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"(Mis)interpreting Threats: A Case Study of the Korean War"

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During the fall of 1950, many American national security officials concluded that the Chinese Communists would refrain from undertaking full-scale intervention in the Korean War. Contrary to most secondary accounts, however, officials who doubted that Communist China would intervene nonetheless drew increasingly worrisome signs from incoming verbal threats and intelligence signals. A small minority of officials in the State Department expressed considerable concern over the dangers of having United Nations forces cross into North Korea and approach the Yalu River. This growing concern and the minority of opposing voices, however, did not override the prevailing judgment—held by hawkish members of the State Department and the CIA *as a whole—that China would more likely increase covert involvement in the Korean War, but would not undertake full-scale military intervention. Theories of biased assimilation and risk-taking practices have divergent success in predicting American reactions to the threat. Only further archival research can shed light on how this case of American strategic surprise comports with these theories.*

American assessments of the prospect of Communist China's intervention in the Korean War aptly illustrate the interaction between incoming information and cognitive assumptions. Literature on the Korean War has long established that American national security officials drafted numerous intelligence reports and received successive verbal warnings suggesting Communist China might intervene in the war. During the summer and fall of 1950, American national security officials weighed the prospect of Chinese military intervention in Korea as United Nations forces approached, and then drove past,

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the 38th Parallel. Although they received increasingly ominous signals, many American officials either called the threat of intervention an outright bluff or doubted that it would materialize in overt military action. Many of them retained their initial conclusions about the threat of intervention until China's fateful entry became apparent, despite the avowed danger of seeking to unify Korea by military force. Even following the intervention, some American officials chose to maintain the entrenched assumptions which had underpinned their erroneous conclusions since the beginning of the Korean War.

This paradoxical response to considerable amounts of disconfirming information has motivated numerous diplomatic historians and political scientists to investigate why American officials in the national security bureaucracy called Chinese Communist threats a bluff and why the Truman administration undertook a policy that invited an unwanted war with China. Much of the scholarship seeks to explain, among other things, how and why intelligence signals and verbal warnings failed to definitively shape American policy away from militarily unifying the Korean Peninsula, in light of the threat of Chinese intervention. Yet, the main paradox motivating the existing scholarship incorporates smaller research questions whose explanations help reveal particular elements of American reactions to the threat often underemphasized in the literature.

Particular questions remain about the extent to which select American officials assessed the threat of Chinese intervention with greater caution and interpretative flexibility than their more doubtful colleagues. Did any identifiable cleavages emerge separating the prevailing conclusion from the assessments of a more concerned minority; did these cleavages emerge between national security agencies, within the agencies, or some combination of the two? A related question concerns the extent to which American national security officials, in general, became more receptive to incoming signals as the time for necessary analysis rapidly approached. How much did American reactions to the threat gradually change as more information became available between early September and mid-October 1950? To what extent did the predominant focus of concern and attention shift from one possible communist intervention to another distinct possibility?

To explore these questions, this article examines the responses of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as a whole and several American national security officials to incoming information about the threat of Chinese intervention. It shows that American reactions to the prospect of Chinese intervention did not remain stagnant from September through mid-October 1950. The rising volume and directness of the warning signs, particularly verbal threats from Peking, gradually elicited greater concern among some senior policy makers, including President Harry Truman, evidencing their receptiveness to the danger of proceeding with formulated U.S. policy. Contrary to some accounts, American officials from both the civilian and military branches became increasingly worried about the dangers which their policy of unifying

Korea by force invited when they saw the virulent reactions it induced in the Chinese leadership. As Moscow demonstrated restraint but warnings from China became more foreboding, many U.S. officials shifted from concentrating on likely Soviet political and military maneuvers toward focusing more on Chinese Communist reactions. These interrelated reactions demonstrated a measure of collective receptiveness to incoming information, even though it proved insufficient to substantially alter American policy in Korea.

Neither did American assessments of the threat take a monolithic semblance amid the rising concern and as the collective focus shifted. As the most cautious among American officials, a small group of State Department analysts and diplomats took Chinese threats as a foreboding augur of eventual military intervention. This group came closest among the range of national security officials to recognizing the general perspective of the Chinese leadership. Many American officials, however—from the CIA and General Douglas MacArthur to senior members of the Truman administration and the State Department—shared generally similar doubts about the threat from Communist China. Their orienting assumptions supported the initial expectation that China would refrain from entering the war in full force, even as contrary indications became more direct and numerous. Members of both the civilian and military branches, therefore, expressed heterogeneous responses that evolved into divergent strands in light of the information about Chinese intentions.

Both the disparate reactions to incoming information and the prevailing conclusion that China would not enter the Korean War suggest a reconfigured version of the question that motivates much of the existing literature. Addressing the reconfigured question, this paper demonstrates that hawkish members of the State Department and the CIA as a whole decided to reject the widely known warning signs as insufficient reasons to conclude that Peking[1] would intervene, even as they recognized an emerging threat in the prospect of Chinese intervention. Senior administration officials, including President Truman and Secretary of State Dean Acheson, failed to view America's policy in Korea and the Far East through the perspective of their counterparts in Peking; and assumptions held by General MacArthur, CIA analysts, and select U.S. diplomats about China's military-strategic rationale structured their interpretation of both intelligence signals and explicit verbal warnings. In the end, fundamental assumptions about Chinese decision making inhibited the CIA and many of the American officials examined here from predicting the intervention.

This paper continues by presenting arguments that appear in the relevant literature and distinguishes itself from those arguments. The second section summarizes much of the information that U.S. national security officials

[1] American officials commonly used this term to refer to the Chinese Communist leadership in the documents referenced in this study. The same meaning applies here.

received from 1 September through mid-October (when Chinese troops crossed the Yalu) on the possibility that China would enter the Korean War. It reviews archival records almost exclusively to avoid the pitfalls of relying on second-hand accounts, in emphasizing both variability and gradual changes in the conclusions of select American officials and the CIA regarding the threat from Communist China. As the analytic portion, the third section explains why many American officials discussed here concluded that China would not intervene, even as they began to appreciate the danger of proceeding with established policy toward Korea. It distinguishes between and among the assessments of military officers (including General MacArthur), select State Department diplomats abroad and analysts in Washington, the CIA as a whole, and senior members of the Truman administration to identify differences among the various evolving assessments of Chinese intentions. The final section summarizes the empirical findings and briefly discusses how they comport with theoretical explanations of risk-taking practices and cognitive assimilation.

EVALUATING THE LITERATURE

The literature on American policy in the Korean War includes a variety of explanations for the Truman administration's failure to predict China's intervention. Nearly all scholars have agreed that this failure was not a product of inadequate intelligence, but instead was a direct consequence of how American officials interpreted Chinese statements and actions.[2] One segment of the literature explains America's confrontation with China as a dual failure in deterrence. It commonly argues that senior U.S. officials failed to recognize Peking's warnings partly because they did not share the Chinese "frame of reference" on American actions in Korea.[3] American officials also assumed that Peking performed the same cost-benefit analysis as they did in Washington before deciding whether to intervene. In short, American officials failed to understand Peking's perspective on U.S. actions in Korea—just as the Chinese Communist leadership failed to understand the prevailing American perspective.[4] This article develops these arguments further with archival information and makes an additional point about the prevailing American

[2] Allen Whiting and Harvey de Weerd first presented this argument. See Allen Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1960); and Harvey de Weerd, "Strategic Surprise and the Korean War," *Orbis* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1962): 435–52.

[3] See, in particular, Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 183–235. Walter Zelman provides a similar explanation in Walter Zelman, *Chinese Intervention in the Korean War: A Bilateral Failure of Deterrence*, Security Studies Paper No. 11, (Los Angeles: University of California-Los Angeles, 1967).

[4] Richard Ned Lebow, "Conclusions," in Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, Janice Gross Stein, eds., *Psychology and Deterrence* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 203–32.

image of Communist China, but also draws distinctions among American opinions to illuminate the limits of the deterrence failure explanation.

Another common explanation for the failure to predict China's entry into the war is based on the Truman administration's decision to cross the 38th Parallel to unify the Korean peninsula under a single government. According to this argument, leading officials in the administration believed America's international prestige was at stake in the Korean War.[5] By October, the administration had committed itself to establishing lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula, which American civilian and military officials believed required the elimination of the North Korean regime. Overlooking ominous warnings became a necessary step in satisfying his political imperative; American officials became less receptive to the danger as the Truman administration became increasingly committed to unifying Korea under a single government.[6] Irving Janis also asserts that the Truman administration did not heed the warnings, as does Barton Bernstein, while Truman's small group of senior advisers gradually became unified on a policy of expanding the war into North Korea.[7] Under both explanations, senior American officials achieved seeming unanimity on the policy and held nearly uniform assessments of the threat. While plausible, these explanations do not entirely characterize the evolution of American concern over Chinese intervention. Between mid-September and mid-October, senior American officials throughout the national security bureaucracy became more concerned about China's likely actions and demonstrated increasing receptivity to incoming information, even as the Truman administration became more committed to its Korea policy. The palpable impact that incoming information had on certain key American officials, including Truman and Acheson, thus is submerged under a generalization grounded mainly on the administration's decision to have United Nations' forces cross the 38th Parallel.

Other studies explain America's confrontation with Communist China through a variety of perspectives. Rosemary Foot correctly notes that American officials, by October 1950, believed the optimal time for Chinese intervention had passed.[8] She and William Stueck each argue that American

[5] George Poteat, "Strategic Intelligence and National Security: A Case Study of the Korean Crisis (June 25-November 24, 1950)" (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, St. Louis, MO, 1973); George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*; Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Jan Kalicki, *The Pattern of Sino-American Crises: Political-Military Interactions in the 1950's* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Also see Jennifer Milliken, *The Social Construction of the Korean War* (British Columbia: University of British Columbia Press, 2001).

[6] George H. Poteat, "The Intelligence Gap: Hypotheses on the Process of Surprise," *International Studies Notes* 3, no. 3 (Fall 1976), 14–18.

[7] Irving Janis, *Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1983); Barton J. Bernstein, "The Policy of Risk: Crossing the 38th Parallel and Marching to the Yalu," *Foreign Service Journal* 54, no. 3 (March 1977), 16–22, 29.

[8] Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

officials did not believe that intervention would serve Chinese interests and that the Kremlin exercised some degree of control over Peking's international actions.[9] In a recent book, Stueck cites General MacArthur's personality, his political-military designs for Asia, a supposed lack of adequate intelligence on Chinese intentions, and a lack of reliable diplomatic contacts with Peking, in explaining American policy toward Korea after the Inchon invasion.[10] Analyzing it from a different angle, Thomas Christensen argues that the Truman administration attempted to mobilize the American public on the issue of defense spending as part of a larger domestic mobilization campaign.[11] Like Stueck, Christensen notes that Washington lacked a reliable means of communicating with Peking, which facilitated misunderstanding between the two governments. These and similar accounts also emphasize the euphoria and optimism in Washington following the successful invasion of Inchon and the common distrust among State Department officials of Indian ambassador to Peking K. M. Panikkar.

Two characteristics separate this article from much of the existing literature. First, this article concentrates on disparate American interpretations of the threat of Chinese intervention, while seeking to explain the rationale underlying the commonly held conclusion that China would not enter the war. In contrast to much of the literature, this paper does not purport to explain the wide-ranging causes of Sino-American confrontation in the Korean War or the failure of America's China policy. Instead, it describes the thoughts of the CIA as a whole and a few national security officials to reveal an evolution in both their conclusions about Chinese intentions and in the primary focus of their attention. Rather than generalizing, the analysis also differentiates between and among the conclusions of U.S. military commanders (including General MacArthur), civilian policy officials (in the Truman administration and State Department), and the CIA to describe the diversity of opinions that American officials held regarding the threat of Chinese intervention. It thereby avoids making generalizations about "Washington" and similarly broad references that occasionally characterize some of the literature.

Second, the analysis is rooted almost exclusively in the records of American officials who took part in the events it describes. In particular, it examines private correspondence, intelligence reports, and other documents dated from 1 September 1950 through the time when China intervened in the Korean War, though it consults memos issued just before or after this period. Some of the intelligence reports discussed here are not incorporated in the existing literature, including perhaps most prominently the military

[9] William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Toward China and Korea, 1947–1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

[10] William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[11] Thomas J. Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

intelligence reports General MacArthur received from Far East Command in Tokyo. The paper references secondary works sparingly and only to provide contextual information. Therefore, the analysis is grounded in the facts American officials felt confident about and the conclusions they formulated during the weeks preceding the moment of strategic surprise—not, by contrast, in a mixed combination of primary sources and second-hand accounts. A primary objective in adopting this rigorous method of examination is to understand the collective and individual thought processes of American officials with as much objectivity as possible and in the words they used to describe them during the period under study. This approach helps the analysis avoid suffering from the accidental half-truths that imperfect hindsight or simple defensiveness sometimes engender in political memoirs. It also provides a more detailed account of the information American officials received, when specifically they received it, and how it shaped both individual and collective thinking about the threat from China.

REACTING TO INFORMATION

Led by General MacArthur, United Nations forces responded soon after the North Korean Army crossed the 38th Parallel on 25 June 1950. They began defensive operations by establishing a perimeter around the port city of Pusan after North Korean forces had driven them almost entirely off the peninsula. By early September, with their defenses well-entrenched, the American-led forces were planning to break out from the "Pusan Perimeter" in a large counteroffensive. The Chinese Communists, led by Mao Tse-Tung and Zhou Enlai, were becoming increasingly concerned that the Americans might undertake a full-scale intervention in the conflict and defeat the North Koreans.[12] In direct response to America's military actions in Korea, Chinese Communist troops continued amassing in Manchuria (bordering the Korean Peninsula) to prepare for a possible defense of the mainland.

Throughout the early phases of the war, American officials across the national security bureaucracy were concerned about the possibility of war with China, but considered armed conflict with the Soviet Union far more. George F. Kennan drafted a memo a day after North Korea's invasion in which he stated that the Korean War would have large implications for the geopolitical situation in "any theater of the east-west conflict . . . "[13] A day later, on 27 July, he drafted another memo intended for Acheson that outlined possible American courses of action in the event of armed Soviet involvement in the

[12] Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[13] Kennan to Acheson, 26 June 1950, box 24, folder 10, Papers of George F. Kennan, Mudd Library, Princeton University.

war.[14] In late June, the Defense Department also considered possible Soviet intervention and a general war with the Soviet Union as far more serious possibilities than the "limited war" which America had entered on the Korean Peninsula.[15] The Joints Chiefs of Staff immediately ordered evaluations of possible American responses to different levels of direct Soviet involvement in the Korean conflict.

Gradually, American national security officials began to consider Chinese reactions more deeply. A memo drafted by Dean Acheson in late July and presented during the 62nd meeting of the National Security Council (NSC) stated, "We are not at war with Communist China nor do we wish to become involved in hostilities with Chinese Communist forces."[16] An NSC report drafted for that meeting began by considering the possibility of Soviet or Chinese intervention, suggesting that this latter prospect already weighed on American thoughts by late July—well before Peking's verbal threats had begun to mount.[17] Dated from 2 July through 25 August, five National Security Council (NSC) reports exhibited the rise in general concern. These reports went from hardly discussing the possibility of Chinese intervention, to saying it was possible, to calling it an "immediate" possibility, to then stating by late August that it was a "strong" possibility.[18] An internal CIA memo prepared around 18 August reiterated that entering North Korean territory might invite Chinese Communist or Soviet intervention.[19] A memo transmitted to President Truman affirmed that, by the end of August, the Joint Chiefs of Staff likewise considered the prospect of Chinese intervention as much as, if not more than, direct Soviet intervention.[20]

During early September, various signs alluded to rising Chinese concern about events in Korea. General MacArthur's intelligence service in Tokyo reported increased Chinese military movements and a larger number of reinforcements in Manchuria; other reports indicated that Chinese troops were

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[14] Kennan to Acheson, 27 June 1950, box 24, folder 11, Papers of George F. Kennan, Mudd Library, Princeton University.

[15] American officials commonly referred to the Korean War as a limited war during the first month of combat.

[16] Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council (Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America, 1982), reel 1, 321. Acheson reiterated this point about China to President Truman in a memo dated 11 September. See *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), vol. 7: Korea, 1950 (Washington: GPO, 1976), 721.

[17] As early as late July, General Omar Bradley and Ambassador-at-Large Phillip Jessup believed that the possibility of Chinese intervention was unlikely, yet certainly was a dangerous contingency worth considering. See "Summary of U.S./U.K. Discussions on Present World Situation, 20–24 July 1950," President Harry S. Truman's Office Files, pt. 2: Correspondence Files, (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1989), reel 11, 929.

[18] NSC 73 (dated 2 July), 73/1 (dated 29 July), 73/2 (dated 8 August), 73/3 (dated 22 August), and 73/4 (dated 25 August), *Documents of the National Security Council, First Supplement* (Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America, 1981), reel 2, 635–702.

[19] *FRUS, vol. 7*, 600–603.

[20] Johnson to Truman, 30 August 1950, general data, Korean War File, President's Secretaries Files, box 206, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

fighting within the North Korean Army.[21] On 5 September, the U.S. Consul General in Hong Kong, James Wilkinson, sent a memo to Acheson stating that Zhou Enlai warned, if UN forces approached the Yalu River, his government would fight them outside Chinese territory. Wilkinson wrote that Zhou also boasted Chinese forces were getting stronger each day.[22] Memos from diplomats became Acheson's primary source of information about Chinese intentions. On 8 September, a CIA memo issued to President Truman (who received all CIA reports) reiterated that the Chinese were actively assisting North Korea against UN forces, but asserted that their open military involvement would require Soviet approval and would indicate a Soviet willingness to risk general war.[23] Chinese forces in Manchuria totaled 210,000, the memo added, making "intervention in Korea well within Peking's capabilities."

By early September, State Department officials had recognized that American troops would likely cross the 38th Parallel into North Korea, requiring some consideration of the potential reactions this would provoke in both Moscow and Peking. The possibility of Chinese intervention had become a greater preoccupation for senior administration policy makers and State Department officials, as they recognized that the Soviet Union did not become directly involved in the fighting. Concern had grown to the point that British and U.S. military officers, on 8 September, agreed to a set of basic military operations to take place in the event of three types of Chinese and/or Soviet military interventions.[24] Both governments were keenly aware of the dangers of their plans for Korea.

Despite the growing concern, Acheson and select American diplomats continued to discount the possibility of Chinese intervention, choosing instead to focus primarily on possible Soviet diplomatic actions designed to capitalize on America's involvement in Korea. During an NSC meeting held on 7 September, Acheson expressed doubt that either the Chinese Communist or the Soviets would openly intervene in Korea, but drafted a memo that same day revealing his sensitivity to possible Soviet actions.[25] On 8 September, John Muccio, American Ambassador to South Korea, expressed an opinion many in the national security bureaucracy came to hold by positing that the Chinese would not intervene because they would not want to fight U.S. forces.[26] Four days later, on 12 September, Wilkinson cabled Acheson to

[21] Intelligence Summary, September 1950, *Daily Intelligence Summaries, August-November 1950*, reel 665, MacArthur Memorial.

[22] *FRUS, vol. 7*, 698.

[23] "Probability of Direct Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," 8 September 1950, *CIA Research Reports. Japan, Korea, and the Security of Asia, 1946–1976* (Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), reel 3, 540.

[24] An NSC draft memo, dated 31 August, summarizes this agreement. *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 679–81.

[25] Minutes of the 67th Meeting of the NSC, 7 September 1950, *Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council*, reel 1, 467–86.

[26] Memorandum of Conversation, 8 September 1950, "Policy Concerning UN Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950," Korean War File, box 6, Truman Papers.

contend that reports of troop activities in Manchuria were not reliable, and any Chinese troops in the province had been "planted for U.S. consumption" to give the impression that intervention would follow.[27]

During mid-September, military intelligence reports of Chinese military activities in Manchuria became increasingly prominent, as did information conveyed through diplomatic channels. One anti-communist source in China reported that communist forces had crossed the Yalu from Manchuria, but this report, like others from Chinese Nationalists, was dismissed as politically motivated.[28] A report considered more reliable indicated that the Chinese Communists were conscripting men ages 14 to 40, and a traveler reported that the Communists were seeking to conceal their military activities in Manchuria.[29] On 12 September, the director of the State Department's Office of Chinese Affairs, O. Edmund Clubb, sent Acheson a memo stating that a reliable Chinese American informant had learned that leaders in Peking decided they could not remain neutral in the Korean conflict due to their treaty obligations with the Soviet Union.[30] A U.S. report to the United Nations Security Council, dated 18 September, added that:

[The Chinese Communists] have furnished substantial if not decisive military assistance to north Korea by releasing a cast pool of combat-seasoned troops of Korean ethnic origin. . . At the time of the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, a probable aggregate of 40,000 to 60,000 Koreans trained by the Chinese Communists had been released and integrated into the north Korean army. . . [31]

Despite these ominous signs, the CIA maintained that there was no direct Chinese military participation in the Korean War.[32] Ambassador Panikkar seemed to corroborate the CIA's determination on 20 September, while also warning that crossing the 38th Parallel might prompt the Chinese or Soviets to intervene.[33]

During mid-September, American officials across the national security bureaucracy openly acknowledged that MacArthur's successful invasion at Inchon had significantly increased the likelihood of Chinese intervention. After the Inchon invasion appeared highly successful, both military and CIA intelligence began to focus more on Chinese Communist activities in Manchuria immediately; indeed, the section devoted to this in daily and weekly CIA

[27] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 724.

[28] Korean War Message Forms, September 1950, *RG-6 Records of Headquarters, Far East Command (FECOM): 1947–1951*, reel 628, MacArthur Memorial.

[29] Ibid., a subsequent report.

[30] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 724–25.

[31] Report of the United Nations Command Operations in Korea for the Period 16 to 31 August 1950, 18 September 1950, *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*, vol. 18, ed. Dennis K. Merrill, (Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1995), 478.

[32] "Situation Summary," 15 September 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4, 7–14.

[33] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 742.

summaries increased in size following 15 September.[34] Ambassador to India Loy Henderson expressed greater concern over war with China one day following the Inchon landing, on 16 September, when concerned State Department officials began shifting their focus increasingly toward China in considering the geostrategic future that lay ahead for American policy in Korea.[35] A day after the Inchon invasion, the Pentagon sent MacArthur a memo stating that he would probably be authorized to conduct military operations above the 38th Parallel, provided neither the Chinese nor Soviets had militarily occupied North Korea by the time his forces entered North Korea.[36] The memo relayed portions of NSC 81/1 that reflected growing concern over the prospect of Chinese Communist intervention. Some in the State Department believed that the Soviets or Chinese Communists would intervene if the Inchon campaign succeeded—an assessment which the Joint Chiefs of Staff conveyed to MacArthur on 21 September.[37] Rather than heeding the ominous predictions, senior administration officials (Acheson especially) and hawkish diplomatic officials continued anticipating the military occupation and political administration of North Korea into late September,[38] while gaining U.N. authorization to conduct military operations in North Korea remained a central political priority for the Truman administration.[39]

Toward the end of September, particularly during the last week, General MacArthur received more ominous intelligence reports and the State Department received more verbal warnings. Military intelligence judged reliable indicated that the areas in Manchuria bordering the Yalu River were being cleared of civilians to conceal local military activities.[40] Chinese sources reported some communist troops had crossed into Korea at night disguised as civilians and changed into North Korean Army uniforms. One report stated that Chinese troops were being instructed to respond in Korean if captured by U.N. forces.[41] On 27 September, the State Department and the Army each received word that the Chinese Chief of Staff, General Nieh Jung-chen, declared that his country would actively resist U.S. provocations, referring specifically to

[34] See the situation summaries and daily intelligence reports found in *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4. Also see the "Korean War Message Forms," in *RG-6 Records of Headquarters, Far East Command (FECOM): 1947–1951*, reel 628; as well as the intelligence summaries found in *Daily Intelligence Summaries,* reels 665–66.

[35] Henderson to Acheson, 16 September 1950, "Indian Efforts to Mediate and Prevent the Spread of Hostilities [2 of 2: August-November 1950]," Korean War File, box 5, Truman Papers.

[36] Memo to MacArthur, 16 September 1950, RG-6, Korean War File, no. 2, box 9, Papers of General Douglas MacArthur, MacArthur Memorial.

[37] Memo to MacArthur, 21 September 1950, RG-6, Korean War File, no. 2, box 9; *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 731.

[38] Notes on Cabinet Meeting, 29 September 1950, Papers of Matthew J. Connelly, box 2, Truman Library; Joint Chiefs of Staff to MacArthur, 26 September 1950, "JLCOM Aug 50–Apr 51; JCS Nov 45–Apr 51; KMA Jul–Sep 49," RG-9 Radiograms, MacArthur Papers, reel 186.

[39] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 727.

[40] Intelligence Summary, September 1950, *Daily Intelligence Summaries*, reel 665.

[41] Korean War Message Forms, September 1950, RG-6 Records of Headquarters, Far East Command (FECOM): 1947–1951, reel 628.

an attack by American aircraft against targets in northeast China. The General asserted that all signs pointed to an "imminent" U.S. attack against the mainland.[42] The State Department also received warnings from Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Ambassador Panikkar throughout late September against crossing the Parallel for fear of further provoking Peking.[43] Acheson and Truman were well aware of Peking's angry reactions to accidental U.S. aerial attacks in Manchuria, and Acheson learned through Dutch diplomats on 29 September that the Chinese were gathering considerable forces near the Korean border.[44] As America's staunchest ally in the war, Great Britain provided a rationale for intervention: in a telegram cabled to the State Department on 28 September, the British Foreign Office cautioned that the Chinese Communists might intervene because they perceived a threat to their regime in American forces moving north of the 38th Parallel. However, it continued, since it was not in Peking's political interest to intervene, the Chinese would probably seek a buffer zone separating China from what would become the UN-occupied zone of Korea.[45]

Amid these warnings from Peking, President Truman authorized General MacArthur on 27 September to cross the 38th Parallel to destroy the North Korean Army. Although this had been a subject of much discussion as early as July, Truman and Acheson had postponed the decision before committing to a specific policy on the Parallel.[46] They sought to gain U.N. authorization before having MacArthur's forces drive into North Korea, while many officials continued emphasizing the military exigencies of crossing the Parallel. Rescuing South Korea, the Joint Chiefs and Acheson believed, would have been for naught if the threat of North Korean invasion remained after U.N. troops were demobilized; the possibility of another invasion of South Korea would simply remain.[47] Halting at the Parallel, Loy Henderson asserted on 27 September and afterwards, would simply not make strategic sense, even in

[42] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 796.

[43] Both Panikkar and Prime Minister Nehru repeatedly warned U.S. diplomats of the danger from China, particularly after the Inchon invasion, and advised against crossing the 38th Parallel. Ibid., 791, 809, 822-23.

[44] Homes to Acheson, 29 September 1950, "Indian Efforts."

[45] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 814–16; New York (United Nations Delegation of the United States) to Acheson, 28 September 1950, "Indian Efforts."

[46] See Dean Rusk's memo,*FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 709. The State Department asked General MacArthur on several occasions to tell South Korean President Syngman Rhee to desist from making public declarations about the 38th Parallel before the issue was officially decided in Washington.

[47] This was a near-consensus view among senior military officials in Washington. See the comments by Lieutenant General J. Lawton Collins in *The Korean War: A 25-year Perspective*, ed. Francis H. Heller (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1977), 26–27; Dean Acheson's Congressional testimony, "Military Situation in the Far East," Committee on Armed Services and Committee on Foreign Relations. United States Senate, 82nd Congress, 1st Session, 1 June 1951 (Washington: GPO, 1951), 1716–17, 1729; the *Papers of Dean Acheson: Princeton Seminars*, 13 and 14 February 1954, (Independence, MO: Harry S. Truman Library, 1975), reel 4, 1235; and *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 763.

light of the prospect of Chinese intervention.[48] Obtaining U.N. authorization for operations north of the Parallel thus remained a principle objective.

Truman granted official authorization to cross the Parallel, despite the looming specter of Chinese intervention. The Joint Chiefs acknowledged the threat in a memo they sent to MacArthur on 29 September, two days after Truman had authorized the directive, which reiterated that his administration was fully committed to having U.N. forces cross the Parallel.[49] The memo reiterated that MacArthur should continue to assess the prospect of communist intervention, mentioning China before the Soviet Union in this regard. The directive authorizing operations north of the 38th Parallel included contingency plans that reflected the mounting concern over the possibility of Chinese intervention. Acheson, Truman, and Secretary of Defense George Marshall had agreed earlier that MacArthur should pursue the North Korean Army beyond the Parallel, but only if neither the Soviets nor Chinese Communists had intervened and were not "expected" (in their words) to intervene at the time MacArthur's forces advanced into North Korea.[50] Kennan and Charles Bohlen both objected to the policy of crossing the Parallel, but mainly because of the potential reactions it might elicit in Moscow in particular. Clubb, by contrast, warned Dean Rusk on 30 September that Chinese leaders might consider the advance of U.N. forces toward the 38th Parallel "a serious threat to their regime."[51] Kennan and Clubb both feared the consequences of extending the war into North Korea, although under notably different concerns.[52]

The fateful decision to authorize MacArthur came as many American officials from the intelligence, military, and policy communities discounted the looming danger, even with mounting evidence of possible intervention. Stationed in Hong Kong, Wilkinson sent a memo to Acheson on 22 September stating that Zhou Enlai had said the Chinese would not get involved in the Korean War unless "provoked."[53] Wilkinson believed that Peking would provide only limited and indirect support to North Korea, as their lack of military preparations on the mainland reflected no desire to confront America.[54] On 22 September, a CIA report issued to President Truman stated that tank movements in Manchuria did not necessarily imply China intended to intervene in Korea and that, in general, there was no clear indication of such an

[48] Henderson to Acheson, 21 September, 27 September, 4 October, and 17 October 1950, "Indian Efforts."

[49] Joint Chiefs to MacArthur, 29 September 1950, "Pertinent Papers on Korean Situation" vol. 2, Korean War File, box 13, Truman Papers.

[50] *Documentary History*, 490–92.

[51] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 829.

[52] Discussing an aerial attack by American planes near Vladivostok, Kennan reminded Acheson of Soviet sensitivity to American military activities so near its Far Eastern border. Clubb, by contrast, considered the same for the Chinese leadership.

[53] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 765.

[54] Wilkinson did not have first-hand knowledge of the preparations in Manchuria, possibly because he was stationed in British-controlled Hong Kong at the time.

intention.[55] Doubt at Langley persisted even as CIA analysts received more auguring information about Chinese intentions. The intelligence signals and verbal warnings were arousing greater concern, in general, but not enough to convince Acheson or the military leadership away from pushing further north in Korea.

As they decided to authorize MacArthur to cross the 38th Parallel, Acheson, Truman, and Marshall believed that the Chinese Communists would probably not intervene. Acheson, in particular, was fully aware of the ominous State Department memos that discussed the possibility of intervention, having received an increasing number of them in late September. In a memo sent on 28 September, he admitted, "Communist Chief of Staff stated in strong language that China would not accept U.S. aggression without resistance, making specific reference to bombings of China by U.S. planes."[56] Acheson acknowledged that Peking believed an attack against China was imminent. In his mind, however, he and the president had sought to assure the Chinese leadership that the U.S. harbored no aggressive intentions and strived only to establish peace on the Korean Peninsula. An attack by Communist China, he concluded, would be "sheer madness." Acheson thus resisted changing his original conclusion that China would not intervene, even as the danger became greater. "Korea," he asserted to the NSC on 29 September, "will become a stage to prove what Western Democracy can do to help the underprivileged countries of the world."[57]

Events during the first week of October made the likelihood of intervention and the concern it aroused in U.S. officials still greater. South Korean forces crossed the 38th Parallel on 1 October, with U.N. forces remaining just south of it as Washington awaited official authorization from the U.N. General Assembly. Military intelligence reports issued to MacArthur (among others) indicated that Peking had already intervened, though these claims were rejected because they had originated from anti-Communist sources in China.[58] Partially accurate, one such report stated that the Chinese would intervene because 1) they were indebted to the Soviet Union, 2) U.N. occupation of all of Korea would present a security threat to Chinese territory, and 3) the Soviet Union would order Peking to intervene. Rejecting these claims, MacArthur's intelligence staff noted that there was no proof of Chinese troops fighting in Korea, nor any indication of an intent to intervene. Yet, the staff acknowledged there was substantial evidence of troop concentrations in Manchuria and the success U.N. forces were experiencing probably aroused deep concern

[55] "Situation Summary," 22 September 1950, CIA *Research Reports*, reel 4, 26–33.

[56] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 797–98.

[57] Notes on Cabinet Meeting, 29 September 1950, Connelly Papers.

[58] "Korean War Message Forms," October 1950, RG-6 Records of Headquarters, Far East Command (FECOM): 1947–1951, reel 628.

among the Chinese leadership.[59] Information from another anti-Communist in China was deemed unreliable, but also proved accurate. The intelligence source posited that the Communists would intervene if U.S. forces crossed the 38th Parallel because, as a previous report asserted, U.N. occupation of North Korea would pose an unmitigated security threat to Mao's regime.[60] A source considered reliable added soon afterwards that 8,000 Chinese troops were at the border between China and North Korea. At this time, moreover, the CIA acknowledged that the Chinese had resumed their internal anti-U.S. propaganda campaign, calling the United States a "paper tiger" and preparing the populace for a possible confrontation in Korea.[61] These facts were relayed to MacArthur as soon as Far East Command received them, but had little affect on the general.

During the first week of October, Zhou Enlai's verbal signals became unavoidably direct and pointed. The State Department received transcripts of a speech Zhou had delivered in which he asserted "the Chinese people absolutely will not tolerate foreign aggression . . . "[62] More provocatively, Zhou told Panikkar late on 2 October that the Chinese Communists would intervene if U.S. forces crossed the parallel, but would refrain if only South Korean forces entered North Korean territory. His message was immediately relayed to the State Department, which immediately cabled it to MacArthur, and quickly induced several mixed reactions among American diplomats. American Ambassador to the Soviet Union Alan Kirk called Zhou's warning a "ploy," and James Wilkinson asserted that Zhou's saber rattling indicated the Chinese Communists hoped to become champions of Asian nationalism.[63] These diplomats expressed the sentiment that hawkish colleagues like Rusk and, to a lesser degree, Acheson shared in viewing the warnings from Peking as little more than blackmail designed to deter the United States.

Nonetheless, on 3 October, the morning they learned of Zhou's declaration, several State Department officials expressed great caution and evinced a broader recognition of the reality of the danger. U. Alexis Johnson of the Northeast Asian Affairs Office in the State Department sent a memo to Rusk stating that Zhou's inflammatory language and threats were probably a bluff, but perhaps not entirely so. Demonstrating alarm, Johnson recommended only having South Korean forces fight north of the 38th Parallel, instead of taking the "risk of calling the Chinese bluff."[64] A memo by State's Office of

[59] Ibid., a subsequent report; "Intelligence Summary," October 1950, *Daily Intelligence Summaries*, Reel 666.

[60] Ibid.

[61] "Propaganda Possibilities in the Korean Situation," 2 October 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4, 54–74; *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 913.

[62] William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 93–94.

[63] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 850, 852.

[64] Ibid., 849.

Chinese Affairs issued on 3 October held that Zhou's threat "cannot safely be regarded as a bluff."[65] It noted that Peking and Moscow might be prepared for a third world war in Korea, and may have accepted this prospect, which would leave the United States with few policy options that could reduce the likelihood of general war. Heading the China office, Clubb recommended considering the Indian government's U.N. proposal to reconcile American and Soviet resolutions on the Korean conflict to reach a settlement. He believed that Zhou's warnings might signify a willingness to enter the war. American Ambassador to the Netherlands Selden Chapin indeed mentioned that the Chinese might fight U.S. forces, even knowing the consequences this would entail.[66]

These warnings and notes of caution did not resonate with a doubtful and reassured CIA, which upheld its initial conclusion that Peking would refrain from intervening. A CIA memo issued to President Truman, among others, on 2 October rejected the warnings that the Indian government had relayed, and provided reasons why the Chinese Communists would not intervene.[67] It stated that India was politically biased against U.S. actions in Korea and should not be trusted, but, more importantly, Peking had been "disabused" of the feeling that it could intervene in a war against the United States without suffering heavy casualties. Discussing the propaganda possibilities of the Korean situation, the report concluded that Peking believed the United States could be bullied or bluffed into backing down. A subsequent CIA memo issued on 6 October indicated that Soviet and Chinese Communist trucks were moving southward toward the Manchurian border with Korea, and estimated a troop presence of 155,000 in Manchuria. However, as was standard by that point, it reiterated there was "no firm evidence of the presence of. . . Chinese Communist units in Korea, although fragmentary information. . . suggests the possibility of close liaison."[68] The CIA thus resisted concluding, as British intelligence had posited on 4 October, that Mao and his cohort considered the presence of American troops in North Korea an unmitigated security threat to their still-consolidating rule in China.[69]

Although senior military officials acknowledged the early-October signals, they did not seek to change American policy to prevent possible confrontation. Secretary of the Air Force Thomas Finletter and Army Secretary Frank Pace became openly worried about Chinese, not Soviet, intentions. On 9 October, the Joint Chiefs of Staff cabled MacArthur an amplification (as it was called) that added to the late-September directive which had formally

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[65] Ibid., 864.

[66] Chapin to Acheson, 3 October 1950, "Information and Estimates Regarding Chinese Communist and Soviet Intentions in Korea," Korean War File, box 7, Truman Papers.

[67] "Propaganda Possibilities in the Korean Situation."

[68] "Situation Summary," 6 October 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4, 82–88.

[69] James Webb of the State Department to Far East Command, 5 October 1950, "State Depart May–Oct 50," RG-9 Radiograms, MacArthur Papers, reel 237.

authorized military operations in North Korea. It represented perhaps the first such memo the Joint Chiefs sent to MacArthur solely on the topic of Chinese intervention, displaying their greater concern after the warnings received directly from Peking and through Indian officials. The amplification directed MacArthur to continue fighting, even if the Chinese intervened, but only if he believed there was a "reasonable chance of success."[70] Unlike the 27 September directive, this amplification only mentioned Chinese intervention, thus suggesting the Joint Chiefs recognized the Soviets had taken a "hands-off" policy regarding the Korean War and that the Chinese were the only realistic potential adversary. The Joint Chiefs had thus shifted their primary concern by early October away from Moscow and toward Peking, and indeed had begun considering contingencies involving Chinese intervention.[71]

During the second week of October, with U.S. forces north of the 38th Parallel, American diplomats continued receiving auguring information about Chinese intentions. The American ambassador to Burma reaffirmed on 9 October that Burmese officials believed there were "large troop concentrations near [the] Korean frontier," but he asserted five days afterward that the optimum time for intervention had already passed.[72] On 10 October, American officials in Washington also learned that the Chinese Foreign Ministry declared the "Chinese people cannot stand idly by" for much longer.[73] Despite the warnings, the CIA remained firm in its initial judgment of likely Chinese actions. A weekly CIA situation report issued to President Truman on 13 October reaffirmed that there was "no reliable evidence" of Chinese combat units in Korea and no further evidence that more troops had been added to those already stationed in Manchuria.[74]

During the second week of October, incoming information elicited mixed yet carefully considered reactions among American diplomats. Doubts remained among State Department officials who favored the American course of action with little or no reservations. On 7 October, for example, James Wilkinson wrote to Acheson to present his belief that the Chinese Communists would undertake guerrilla resistance against American forces in North Korea, instead of militarily intervening in large numbers.[75] Less propaganda in China, he wrote, suggested that Peking did not intend to intervene in the war. As late as 10 October, senior members of the State Department—Acheson and Rusk, among a few others—maintained that Peking would

[70] *Documentary History*, 528.

[71] Initially, they focused Moscow's possible intervention in the war. Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, 2 July 1950, *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Part 2, 1946–53, the Far East* (Washington: University Publications of America, 1979), reel 9, 88.

[72] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 915, 944.

[73] Ibid., 913–14.

[74] "Situation Summary," 13 October 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4, 103–109.

[75] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 912.

refrain from undertaking open military intervention on a wide scale.[76] Others in the State Department expressed greater alarm. In a memo sent to Acheson on 9 October, Philip Jessup acknowledged what many of his colleagues had not by stating, "I think it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese Communists fear that we are mobilizing forces in North Korea to invade Manchuria or to engage the Chinese armies while Chiang Kai-Shek makes a landing on the mainland to the south."[77] Since late June, in fact, Jessup had suspected that the danger of communist intervention in the Korean conflict came from Peking more so than Moscow.[78] In an addendum to the Wake Island Conference, even the hawkish Rusk noted on 14 October that it was "not impossible (though improbable) that Red China might declare war on the United States."[79]

A pair of CIA assessments issued on 12 October acknowledged that the likelihood of Chinese intervention was higher than ever before, but that important realities suggested Peking would not undertake such a potentially disastrous policy. The larger of the two reports emphasized that Chinese ground forces were capable of intervening effectively, but not decisively, given their lack of requisite air and naval support.[80] Like military intelligence and CIA reports previously issued, it maintained that there were "no convincing indications of an actual Chinese Communist intention to resort to full-scale intervention in Korea."[81] A smaller report upheld prevailing CIA thinking by stating that the Soviets would intervene only if they determined it was in their interest to precipitate global war, which they surely had not done.[82] Both the larger and smaller analyses concluded that the Chinese would not intervene militarily in the war, but would continue to covertly help the North Koreans against United Nations forces, perhaps by increasing their assistance and supply efforts.

President Truman and General MacArthur had both been keenly aware of the ominous intelligence signals and verbal threats from Peking. MacArthur had received detailed and daily intelligence reports from his military staff in Tokyo about military, political, and economic affairs in China.[83] He became aware of the increasing amount of warnings and signs of Chinese intentions, yet continued to discount the danger, even when questioned about it on

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[76] U. Alexis Johnson (of the State Department) to Far East Command, 10 October 1950, "State Depart May–Oct 50."

[77] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 916.

[78] Ibid., 258.

[79] *Documentary History*, 546.

[80] "Critical Situations in the Far East," 12 October 1950, ORE 58–50, *Tracking the Dragon: National Intelligence Estimates on China during the Era of Mao, 1948–1976* (Pittsburgh: GPO, 2004).

[81] "Critical Situations in the Far East," 3.

[82] "Threat of Soviet Intervention in Korea," 12 October 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4, 98–101.

[83] The "Intelligence Summaries" provided updated, detailed information about Chinese military movements, political interactions with the Soviet Union, and domestic economic conditions. These summaries were more detailed than the daily summaries which President Truman received from the CIA.

occasion. Truman had read daily and weekly CIA reports, as well as larger CIA intelligence estimates, regarding the possibility of Chinese intervention to keep abreast of the quickly shifting politico-military developments.[84] Recognizing the apparent danger conveyed in CIA reports and Zhou's latest statements, President Truman called for a conference with General MacArthur in part to learn his assessment of the threat of Chinese intervention.[85] During the meeting on 15 October, Truman asked about the chances of Chinese or Soviet intervention. MacArthur confidently responded that the optimal time for intervention had passed (as the recent CIA report had asserted), but also added that the Chinese would not be able to get more than 50,000-60,000 troops across the Yalu River if they did intervene. He told the president that the Chinese Communists had no air support to protect them and would be "slaughtered" by U.N. forces in the event they intervened.[86] Within four days of the meeting at Wake Island, several divisions of the Chinese People's Volunteers—composed of over 300,000 troops—crossed the Yalu River to drive U.N. forces out of Korea.[87] This attack failed, but was followed by a massive offensive on 25 November that started an altogether new war.

The Cognitive Sources of Doubt

Existing studies often portray American reactions to the prospect of Chinese intervention as a collective failure to heed warnings. Yet archival records reveal a heterogeneous set of reactions that evolved into divergent interpretations as more information became available. Archives also suggest that, although divergent interpretations of the threat emerged, even doubtful American officials became increasingly alarmed at the prospect of Chinese intervention as they received more information. This surely inspires different questions, perhaps the most salient of which closely relates to the motivation for many analyses of this case of American strategic surprise. In contrast to what others have asked, the following section explores not why American officials in general effectively disregarded the threat by supposedly discounting the ominous information, but rather why many of them retained their respective conclusions about the prospect of Chinese intervention while openly acknowledging—and with increasing frequency as time passed—the danger American actions invited. This latter question represents the true paradox of this case. Accordingly, this section concentrates specifically on the CIA and those American officials who comfortably concluded that China would refrain from intervening. It shows that General MacArthur, President Truman, senior members of the State Department, and the CIA as

[84] Poteat, "Strategic Intelligence and National Security," 125.
[85] *Documentary History*, 530.
[86] Ibid., 558.
[87] For analysis of the evolution of this decision, see Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*.

a whole interpreted information about Chinese statements through orienting assumptions that inhibited them from predicting the eventual intervention.

An Early Cold War Presumption

After first learning of North Korea's invasion, American national security officials almost unanimously viewed the Korean War as another attempt by the Kremlin to expand its global influence. The Soviet acquisition of nuclear weaponry in August 1949, the fall of Chiang Kai-Shek's government to a communist regime, and the alliance treaty between Mao and Stalin all seemed to place America in a defensive position vis-à-vis Moscow on a global scale.[88] NSCs 73 through 73/4 all asserted that the Kremlin, as the latest product of its global designs, had caused the Korean War to gain strategic control of the Korean peninsula and to strengthen its overall military and geopolitical position.[89] Even those who opposed having U.N. forces cross the 38th Parallel, like Kennan and Bohlen, held to the initial presumption that the Kremlin would inevitably attempt to manipulate the war to strengthen its hand against the United States on a global scale.[90] A CIA report presented in mid-August 1950 affirmed that the Soviets would seek to capitalize on the immediate advantages they had gained in initiating limited, local war in Korea.[91] Smaller CIA reports issued in mid-August and early September maintained that Soviet officers were advising the North Koreans and equipping them (as well as the Chinese Communists) with war materials, without which the North Koreans could not continue fighting.[92] The State Department relayed this information to Far East Command for MacArthur's viewing, but stated that covert aid did not represent direct participation in the aggression.[93] Even before the war began, U.S. intelligence was aware of the great dependence of the North Korean regime on Soviet (and Chinese Communist) military provisions.[94]

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[88] Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 94.

[89] "The Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible Further Soviet Moves in the Light of the Korean Situation," *Documents of the National Security Council, 1947–1977* (Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America, 1980), reel 2, 635–702.

[90] See Kennan's draft memorandum of 30 June 1950, folder no. 12, Kennan Papers, box 24. For Bohlen's thoughts, see *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 174.

[91] "Review of the World Situation," CIA 8–50, 16 August 1950, *Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council*, reel 1, 1.

[92] "Review of the World Situation," 1; "Probability of Direct Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea"; "Military Supplies for North Korea," 15 September 1950, Intelligence Memorandum no. 325, National Security Council Files, box 209, Truman Papers.

[93] State Department to Far East Command, 22 September 1950, "State-In Dec 50–Apr 51; State Misc. in Jun–Sep 50," RG-9 Radiograms, MacArthur Papers, reel 239.

[94] "Current Capabilities of the Northern Korean Regime," ORE 18–50, 19 July 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 5, 297-308. In a draft memo, John P. Davies of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff portrayed the Soviet government as controlling North Korean military operations in the war. *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 754.

In this context, hawkish State Department officials, MacArthur's intelligence unit in Tokyo, and the CIA on the whole believed that Peking and other communist regimes effectively served as puppets of the Soviet Union. They generally believed, albeit to varying degrees, that communist regimes were imperial extensions of the Soviet Union operating within a hierarchical system, with Moscow at the center.[95] Months before the Korean War began, Acheson called communism "the spearhead of Russian imperialism."[96] Following the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet alliance treaty, he publicly asserted in March 1950, "...the U.S.S.R. has special rights in China which represent an infringement of China's sovereignty and which, despite all the tawdry pretense of the treaty terms, occupies the role of empire builder at China's expense."[97] The Korean War reinforced these presumptions in the minds of most American officials examined here. Drafted after the war had begun, NSC 73/2 called the Chinese Communists a "Soviet satellite force in Asia" capable of committing major acts of aggression.[98] Any Chinese capabilities, it asserted, added to those of the Soviet Union because Chinese military victories would enhance security for the Soviet Far East. NSC 81/1 reiterated this notion by portraying the Chinese Communists as instruments of the Soviet Union.[99] Acheson was one of several senior officials in the State Department who firmly believed that Moscow guided Peking's foreign policy.[100] Warnings from the Indian government that China was not Moscow's satellite failed to disabuse Loy Henderson or like-minded members of the State Department, like Rusk and John Allison, of this assumption.[101]

Accordingly, for over two months following the start of the Korean War, American intelligence analysts and senior State Department officials focused on potential Soviet (not Chinese) intervention.[102] Officials from across the

[95] The CIA and most State Department officials subscribed to this general proposition, albeit to varying degrees. For an authoritative discussion, see Deborah Larson, *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[96] Samuel F. Wells, Jr., "Sounding the Tocsin: NSC 68 and the Soviet Threat," *International Security* 4, no. 2 (Autumn 1979): 126. Some in the State Department were concerned that weak governments in Asia were vulnerable to communist subversion and thereby subject to potential Soviet suzerainty. See the draft paper Acheson cabled to Far East Command, 12 October 1950, "State Depart Nov 50–Apr 51 State–In Jul–Nov 50."

[97] Address before the Commonwealth Club of California, San Francisco, 15 March 1950, *American Foreign Policy, 1950–1955, Basic Documents*, vol. II (Washington: GPO, 1957), 2567.

[98] "The Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible Further Soviet Moves in the Light of the Korean Situation," 8 August 1950, *Documents of the National Security Council, First Supplement*, reel 1, 12.

[99] "United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea," 9 September 1950, *Documents of the National Security Council, 1947–1977*, reel 2, 833–43.

[100] David A. Mayers, *Cracking the Monolith: U.S. Policy Against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949–1955* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 52.

[101] Henderson to Acheson, 21 September 1950, "Indian Efforts."

[102] David S. McLellan, "Dean Acheson and the Korean War," *Political Science Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (March, 1968): 18. Dean Acheson was especially sensitive to the possibility of open Soviet military involvement. See *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 706. The Defense Department immediately evaluated the likelihood of this.

national security bureaucracy believed that Moscow might choose to escalate the conflict, possibly through "proxy states," particularly in late June and July.[103] Although critical of having U.S. forces cross the 38th Parallel, Bohlen, for example, saw the Korean War as an element of a larger Soviet strategy intended to distract the United States from Europe.[104] With near unanimity, American officials believed the Korean War reaffirmed that the Kremlin held global ambitions and might risk war with the United States to attain them.[105] Discussions between American and British delegates concluded that Chinese intervention in the Korean War would indicate a "Soviet intention to force the issue."[106] Many American officials, including hawkish State Department members, thus framed their perspective on belligerent Chinese Communist statements and auguring actions by concentrating specifically on Soviet actions.[107]

The low level of active Soviet engagement in the early months of the Korean War was therefore noteworthy precisely as a source of insight into likely Chinese actions. By late September, the NSC and the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to posit that the Kremlin was maintaining a "hands off"[108] policy toward the Korean conflict by restraining itself to providing limited logistical, material, and moral support to the North Korean forces. Even an American air attack against a Russian airfield in the Far East in late September and again in mid-October received only perfunctory criticism from Soviet representatives at the United Nations and in Moscow.[109] Material facts appeared to suggest that the Soviets shared the predominant view in Washington that a general war against the United States and its allies would not favor global communist interests. Consensus opinion on the possibility of Soviet intervention held that the Kremlin had neither chosen to initiate global war by causing the North Korean invasion nor had accelerated its involvement in the Korean War since

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See "U.S. Courses of Action in the Event of Soviet Forces enter Korean Hostilities," 2 July 1950, *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, reel 9, 88.

[103] CIA and NSC reports both reflected this belief. Notable examples are "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," 6 November 1950, National Intelligence Estimate no. 2, Central Intelligence Agency; and "Review of the World Situation."

[104] Bohlen memorandum, 13 July 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States* vol. 1: 1950 (Washington: GPO, 1977), 342–44.

[105] James Irving Matray, *Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941–1950* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), 253.

[106] "Summary of U.S./U.K. Discussions on Present World Situation, 20–24 July 1950," 922.

[107] Rosemary Foot, "The Sino-American Conflict in Korea: The U.S. Assessment of China's Ability to Intervene in the War," *Asian Affairs* 14 (June 1983): 161.

[108] This term is used in numerous State Department memos. The conclusion that the Soviet Union had adopted a seeming "hands off" policy only slowly evolved. Drafted in early September, the NSC report upon which MacArthur received authorization to conduct military operations above the 38th Parallel noted that probably had not adopted a hands off policy. By late September and early October, opinion on this question had changed.

[109] Ambassador Alan Kirk in Moscow found Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko's response—and the overall response he witnessed—to the attacks mild in tone. State Department to Far East Command, 10 and 11 October 1950, "State Depart May–Oct 50."

it began.[110] Indeed, only a conscious decision to precipitate global war with the United States would lead to direct Soviet military entry—an action that U.S. officials believed did not accord with Soviet interests and thus would not likely materialize.[111]

The CIA and State Department officials who favored the decision to cross the 38th Parallel believed that greater Soviet involvement was more likely to come in the form of using the Chinese Communists as a proxy force.[112] As a State Department memo dated 31 August concluded, the Soviets probably would not use Chinese troops to occupy North Korea, because prompting such action against UN forces would precipitate a greater military conflict in which the Kremlin would become directly engaged.[113] Acheson reiterated this point during the MacArthur hearings in June 1951: "In the period from 25th of June to the 23rd of September, the general intelligence estimates which were put together regarded [Chinese Communist] intervention as improbable, barring Soviet decision to precipitate global war."[114] Thus, as Wilkinson wrote on 7 October," . . . it seems most unlikely [the] USSR could afford to risk political dangers involved in pushing its most important satellite [China] into [a] devastating war unless fully prepared to back it with Red Army, particularly in view of [the] Sino-Soviet treaty."[115]

Select Soviet actions seemed to confirm this crucial assumption. A CIA report issued in mid-August stated that the Soviets were "discouraging" Peking from invading places not traditionally under Chinese control, particularly the islands of Taiwan and Macao and British-controlled Hong Kong.[116] The Chinese Communists, in fact, did not attack any of these three locations by the time they intervened in Korea. Wilkinson asserted on 8 October that the Soviets would not "push its strongest ally into war with the United States."[117] Perhaps the Russians were "keeping the Maoists in line."[118] Instead, a CIA report asserted, the Soviets were using Chinese threats of intervention to intimidate the United States and its allies, implying that the Chinese campaign of issuing verbal warnings had its origins in Moscow.

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[110] See NSCS 73 through 73/4 and Situation Summary, 13 October 1950, *CIA Research Reports*, reel 4, 103–9.

[111] "Threat of Soviet Intervention in Korea," 101. George Kennan agreed with this assessment, and judged the likelihood of a Soviet military attack in either Europe or Asia lower than in the immediate aftermath of the North Korean invasion. See "Memorandum on Soviet Intentions," 2 October 1950, folder no. 14, box 24, Kennan Papers.

[112] "Threat of Soviet Intervention in Korea."

[113] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 673

[114] Dean Acheson, congressional testimony, "Military Situation in the Far East," 1 June 1951.

[115] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 913.

[116] "Review of the World Situation," 4.

[117] Wilkinson to Acheson, 8 October 1950, "Policy Concerning U.N. Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950."

[118] David M. Lampton, "The U.S. Image of Peking in Three International Crises," *The Western Political Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (March 1973): 33.

Even following China's entry into the war, the CIA and hawkish State Department analysts who firmly believed in the monolith thesis assumed that the Soviets had prompted Peking's final decision. A National Intelligence Estimate issued to the president (among others) on 6 November posited that China must have acted in concert with the USSR prior to intervening, and a subsequent estimate issued on 24 November posited that the Soviets might increase provisions to the Chinese.[119] After the Chinese counteroffensive in late November had forced U.N. forces into a massive retreat, the CIA again assumed intimate Soviet involvement, asserting, "Soviet rulers, in directing or sanctioning the Chinese Communist intervention in Korea, must have appreciated the increased risk of global war and have felt ready to accept such a development."[120] Rusk and John Davies, among others in the State Department, agreed with this assessment, believing that the intervention only served Soviet interests and reinforced the notion that Moscow had forced China's entry.[121]

THE PERILS OF STRATEGIC "MIRROR-IMAGINING"

General MacArthur, CIA analysts, and several senior State Department officials also assumed that the Chinese Communists were conducting the same basic cost-benefit analysis as they were. In particular, these officials commonly assumed that they and their counterparts in Peking viewed the likely military consequences of intervention in a similar light. Prevailing opinion held that U.N. forces were militarily superior to those of the Chinese, who had only recently begun developing an air force[122] and were not assured Soviet military support in the event of a confrontation with the United States.[123] This material advantage gave General MacArthur confidence in responding to President Truman that the Chinese would be repulsed if they intervened—an assessment the president was particularly inclined to value after the resounding victory following Inchon. U.N. forces were rapidly driving northward while routing the North Korean Army and had become better supplied by the late

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[119] "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," National Intelligence Estimate no. 2, 6 November 1950, "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," National Intelligence Estimate no. 2/1, 24 November 1950, *Tracking the Dragon*.

[120] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 1309. Another estimate upheld this supposition by indicating that the Soviets might become directly engaged in an air defense of Manchuria—more than the initial assessment holding the Soviets would remain disengaged would have allowed. See "Soviet Participation in the Air Defense of Manchuria," National Intelligence Estimate 2/2, 27 November 1950, CIA website. http://www.foia.cia.gov/search.asp.

[121] Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4 (December, 1980): 579.

[122] Zhang Xiaoming, *Red Wings over the Yalu: China, the Soviet Union, and the Air War in Korea*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

[123] As late as 14 October, a day prior to the Wake Island Conference, General MacArthur believed that Peking would declare war only if it had the assurance of Soviet support. *Documentary History*, 544.

summer of 1950.[124] By contrast, Chinese Communist forces had just fought a long, brutal civil war against the Nationalists and were dealing with attacks from isolated locations, particularly from Nationalist-occupied islands in the Pacific.[125] The conscripts they were amassing were not trained or battle-hardened forces like those fighting under MacArthur's command. Moreover, Chinese territory and industry were readily open to American air attack. An NSC note issued on 2 July asserted that the United States would have many targets in China in case it intervened in Korea.[126] On numerous occasions thereafter, American aircraft attacked small towns in Manchuria allegedly as accidents, thereby demonstrating Manchuria's vulnerability.[127]

Chinese military capabilities were frequently mentioned in CIA reports and numerous diplomatic memos that assessed the likelihood of Chinese intervention. In Kennan's view, America should "not hesitate to oppose any Chinese Communist forces which might engage themselves against us in the Korean theater . . . "[128] The British Foreign Office also expressed its doubts over the Chinese Communists' ability to fight seasoned U.S. forces while the 38th Parallel issue demanded a final decision.[129] As early as 2 July, a report by the Joint Strategic Survey Committee of the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded: "The introduction of Chinese Communist armed forces into the Korean situation without concurrent action there by the forces of the U.S.S.R. . . . would not itself necessarily jeopardize the success of present United Nations military plans for South Korea . . . "[130] Under that opinion, the directive authorizing military operations above the 38th Parallel noted that the mere fact of Chinese intervention should not stop MacArthur from pursuing the North Korean Army. The directive instructed MacArthur to continue "as long as action by your forces offers a reasonable chance of successful resistance."[131] Only if intervention were so great as to imperil American objectives would MacArthur

[124] Foot, "The Sino-American Conflict in Korea," 161.

[125] Military intelligence reports and CIA reports frequently mentioned Chinese intentions toward the remaining islands.

[126] "The Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible further Soviet Moves in Light of the Korean Situation," NSC 73, 1 July 1950, 6. In late September, Dean Rusk also acknowledged that Northeast China was open to easy American aerial assaults. See *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 760.

[127] On 27 August, U.S. aircraft attacked a rail terminal and adjoining facilities in Antung, north of the Yalu. Two days later, another border violation was charged against U.S. military aircraft. Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou eventually filed a grievance over these events at the United Nations. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu*, 97.

[128] "Draft memorandum on possible further danger points in light of Korean situation," 30 June 1950, folder no. 12, box 24, Kennan Papers.

[129] A telegram sent by the British Foreign Office to the State Department on 28 September stated that China's "military capacity to face major hostilities is doubtful although she may consider on the analogy of the war with Japan that her vast territory and population would ensure ultimate success." *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 815.

[130] "U.S. Course of Action in the Event Soviet Forces Enter Korean Hostilities," 2 July 1950, *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, reel 9, 87–90.

[131] "Operational Immediate," R6-16a, folder 15, box 6: "Personal for Joint Chiefs of Staff," MacArthur Papers.

assume the defensive and seek further direction from Washington.[132] The subsequent amplification sent on 9 October reiterated these instructions. Mentioning Moscow's apparent "hands off" policy, the CIA assumed that the Chinese Communists could not reasonably fend off MacArthur's forces, in part because they lacked sufficient naval and air power.[133] Instead, they would probably resort to increasing the amount of supplies and training they provided the North Koreans, as well as the number of clandestine troops they incorporated into remaining North Korean forces.

Select State Department officials and the CIA on the whole held that timing represented another factor crucial to Chinese success in the event they intervened. The North Koreans had invaded when they were far superior militarily to the South Koreans, which made Kim Il Song's war plans objectively attainable, provided the United States refrained from entering the war. On 29 August, Alan Kirk wrote that the Chinese Communists would not likely intervene and asserted that the optimal moment was when U.N. forces were reeling against the North Korean offensive in late June and early July.[134] Subsequently, a CIA analysis issued on 2 October stated, "If the Chinese Communists genuinely entertained [the belief they could safely engage in aggression outside China without suffering tremendous loss], they have been disabused of it."[135] On 12 October, in outlining the factors opposing Chinese Communist intervention, another important CIA memo issued to the president reiterated, "From a military standpoint the most favorable time for intervention in Korea has passed."[136] At Wake Island, MacArthur expressed the same conclusion to President Truman, adding that Chinese intervention during the early phase of the war would have proven decisive against United Nations forces.[137]

These strategic advantages fortified the Truman administration's decision to "call the Chinese bluff." Under a strict military analysis, CIA analysts and some in the State Department believed that Peking lacked sufficient motivation to intervene, in light of the military realties they would face in a confrontation with UN forces.[138] The Chinese were expected to recognize the

[132] *Documentary History*, 490–91, 529.

[133] "Critical Situations in the Far East," 3.

[134] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 822.

[135] "Propaganda Possibilities in the Korean Situation," 72.

[136] "Critical Situations in the Far East," 3.

[137] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 953.

[138] This was notably different from the CIA's perspective on a possible Chinese intervention in French Indochina. A CIA analysis issued to major elements of the American national security bureaucracy, including President Truman, concluded that Chinese forces would experience a near-total victory against the French, even if the United States provided military supplies in defense against the invasion. Apparently, the CIA underestimated the impact of Chinese military intervention in Korea, but did not entirely discount Peking's overall armed strength, particularly its ground capabilities. This may reveal either American estimates of French forces stationed in Indochina or a specific inclination of the CIA to emphasize and overestimate the prowess of U.S. forces relative to that of Chinese forces. See "Prospects for the Defense of Indochina

situation as American officials did—that is, in an "objective" way—in assessing the strategic situation that would arise after an intervention.[139] With this mindset guiding his thinking, Acheson admitted, "I should think it would be sheer madness on the part of the Chinese Communists to intervene and see no advantage to them doing it."[140] It seemed more rational for the Chinese to increase resistance against the wave of U.N. forces by resorting to an assortment of covert tactics, including adding troops to the North Korean forces and fostering guerrilla resistance.[141] The larger number of Chinese soldiers (as many as 30,000) reported within the North Korean forces reinforced this presumption among those who discounted Chinese threats as a bluff.[142]

MISPERCEIVING THE OTHER'S MISPERCEPTIONS

The third premise that structured interpretations of the threat of Chinese intervention was the belief that Peking saw American statements and military actions in the same light as did U.S. officials. Acheson and Truman assumed that the Chinese Communists understood the essential character of their intentions regarding Korea and, more generally, the Far East. As Acheson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff began to expect U.N. forces to advance above the 38th Parallel, they recognized that military victory in Korea would raise concern in both Peking and Moscow. America had entered the conflict to defend South Korea against supposed Soviet-led aggression against a noncommunist country. The objective of American military operations changed, though, from initially saving South Korea to unifying the peninsula under a democratically elected government, thereby effectively rolling-back communism. Kennan and Allison of the State Department believed American victory in Korea would deal a strong blow to the Soviet Union, possibly encouraging the Kremlin to become directly involved at the prospect of facing a resounding defeat in Korea.[143] Those concerned more with China, like Clubb and Johnson, believed that the change in policy might induce Peking to react

Against a Chinese Communist Invasion," ORE 50-50, "Prospects for Chinese Communist Action in Indochina during 1950," ORE 50-50 Supplement, 7 September 1950, Korean War File, President's Secretary's Files, box 216, Truman Papers. Assessments of Soviet military capabilities and Chinese Communist capabilities also posited that Chinese intervention alone would not carry the same dangers for American military objectives in Korea. See NSC 81/1.

[139] Foot, "The Sino-American Conflict in Korea," 162.

[140] McLellan, "Dean Acheson and the Korean War," 21.

[141] Wilkinson to Acheson, 8 October 1950, "Policy Concerning U.N. Crossing of the 38th Parallel, Summer 1950."

[142] On 6 October, the State Department notified Far East Command that 20,000-30,000 Chinese soldiers of Korean descent fought with North Korean forces against the UN forces. State Department to Far East Command, 6 October 1950, "State Depart May–Oct 50."

[143] For Kennan's assessment, see Kennan to Acheson, 26 June 1950, Kennan Papers. This opinion is also expressed in an unsigned memo: State Department to Far East Command, 29 September 1950, "State-In Dec 50–Apr 51; State Misc In Jun–Sep 50."

with military force. Although archival records suggest that American policy makers did not intend to threaten the Chinese (or the Soviet Union), President Truman and many in the State Department recognized some danger in expanding American policy toward Korea.

To help ensure Peking of their benign intentions, Acheson and others in the State Department believed that public statements should be made reiterating underlying American goals in fighting the Korean War. On 26 September, one day before President Truman approved the directive authorizing General MacArthur to conduct military operations above the 38th Parallel, Robert Hooker of the Policy Planning Staff suggested issuing public assurances to the Soviets and Chinese Communists that the United States did not mean to attack either of them.[144] It was imperative, he believed, to assure both governments that crossing the parallel was not a prelude to initiating war against either nation, but instead furthered U.N. goals for Korea. Soon after learning that American aircraft had attacked locations in Manchuria, Acheson wrote on 28 September that the United States had publicly reassured India and China by proposing a U.N. commission to investigate the incident.[145] Repeatedly, he and others in the State Department, especially at the U.N., openly declared that the United States sought to localize the hostilities to Korea and did not seek general war with either the U.S.S.R. or Communist China—a position they maintained throughout the summer and autumn months.[146] The assumption underlying their public statements was that the Chinese leadership would recognize them as genuine expressions of America's intentions toward Korea.

Similarly, President Truman and many in the State Department assumed they and their Chinese counterparts interpreted American policy toward Chiang Kai-Shek's regime as a strictly defensive orientation. On 27 June, President Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Straits, in order to preserve peace between Chiang's regime and the mainland. Afterward, the Joint Chiefs concluded that protecting Taiwan was crucial to American strategic capabilities and positioning in the Far East and Southeast Asia.[147] State Department officials opposed providing Chiang any more military aid than required to defend his regime against an attack from the mainland. Recognizing Peking's sensitivity on the issue, Acheson rejected a policy memo drafted

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[144] *FRUS*, *vol.* 7, 784.

[145] Ibid., 798. Acheson had repeatedly asked Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson not to have American planes bomb locations close to the Soviet Far East or Manchuria, for fear of provoking Moscow or Peking. On 12 October, he reiterated his position on bombing near the Soviet and Chinese borders to Air Force Secretary Finletter. *Documentary History*, 541.

[146] Even after the Chinese intervention, a CIA report grimly indicated that this development could mean general war in the Far East. See "Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," 6 November 1950, National Intelligence Estimate no. 2.

[147] "Immediate United States Courses of Action with Respect to Formosa," NSC 37/10, 3 August 1950, *Documents of the National Security Council, 1947–1977*, reel 1, 950–61.

by the Defense Department that would have increased American military provisions to Chiang's forces.[148] CIA analysts also recognized that Taiwan was a central focus of Chinese Communist attention. A CIA report in mid-August stated that invading Taiwan to "liberate" it was the principal focus of Chinese Communist propaganda—announcements the Joint Chiefs knew full well.[149] Another CIA report issued to the president on 8 September indicated that Communist propaganda had called America's policy toward Taiwan an act of "aggression" and "intervention."[150]

However, neither this knowledge nor Acheson's rejection of the Pentagon's proposal to increase aid to Chiang alluded to the intense affect that stationing the Seventh Fleet had on the Chinese leadership. The CIA report and Acheson did not see how Peking could view America's overall assistance program to Chiang as an act of aggression against China.[151] Even the president, though worried about a general war, failed to grasp the Chinese leadership's perspective in predicting that Peking would interpret an attack by the Nationalists against the mainland as merely an "unfriendly act."[152] Loy Henderson expressed the common sentiment in calling American policy toward Taiwan a defensive reaction to a perceived threat.[153] Peking would become more aware of the benign motivations underlying American policy toward the Nationalist government, presumed Henderson and Acheson, with continued reassurances.

The president and concerned officials in the State Department also sought to assure Peking that belligerent public statements from U.S. military officers did not reflect true U.S. objectives. After the Pusan Perimeter had been stabilized and plans for the Inchon landing began to be considered, leading military officers, including General MacArthur, called for an aggressive campaign to institute peace in the whole of East Asia. Major General Orvil Anderson, in fact, was suspended for publicly advocating war against the Soviet bloc. The White House officially repudiated these statements, dismissed the multiple officers who made them, and forced MacArthur to publicly withdraw his provocative statement about increasing military commitments to Taiwan. After supporting a statement advocating "preventive war" in Asia, Defense

[148] "Minutes and Documents," *Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council, First Supplement* (Fredrick, MD: University Publications of America, 1988), reel 1, 321–22. Acheson advocated maintaining American policy toward Taiwan as President Truman had described it when he ordered the Seventh Fleet to protect against an invasion. Acheson feared antagonizing Peking further by accelerating assistance to Chiang.

[149] "Review of the World Situation," 4; Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, 28 July 1950, *Minutes of Meetings of the National Security Council, First Supplement*, reel 1, 361–78.

[150] "Probability of Direct Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea," 542.

[151] Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu*, 106.

[152] From the President to the Secretary of State," 18 July 1950, *President Harry S. Truman's Office Files, Part 3: Subject Files*, reel 25, 978. Also see Truman to MacArthur, 30 August 1950, RG-1a, folder 19: "Personal for President Truman," box 5, MacArthur Papers.

[153] Henderson to Acheson, 1 September 1950, "Indian Efforts."

Secretary Louis Johnson grudgingly resigned at Truman's firm request.[154] To pacify the Chinese leadership, Acheson, Truman, and American ambassador to the U.N. Warren Austin subsequently reiterated that the United States held no aggressive designs toward the Soviet Union or Communist China.

Truman, Acheson, and hawkish State Department officials failed to entirely appreciate that pronouncements claiming the United States harbored no aggressive intentions toward Communist China were drowned out by U.S. military actions and policies in the Far East.[155] From 25 June, U.S. policy in the Far East had gone from defending the South Koreans, to stationing the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Straits two days later, to making greater commitments to supporting Chiang's government, and to then establishing a single government in Korea by military force.[156] As this happened, the Chinese leadership grew more concerned about larger U.S. intentions. Yet the majority of senior American policy makers never entirely appreciated Mao's perspective on the security situation emerging for his regime. An extensive intelligence report issued in early October likewise gave little indication that the CIA recognized how the Communist Chinese leadership reacted to this military move.[157] Although he refused to expand military provision to Chiang's regime, Acheson did not openly acknowledge in his refusal memo that the Chinese might have interpreted American assurances as intended to conceal underlying aggressive designs, particularly when U.S. military aircraft violated Chinese airspace and attacked locations in China only days after bellicose statements were made.[158] Prominent U.S. diplomat at the United Nations, John Foster Dulles, for example, wanted to both unify the Korean Peninsula under a non-communist (and presumably pro-U.S.) government and avoid a general war in Asia against the Chinese and Soviets.[159] He, like many others, did not recognize the possible incompatability of seeking to accomplish both goals through war in Korea.

FINDINGS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Archival evidence suggests that incoming information about the likelihood of Chinese intervention elicited increasingly greater concern among a wide range of American officials, including those who held strong doubts about the threat through October. In particular, the CIA, State Department officials in Washington and overseas, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and President Truman

[154] *Documentary History*, 468; Memorandum for Record, 13 September 1950, Papers of Eben A. Ayers, box 9, Truman Library.

[155] Truman to MacArthur, 30 August 1950, "Personal for President Truman."

[156] Chen,*China's Road to the Korean War*.

[157] "Propaganda Possibilities in the Korean Situation."

[158] Holmes to Acheson, 29 September 1950, "Indian Efforts."

[159] *FRUS*, *vol. 7*, 747.

became more alarmed as Moscow conveyed a restrained policy, but Peking voiced more direct warnings. The danger not only had grown after Inchon, but had also shifted to an extent from the prospect of global war with the Soviet Union to a war against Communist China in Korea. Although they acknowledged the increasing danger, MacArthur, the CIA, and some senior members of the State Department (Acheson and Rusk, among others) nonetheless expected Peking to refrain from entering the war in full force. Their interpretations of Chinese statements and actions were viewed in light of the Soviet Union's apparent dispositions toward the Korean War, the supposed nature of Sino-Soviet relations, a strict military-strategic calculus, and a misperception about the mindset of Chinese leaders. Even under heightened concern, hawkish officials in the State Department and the CIA as a whole concluded that the Chinese would likely increase their covert involvement instead of undertaking full-scale intervention.

Nonetheless, American assessments of the threat became noticeably divided both across national security agencies and within them. Senior administration officials, several overseas diplomats and State Department analysts, and the CIA as a whole admitted that intervention had become more likely by mid-October but nonetheless remained improbable.[160] Only a small contingent in the State Department believed Peking's entry was not the long shot their colleagues in the majority asserted. Clubb and Jessup conveyed some of the rationale under which Peking might (and eventually did) enter the war to fend off American northward advances. Johnson went so far as to recommend allowing only South Korean forces to move above the 38th Parallel, after recognizing that Peking's threats represented more than a mere bluff. These voices of caution, however, were drowned out by prevailing assumptions about Communist China's decision making.

The empirical analysis does not explain the emergence of these divergent reactions among the range of American officials, in part because the archives referenced here do not present an illuminating reason. Theoretical work in the field of political psychology, however, may prove a fruitful guide for further exploration. The archival record confirms what biased assimilation theory would postulate as the main reason many American national security officials, and the CIA, failed to predict China's entry into the war. Broadly stated, this theory holds that initial assumptions about a particular subject of attention, or about categories to which that subject belongs, tend to override incoming information as the information becomes assimilated into the observer's existing knowledge structure.[161] Although this aptly describes most American reactions examined here, it is not clear whether biased assimilation

[160] Dean Acheson, Congressional testimony, "Military Situation in the Far East," 1 June 1951.

[161] See Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 37, no. 11 (November, 1979): 2098–2109. Also see Cheryl Koopman et al., "Beliefs about

theory also helps explain why some drew more worrisome conclusions than others from the same information. Under the biased assimilation proposition, we would expect that all American officials holding the same initial premises about the prospect of Chinese intervention and encountering the same information would have maintained similar interpretations of the threat. Officials operating under a different set of premises, by contrast, would have drawn a different conclusion. The divergent interpretations among American officials may, therefore, represent a function of different initial perspectives on Communist China. Exploring this hypothesis requires knowing the extent to which having specific knowledge about Communist China—gained from personal experience or through formal study—helped some American officials draw more worrisome signs from incoming information than those who lacked an intimate grasp of Chinese decision making.

Theories of risk-taking also serve as an appropriate conceptual guide for understanding the divergent conclusions, largely because nearly all American officials examined here recognized the risks involved in attempting to unify the Korean Peninsula by military force. Prospect theory posits that individuals generally seek to avoid taking risks because they fear losing what they have and accordingly tend to take risks when inaction would cost them something already in their possession.[162] *Ceteris paribus*, individuals would rather retain what they have than risk losing it in pursuit of some new gain. This proposition predicts the caution expressed by Kennan, Bohlen, Clubb, and Johnson, all of whom emphasized the dangers entailed in expanding the war to North Korea, thereby demonstrating an aversion to the great risk their colleagues had accepted. Some advocates of advancing into North Korea, however, also framed the decision with a concern for incurring potential loss. Henderson and military officers in Washington, in particular, believed that America would lose something significant by having to maintain a troop presence in a divided Korea in the event U.N. forces halted at the 38th Parallel. Contrary to opposition voices, this group advocated taking a risk (that is, advancing toward the Yalu River) to avoid a troubling condition that would arise from not taking the risk (that is, defending South Korea against a potential future attack from the north). Still others, Allison especially, focused on the opportunity of rendering a tremendous victory against the Soviet Union in Korea.[163] In their view, forgoing the opportunity would have represented

International Security and Change in 1992 among Russian and American National Security Elites," *Journal of Peace Psychology* 4, no. 1 (1998): 35–57.

[162] A fine application of prospect theory to international relations appears in Rose McDermott, *Risk-taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in Post-War American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998). Yaacov Vertzberger develops a sociocognitive approach to risky decision-making in *Risk Taking and Decisionmaking: Foreign Military Intervention Decisions* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[163] The Joint Chiefs agreed that the defeat of the North Korean armed forces would mark a significant blow to the Soviet Union. See "Military Measures in Support of U.S. Policy with Respect to Korea," 3 September 1950, *Records of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, reel 9, 413.

the greater loss in halting at the 38th Parallel. Although seeking to avoid losses, in short, American officials holding distinct perspectives attributed different values to various elements of the same politico-military situation, thus framing it differently in their respective minds.

In light of how the empirical analysis comports with biased assimilation theory and prospect theory, future research would do well to explore the extent to which different perspectives on Communist China and different framings of the politico-military situation emerging from the U.N.'s military advance northward combined to generate divergent reactions to incoming signals among a wide range of American officials. Depending on the findings of that pursuit, future theoretical work might treat theories of risk-taking and biased assimilation as analytic complements in explaining intelligence and strategic decision making failures.