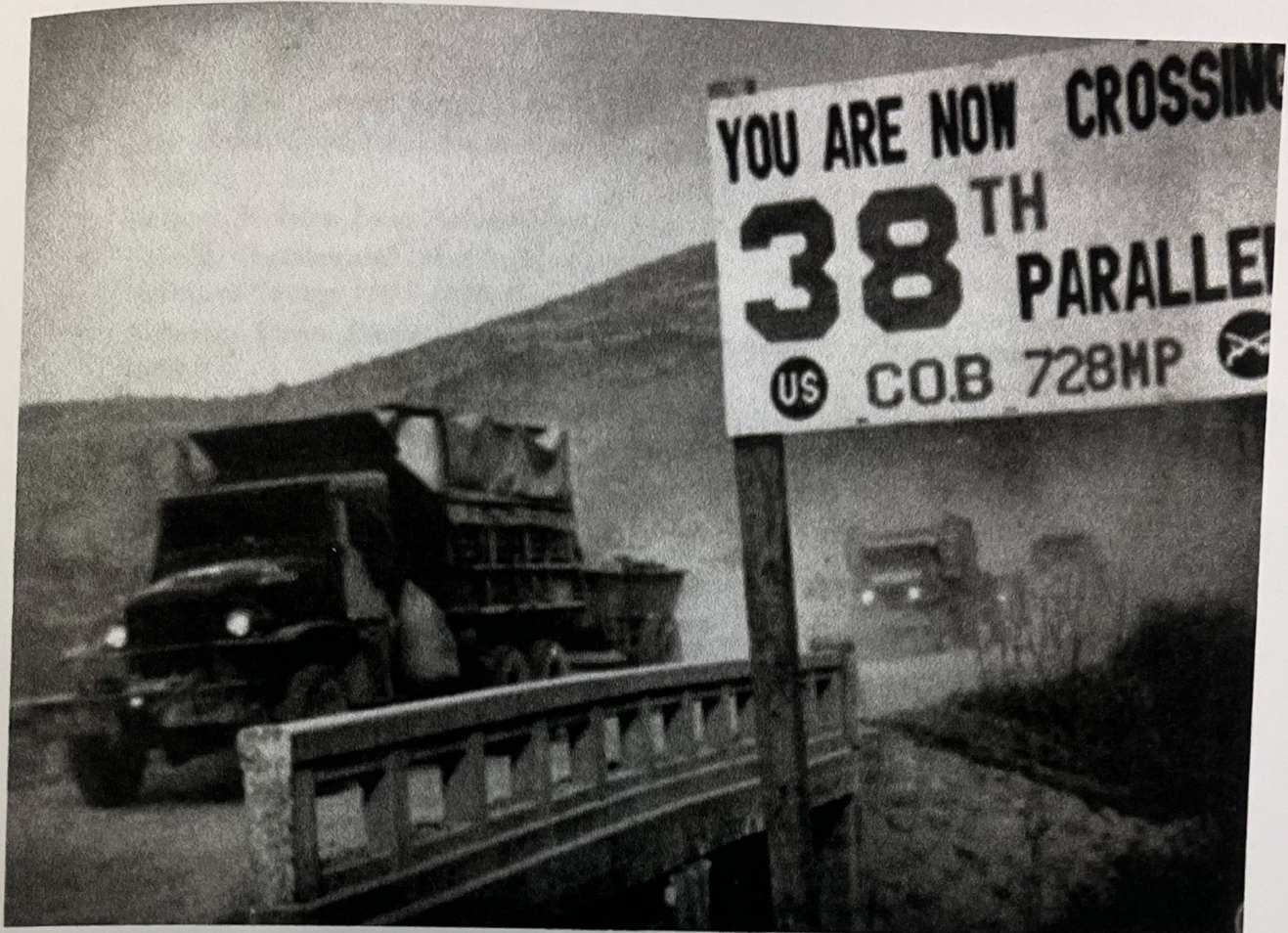
<sup>90</sup> Stueck, *The Korean War*, 120.



Chinese. The war continued until July 1953, when an armistice brought the hostilities to a close. It ended as a stalemate, with both sides holding almost the same turf they had before the war. The peninsula today remains divided near the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, where the US drew its containment perimeter in 1950. Containment policy and its defensive boundaries have since ended along with the Cold War. But at least in Korea, a scar remains where the US once held the line.







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