



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

n-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

From Korea to Vietnam: The Origins and Mindset of Postwar U.S. Interventionism

Mel Gurtov

The wars in Korea and Vietnam were of a piece, directly related by virtue of U.S. global strategy and China's security concerns. This paper, focusing mainly on the U.S. side in these wars, argues that three characteristics of American policy had enduring meaning for the rest of the Cold War and even beyond: the official mindsets that led to U.S. involvement, the centrality of the China threat in American decision making, and the common legacy of intervention against nationalism and in support of authoritarian regimes. It is part of a continuing Asia-Pacific Journal series on the Korean War on the sixtieth anniversary of its outbreak.

The Korean War was the seminal event of the Cold War in Asia. By invoking containment of communism to deal with the outbreak of war on the peninsula, the United States carried the Truman Doctrine into Asia. Japan became the key U.S. military ally in Asia, Chinese intervention in Korea sealed U.S.-China enmity for the next thirty years, and Korea stayed divided without a peace treaty. At one and the same time, war in Korea drew Asia into the orbit of vital U.S. interests and strengthened the U.S. commitment to Europe's primacy.¹ The war rigidified ideological positions and ensured that the East-West geopolitical struggle would go on for many years. As importantly, the ensuing big-power confrontation in Vietnam, in which the United States and China tangled by proxy, represented a straight line from Korea. These two conflicts directly or indirectly enveloped nearly all of Asia, forcing governments to choose sides in the Cold War competition.

This paper will argue that the importance of the Korean and Vietnam wars goes beyond their strategic connection. The official mindsets that led to U.S. involvement, the centrality of the China threat in American decision making, and the common legacy of intervention against nationalism and in support of authoritarian regimes were all features of U.S. policy throughout the remainder of the Cold War in Asia. But not only then or there; after the Cold War, nationalist identities and U.S. internationalist ambitions collided repeatedly in other parts of the world.

Korea: The "Globalization of Containment"

President Truman's containment speech of March 1947, though focused on the Mediterranean, not Asia, nevertheless prefigured the U.S. response to Korean events in June 1950. As the Joint Chiefs of Staff recognized, even if Soviet advances in Greece and Turkey were thwarted, the USSR "may decide to accelerate expansion in the Far East, in order to gain control of those areas which outflank us in the Near and Middle East."² A consistent Cold War principle was thus established: the interconnectedness of global events—falling dominoes, in short. Containing presumed Soviet moves in southern Europe was of a piece with containment in Asia.

During the next two years U.S. policy came to embrace the idea that the so-called Yalta system—built on the assumption of post-war U.S.-Soviet cooperation—was no longer viable. In the Pacific that meant converting Japan into a security partner, with a bilateral peace treaty dependent on Japanese consent to the establishment of major U.S. military bases for the indefinite future, and secret arrangements for U.S. ships carrying nuclear weapons.³ This "revival of Japanese militarism," as the Chinese would call it then and later, invited a communist response, which came in the form of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance (see below) in February 1950. The treaty specified that the Soviet Union would come to China's aid in the event of an attack by Japan "or any other State which should unite in any form with Japan in acts of aggression." Thus was the Cold War line in the sand drawn, precluding Japanese neutralism in foreign policy and early normalization of relations with the PRC.

The next major benchmark in the evolution of the Cold War in Asia was NSC-68, a secret study commissioned by President Truman and submitted for his approval in April 1950. The study provided the essential ideological dimension to U.S. policy.⁴

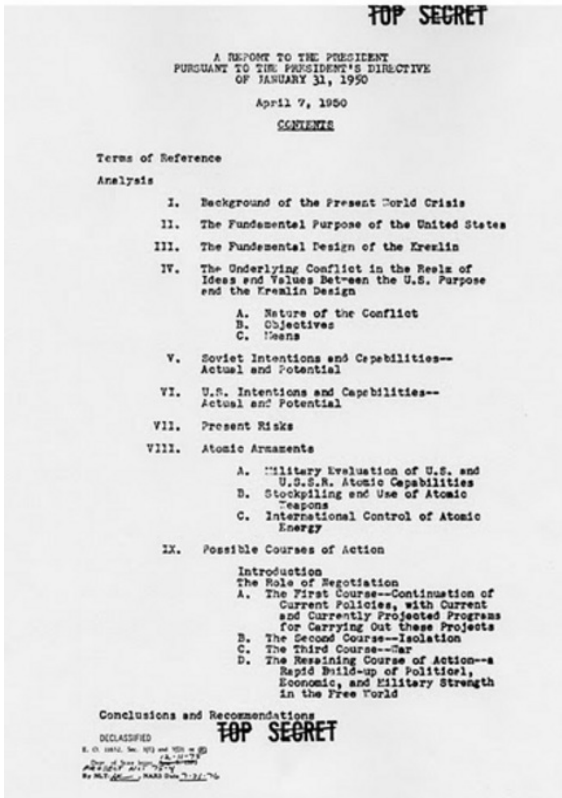
This document, perhaps the most important statement of U.S. grand strategy in the entire Cold War, clarified that global instability, "even in the absence of the Soviet Union," required a major U.S. military buildup and an activist response to Soviet machinations. NSC-68 had its internal critics—George Kennan, for instance, thought it wrong to establish national security strategy by way of doctrine—but it was a consensus document that provided benefits for all the players, notably the U.S. military. Yet it is important to understand that NSC-68 and other NSC studies around the same time, such as NSC 48 (1949), went beyond containment and recommendations for U.S. rearmament.

Of equal importance was the objective to preserve *the global economic system* that Bretton Woods had created—a liberal trading order in which U.S. exports could thrive and U.S. financial supremacy could be sustained.⁵

Ideologically, NSC-68 was the predictable outgrowth of an administration-wide conviction that the communist threat was global in scope, monolithic in structure, and largely "schematic" (Kennan's word) in intent. The declassified NSC studies of China are of a piece with public statements by U.S. leaders in seeing little to distinguish the China threat from the Soviet threat—though with the exception that NSC experts did note the *potential* for Sino-Soviet differences to emerge.⁶ But on the whole, Kennan's early warnings about Stalin's foreign policy—warnings whose alarmist language he would later regret⁷—found a receptive audience in Washington, and were easily transferable to concerns about a communist China.

On the eve of the Korean War Chinese leaders had reached the same kinds of conclusions about "U.S. imperialism" that U.S. leaders had reached about China: an implacable threat, headed by people who would never agree to treat China on the basis of "equality and mutual benefit." The combination of Chinese communist suspicions and anger over U.S. support of Chiang Kai-shek, on one hand, and Patrick Hurley's accusations of pro-communist sympathies among Foreign Service and State Department officers who served in China or on the China Desk, on the other, effectively closed the door on the possibility of finding common ground. Truman spoke of reaching out to Chinese "liberals" instead of to Mao's inner circle, an erroneous choice that further contributed to putting off the day when U.S.-China relations could be normalized. Thus, well before war broke out in Korea, chances for U.S. recognition of China became extremely small.⁸ Mao's only realistic option was to "lean to one side" and drive the best bargain he could—the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance, long understood as the last of China's unequal treaties.

Although we now know that the North Korean invasion of the South was the subject of intense bargaining among the three communist countries' leaders, and that Chinese intervention in support of the North was by no means preordained, Truman's inner circle was surely unaware of such details. Even if they had been known, it is doubtful that they would have led to a decision by the president not to intervene in Korea. The thinking behind NSC-68, and (as Glenn Paige's account makes clear) the small number of people involved in the Korean decisions,⁹ virtually assured U.S. intervention in Korea—no matter Dean Acheson's "perimeter speech," the warnings of U.S. military and civilian officials about the looming Korean "volcano" of civil war,¹⁰ Congressional reluctance



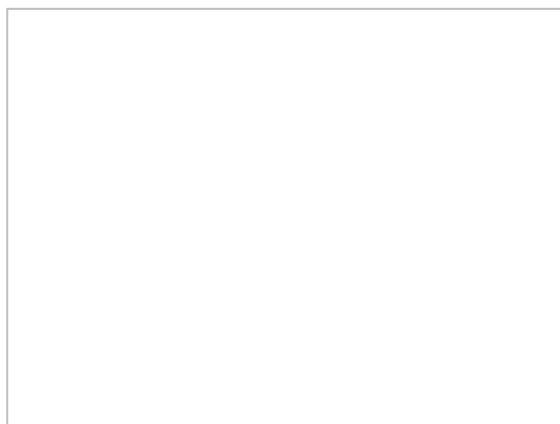
Full text of NSC-68 is available [here](#).

to provide economic assistance to the ROK, or Kennan's concern that a communist threat in the East would draw attention away from the main threat in the West. As Truman would recall, the first images that came to his mind when he got word of North Korea's crossing of the 38th parallel were of Munich, Manchuria, and Ethiopia.¹¹ Given the American political scene—pressures from the Republican right wing and the onset of McCarthyism—Truman was not about to risk charges of being soft on communism.¹²

In making his historic commitment to South Korea's defense, Truman was not merely responding to a communist probe of the West's weak spots, as some U.S. officials initially thought. For the United States, the decision was considered a "test case." The "test" was conceived by the president and his chief advisers as having three dimensions: opposition to communist aggression wherever it occurred (an extension, therefore, of the Truman Doctrine in Europe); preservation of the collective security system under the United Nations; and no appeasement.¹³ Thus, the reputation of the United States as a dependable ally was believed to be on the line.¹⁴ The Korean decision was made with considerable concern about security issues, including protection of Japan and Taiwan; but no one questioned the correctness of intervening. Yet the Korean War, after all, was a civil war as much as it was an international war, a clash of contending Korean nationalisms brought on by the U.S.-Soviet decision at the end of World War II to divide the country. But the debate among Truman's inner circle never entertained such matters; nor did it address the nature of the government the United States became committed to defending. Nor, finally, did U.S. leaders consider Korea's intrinsic value—its culture and history—separately from its place in the global contest with the Soviets.¹⁵

What was important for American leaders about Korea was its derivative value. It could have been anywhere, said Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk; the U.S. response would have been the same.¹⁶ It was a *moral* conflict as much as a strategic one. This unchallenged perspective facilitated the miscalculations and misperceptions that would follow.¹⁷ Vietnam would fall into the same category—a country of no particular importance to U.S. national interests when considered in isolation, yet somehow "vital" to protect nonetheless in the context of the Cold War. Hence Korea marked the initial step in the globalization of containment, as Robert Osgood wrote,¹⁸ and Vietnam would be the second. These conflicts set the stage for *global interventionism*, on the assumption that the communist menace had become worldwide in scope and that Chinese aggressiveness was the Asian component of a full-fledged Moscow-directed assault on the West.

The Chinese were surely motivated by an immediate sense of threat. After all, they believed they had earlier withstood U.S. intervention in their civil war with the KMT. Though hesitant to make a commitment to defend North Korea without assurances of full Soviet support—the final decision was not made until October 4-5, 1950—the PRC leadership viewed the possibility of a U.S. occupation of the entire Korean peninsula and Taiwan as sufficient reason to intervene.¹⁹ The fact of U.S. entry into North Korea was decisive; it threatened China's own security and the socialist revolutions in both countries.²⁰ Mao reasoned that whether or not China prevailed against U.S. forces, China simply had to act; otherwise, not merely its security but also its prestige would suffer, "and the American invaders will run more rampant, and have negative effects for the entire Far East."²¹ In the end Beijing, just like Washington, felt a moral as well as a security imperative to go to war.²² Yet in both cases, leaders underestimated the opponent's will and misunderstood its motives.²³



Map indicates stages in the US-Korean War 1950

China and the United States could each claim victory in the Korean War, since their Korean allies had been successfully protected. But that was hardly the whole story, for both had failed in their larger strategic objective, which was to deter future interventions elsewhere in

Asia. For the United States, moreover, war in Korea had become a sharp-edged political issue, with Republicans charging that Truman's limited-war doctrine was immoral and Truman's joint chiefs of staff answering that a wider war to "win" in Korea would have been (in General Omar Bradley's famous words) "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." Thus, for the United States, limited victory in Korea—stalemate in fact—surely contributed to seeing Vietnam as the inevitable next stop for containment. Indeed, by the time the Korean armistice was signed in 1953, the first of several U.S. administrations (Dwight Eisenhower's) had already committed to preventing the extension of communism in Asia.

Vietnam: A Second Test

Numerous explanations of "why Vietnam?" have emerged since the war ended in 1975. Bureaucratic explanations have been popular: "groupthink" in high-level

decision making; presidents' hopes not to lose the next election; conditioned behavior in response to crisis. Other analysts have focused on presidential hubris, the politics of escalation, the imperial presidency, concern about the U.S. reputation, and the excessive influence of the military, among many others. Common to many of these interpretations is *American hegemony*: the belief among U.S. leaders that the nation was being tested again, and that leadership of the Free World demanded a major commitment to winning lest the communist world prevail in Southeast Asia and beyond.

War in Vietnam preoccupied every U.S. president from Roosevelt to Ford. Each of them, and their top advisers, subscribed to the basic idea that while Vietnam was not intrinsically important, it had increasing symbolic meaning for America's power position in the world. As one reads the basic documents—the NSC strategic assessments from 1950 on, the presidential papers, and the Pentagon Papers collection among others—one finds Vietnam moving inexorably to center stage in U.S. global strategy. At first this evolution was a function of war in Korea: While the Americans were engaged in Northeast Asia, it behooved the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to support the French effort in Indochina. The two wars were interlinked, and the French were viewed as America's proxy in the common struggle to stem the communist tide. Once an armistice was arranged in Korea, Vietnam became America's war for the next twenty-five years, first in ongoing support of the French, then (following the Geneva Conference in 1954 that divided Vietnam) in replacement of them.

US aid for France in Indochina charted in [Pentagon Papers](#).

The United States, particularly the State Department's Far Eastern desk,²⁴ certainly had misgivings about supporting French colonialism and France's choice of a Vietnamese leader (Emperor Bao Dai) who, like Syngman Rhee, had long lived outside his country. Bao Dai, moreover, was widely regarded as a colonial puppet; he, like other leaders in Saigon in the years to follow, would never be able to claim the nationalist mantle that Ho Chi Minh held. But Ho, after all, was considered another Mao, not another Tito; his communism mattered far more (to Acheson and the State Department's European desk) than his Vietnamese nationalism.²⁵ U.S. recognition of Bao Dai's government in February 1950 thus followed Chinese and Soviet recognition of Ho's the month before. Moreover, whereas Korea's independence was never a contested issue, Vietnam's (as well as Cambodia's and Laos') was. France's constant postponement of grants of independence to the three colonies was another source of U.S. irritation. Nevertheless, U.S. presidents consistently placed such reservations second to strategic assessments that called for ever-larger investments of money and then troops to fight "Soviet imperialism."

Following on Truman's commitment to intervention in Korea, U.S. military support, which eventually accounted for around 80 percent of France's war costs, began to flow into Vietnam. Accompanying the flow was an escalating perception of threat.²⁶ NSC 48/1 (December 1949) spoke of the need to contain communism in Indochina. NSC 64 (February 1950) linked events in Indochina to "anticipated communist plans to seize all of Southeast Asia," recited the domino theory, and recommended that "all practicable measures be taken to prevent further communist expansion in Southeast Asia." Reflecting the outbreak of war in Korea, a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of December 1950 considered direct Chinese intervention in Indochina "imminent." NSC 48/2 (December 1950) repeated that concern in calling for U.S. economic and military assistance against "threats from Communist aggression, direct or indirect . . ." NSC 124/2 (June 1952) also put the China threat at center stage, warning that "the danger of an overt military attack against Southeast Asia is inherent in the existence of a hostile and aggressive Communist China." And NSC 5405 (January 1954) considered defense of Indochina the "keystone of the defense of mainland Southeast Asia except possibly Malaya."

These and other official assessments prophesied that the loss of even a single country to communism would be the beginning of a political and economic disaster for U.S. interests. Consequently, whereas before Korea, the security community's advice to the president was to support the "Bao Dai solution" and sustain the French war effort, after Korea—and as the French effort began to fail—the United States was looking for ways to contain a presumptively Chinese threat and prevent a negotiated capitulation to Ho Chi Minh's forces. Thus, NSC 5405 rejected any political solution, including a coalition government in Vietnam, and instead stated: "It will be U.S. policy to accept nothing short of a military victory in Indo-China."²⁷



Emperor Bao Dai

But it did. The United States was forced to swallow what the NSC called a "disaster" in Vietnam, the agreement reached at the Geneva Conference to divide the country at the seventeenth parallel. From there on, it was U.S. policy to replace the French, prevent the holding of national elections called for in the Geneva Accords because of the certainty of Ho Chi Minh's victory, and go about "nation building" with yet another absentee leader who lacked nationalist credentials, Ngo Dinh Diem. But efforts to "reform" his and successor governments failed just as they had in South Korea and in Vietnam under French rule. Constantly thwarted by corrupt and ineffectual South Vietnamese leaders, the Americans felt perfectly justified in promoting coups and giving the green light (in the case of Diem and his brother) to assassinations, again to no avail.²⁸

The second Vietnam War revealed a peculiarly American penchant for relying on military solutions. At one level was counter-guerrilla warfare to "win the hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. Under Kennedy, this effort was shaped by the conviction that communist organizers in the countryside of the Third World were no more than "scavengers of the modernization process." "Communism is best understood as a disease of the transition to modernization," said Walt Rostow in a much-publicized speech.²⁹ If guerrilla warfare, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's "military arm," could be defeated in Vietnam, Rostow proclaimed, there would be no more Cubas, Congos, or Vietnams. Kennedy clearly agreed.³⁰

At some point, however, it became evident that counter-guerrilla tactics were not working. In a briefing of top officials, General Maxwell Taylor said: "The ability of the Viet-Cong continuously to rebuild their units and to make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war. . . . Not only do the Viet-Cong units have the recuperative power of the phoenix, but they have an amazing ability to maintain morale."³¹ Taylor evidently did not consider anti-foreign nationalism much of an explanation. After 1964, U.S. strategy leaned more on force at a second level: the unprecedented bombing of both North and South Vietnam. Here there was considerable internal confusion and bickering about what bombing was supposed to accomplish—

breaking Hanoi's will? Destroying North Vietnam's industrial capabilities? Improving morale in the South?—but no lack of enthusiasm for the task itself. Yet no amount of military firepower proved capable either of defeating or demoralizing the enemy, or uplifting the South Vietnamese military and civilian leadership.

The U.S. response to clear indications that military measures of any kind and dimension were failing to produce victory speaks directly to the hegemony thesis. By 1965, the argument of some of Lyndon Johnson's advisers for continuing the bombing strategy (now called "sustained reprisal") had turned to "setting a higher price for the future upon all adventures of guerrilla warfare. . . ." Even though "the odds of success [by bombing] . . . may be somewhere between 25% and 75%," bombing would at least make Hanoi's plans more expensive.³² To this argument was added the idea that what was really at stake, even in failure, was America's reputation:

It is essential—however badly SEA [Southeast Asia] may go over the next 1-3 years—that U.S. emerge as a "good doctor." We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly. We must avoid harmful appearances which will affect judgments by, and provide pretexts to, other nations regarding . . . U.S. policy, power, resolve and competence to deal with their problems.³³



**US Special Forces and Montagnard troops
in Vietnam**

There were, of course, top advisers such as Walt Rostow and the Joint Chiefs of Staff who persisted in believing that more bombing would produce the desired results. But what the above excerpts reveal is that lost faith in bombing did not end it; rather, bombing became a show of national resolve, essential for *the next time*. The key national interest, John McNaughton (a top adviser to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara) would say in the same memo just quoted, was no longer about saving Vietnam. U.S. aims were now

70%--To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as a guarantor).

20%--To keep SVN [South Vietnam] (and the adjacent) territory from Chinese hands.

10%--To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better, freer way of life.³⁴

If the dominoes were not to keep falling, reputation was the key and displays of staying power were essential to that reputation. As Rostow would argue, the United States could still achieve its objectives in Vietnam "if we enter the exercise with the same determination and staying power that we entered the long test on Berlin and the short test on the Cuba missiles. But it will take that kind of Presidential commitment and staying power." While acknowledging "anxieties and complications on our side of the line," what mattered most to Rostow—and, he had every reason to believe, to everyone else in the Kennedy-Johnson administrations—was the "limited but real margin of influence on the outcome which flows from the simple fact that at this stage of history we are the greatest power in the world—if we behave like it."³⁵

Reputation, test case, hegemony—every president concerned with Vietnam bought into the validity of these ideas and determined somehow to make the most of a war they *knew* was being lost. By the time the war had become "Johnson's war," it was increasingly evident to the president that victory was eluding him. Notwithstanding his tough public words, Johnson privately sharply questioned his military and civilian advisers about why and how they thought the United States could win in Vietnam. In one meeting he specifically wondered whether "Westerners can ever win in Asia" and while fighting side by side with

a "government [that] changes every month." Maybe the United States should "make our stand somewhere else?" he offered.³⁶

But at that meeting and in conversations revealed after his death, Johnson succumbed to the logic of "national security." He had grave and growing doubts: "the biggest damn mess I ever saw," he said on one taped conversation with McGeorge Bundy in the Oval Office. "I don't think it's worth fighting for, and I don't think we can get out." In another conversation with Senator Richard B. Russell, a close friend, Johnson admitted that "We're in the quicksands up to our neck, and I just don't know what the hell to do about it." Johnson worried about sending young men to die and about being impeached for being "soft on communism."³⁷ Thus, he fell back on the anti-communist zeal that had always worked for presidents, with Congress and with the public. Johnson simply saw no alternative to deeper involvement.

And what of the Chinese?³⁸ Having been a strong supporter of Vietnam's revolution against the French—mainly in the form of advisers and military aid—China reacted to U.S. escalation in the mid-1960s in much the same way as in Korea: It considered the threat to Vietnam equivalent to a threat to the PRC's own security. Chinese leaders told their Vietnamese counterparts that they would send troops if requested—and in the end, China did dispatch about 320,000 troops, though none for combat. But at the same time, and contrary to the Korean experience, Mao and other conveyed to Washington that it did not want a war with the United States—messages that Washington reciprocated. Though there were aerial incidents that might have led to direct Sino-American conflict, both governments took steps to prevent it. U.S. troops never entered North Vietnam, and the U.S. government never publicized the fact that Chinese troops were there. "One can say," a Chinese scholar has written, "that the two sides established initial trust during the confrontation."³⁹

Conclusion

There are several remarkable similarities in the U.S. and Chinese experiences in the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Leaders in both countries considered the outbreak of fighting important tests of will and credibility. The conflicts were assessed as threats to national security that demanded a strong response for moral reasons as well. Beneath the surface domestic politics in both China and the United States also compelled intervention. Still, despite the view in both Washington and Beijing that each was the main enemy in the wars, they took steps to keep the wars from expanding into China, and in the U.S. case from resorting to (though considering) use of nuclear weapons.

But while U.S. leaders are to be commended for rejecting total war and improving crisis communication with China by the 1960s, decision making in other respects left much to be desired. Among the most important deficiencies revealed in the course of U.S. decision making on the two wars was the tendency to fall back on what Morton Halperin has called "shared images": axioms of foreign affairs supposedly learned from earlier experiences in dealing with the communist world. Among them are "no appeasement," "peace is indivisible," the unique U.S. responsibility for defense of the Free World, and the primacy of military strength to achieve national security.⁴⁰ Stereotypical thinking, and the misapplication of lessons supposedly learned from other conflicts,⁴¹ blinded

U.S. decision makers (and probably decision makers in the USSR and China too) to the particular historical, political, and cultural conditions that they faced in Korea and Vietnam.⁴² They also kept decision makers from challenging official truths and proposing alternatives. *Were* these conflicts tests of U.S. will? *Was* the USSR pulling the strings? *Was* the domino principle valid? Did U.S. policies contribute to bringing on or prolonging the war? *Were* there *nonviolent* opportunities to end the war? Unfortunately, history overpowered calculation, as Ernest May has concluded.⁴³ Of course it did not help matters that in the 1950s Asia experts in the State Department and other government agencies—people who *might* have asked the impertinent questions—had been sidelined by the McCarthyist purges. Those few who were left to challenge U.S. policy, such as George Ball in the State Department, were given a hearing but were invariably outnumbered and often castigated for not being “team players.”⁴⁴

Military approaches to fundamentally political solutions to these wars ensured a future of seemingly insatiable demands by the Pentagon for more money, weapons, and manpower. No cost was too great when national security was determined to be at stake. The wars in Korea and Vietnam, and other U.S. interventions that followed, set a pattern of high military spending that continues to the present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.⁴⁵ The pattern reflects consistent Pentagon resistance to lowering weapons procurement, redefining missions and objectives, or reevaluating threats. Rather, the thrust of the Pentagon's planning is to *build* on prior budgets, weapons acquisitions, and threat analyses.

U.S. involvement in Vietnam deviated from Korea in a number of respects, principal among them being its unilateral character. President Truman took the Korea issue before the UN—and, thanks to the absence of the Soviet representative, secured Security Council approval—and eventually received troop support from a number of countries. He could thus claim that intervention was legitimate, both in terms of repelling North Korean aggression and defending the South Korean government and people. But Vietnam was a largely unilateral effort; though various countries (including South Korea) contributed, the war from first to last was a matter of American decision.⁴⁶ Of course, in both cases the issue of legitimacy was not entirely resolved: Truman never asked Congress for a declaration of war, or even consulted with Congress beforehand; and (with the exception of Eisenhower's informal but critical consultations with key members of Congress on Vietnam in 1954) no president brought Congress into discussion of policy making. Moreover, the support the United States received from other countries in both wars never impacted U.S. decision making. A “coalition of the willing” always presumed U.S. leadership. The “imperial presidency” and U.S. unilateralism were thus born in these wars; we have witnessed the survival of these trends most recently in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite the fact that since 1973 a War Powers Resolution has been the law.⁴⁷

“Limited war” is another legacy of Korea and Vietnam. Presidents throughout were disposed to “minimax” strategies: seeking maximum gains with *relatively* smaller investments. Of course the sacrifices of blood and treasure were very large in both wars, and in terms of destructiveness, these wars were anything but limited. Yet presidents withheld uses of force that would have created even larger and more destructive conflicts, such as by carrying the war into China, committing still larger numbers of ground troops, bombing large cities and ports, and using the atomic bomb. All presidents thus had to endure political flak for not fighting to win despite their use of extraordinary firepower: General MacArthur's accusations after Truman fired him would be just the beginning of presidential troubles when fighting for anything less than complete victory and allegedly interfering with the professional military's right to conduct hostilities as it sees fit.

In limiting U.S. objectives in Korea and Vietnam to deterrence and defense, however, the aims of policy were not met. The United States saw Korea still divided and a North Vietnamese takeover of the South. Moreover, U.S. presidents presided over the expansion of both wars in other directions. Vietnam became an extension of the Korean War, at least in the minds of U.S. leaders; and the war in Vietnam engulfed both Laos and Cambodia. In Cambodia, the Nixon administration's preference for military action rather than acceptance of Prince Sihanouk's version of neutrality led to the overthrow of the government and the start of a nightmarish reign of terror under the Khmer Rouge. Thus, large-scale U.S. interventions accomplished defense of South Korea, but at the cost of constant inter-Korean tension, a long-term U.S. military presence there and in Japan, and postponement of normal relationships with Vietnam, China, and North Korea.⁴⁸

It might be objected that *in the context of the Cold War*, presidents and their top advisers had limited options: Intervention in Korea and Vietnam was unavoidable for both domestic and international reasons. After all, the Soviet Union and its allies appeared to be on the march; if they weren't stopped, it was irresponsible not to take action to stop them—and politically risky as well. (LBJ thought he would be impeached if he pulled U.S. forces out of Vietnam; and not being “the first president to lose a war” was the first rule of presidents involved in one.) Hindsight only obscures the real-world choices that faced leaders who had witnessed the Soviets clamping down on Eastern Europe. These leaders therefore had every reason to presume and anticipate aggressive communist behavior in Asia.

But while these are reasonable counter-arguments to nonintervention, they inadvertently make the very point I conclude with based on the case studies. American administrations are consistently faced with unpalatable choices because of their prior commitment to being global policeman. They misinterpret the circumstances of the time—the communist threat, the terrorist threat—as requiring a crusade rather than considering each situation from the standpoint of that country's own history and nationalist identity. U.S. leaders often argue that leadership of the Free World is thrust upon them, and that “history” has chosen the United States to bear the greatest burdens. In reality, the notion that America is destined to lead, and moreover is beneficent and non-imperial in leading, forms part of the mythology that justifies interventionism.⁴⁹ “We are the indispensable nation,” as Madeleine Albright once put it. President Obama's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech continues this tradition.

The trap of “national security” has been acknowledged by none other than Robert McNamara. His memoirs list eleven lessons that should be learned from Vietnam, perhaps the most important of which is the following:

We did not recognize that neither our people nor our leaders are omniscient. Where our own security is not directly at stake, our judgment of what is in another people's or country's best interest should be put to the test of open discussion in international forums. We do not have the God-given right to shape every nation in our own image or as we choose.⁵⁰

Yet even here we see how a general guideline can easily be overwhelmed by events. Precisely where and when “our own security” is at stake is, in the end, a matter of judgment, and no president is going to put the issue “to the test of open discussion,” not in Congress and certainly not in “international forums.” Instead, national security issues will be judged as they have always been judged—by a handful of (mostly) men around the president, people who share his world view and who have always believed in American globalism.⁵¹

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This article is part of a series commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War.

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- [Mark Caprio](#), *Neglected Questions on the "Forgotten War": South Korea and the United States on the Eve of the Korean War*.
- [Steven Lee](#), *The United States, the United Nations, and the Second Occupation of Korea, 1950-1951*.
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- [Sheila Miyoshi Jager](#), *Cycles of History: China, North Korea, and the End of the Korean War*.
- [Tim Beal](#), *Korean Brinkmanship, American Provocation, and the Road to War: The Manufacturing of a Crisis*.
- [Wada Haruki](#), *From the Firing at Yeonpyeong Island to a Comprehensive Solution to the Problems of Division and War in Korea*.
- [Nan Kim](#) with an introduction by John McGlynn, *Factsheet: West Sea Crisis in Korea*.

Notes

¹ Recall that U.S. entry into the war in Korea was soon accompanied by the rearmament of Germany, establishment of a common European defense strategy and command center, and an increase in U.S. ground forces in Europe.

² Quoted by Akira Iriye, *The Cold War in Asia: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 156.

³ *Ibid.*, pp.173-74; Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 295. As LaFeber writes, democratizing Japan was not the primary objective of the U.S. occupation. "The highest objectives were, first, to use Japan as the hub of an open, multilateral capitalism in Asia; second, to contain communism; and third to reassure neighbors by keeping Japan orderly and controlled." The secret agreements, recently discovered by the new DPJ government in Tokyo, regarded use of U.S. bases and passage for nuclear-armed ships, including the right of U.S. ships carrying nuclear weapons to enter Japanese ports. Martin Fackler, "Japan Drops Denial of Cold War 'Treaties,'" *New York Times*, March 9, 2010.

⁴ See Michael Yahuda, *The International Politics of the Asia-Pacific* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 2d rev. ed., p. 111 on NSC-68 as an ideological document.

⁵ Benjamin Schwarz, "Why America Thinks It Has to Run the World," *The Atlantic*, April 1996, p. 39.

⁶ National Intelligence Council, ed., *Tracking the Dragon: National Intelligence Estimates on China During the Era of Mao, 1948-1976* (Washington, D.C.: NIC, 2004), pp. 37-60, 67-80, 87-98, 375-90, 403-12.

⁷ See, for instance, the CNN interview with Kennan in May and June 1996, found [here](#).

⁸ See the documents in Michael H. Hunt, ed., *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy: An International History Reader* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. xxx.

⁹ Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean Decision: June 24-30, 1950* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 282. Except for the decision of June 29, 1950 to send combat troops to the Pusan area, Truman did not consult with any formal group such as the NSC. All the decision making was ad hoc.

¹⁰ Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 192.

¹¹ Harry S Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. II: *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 333. "I felt strongly," Truman wrote, "that if South Korea was allowed to fall Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores. . . . If this was allowed to go unchallenged it would mean a third world war . . ." *Ibid.*

¹² See, for example, his speech of October 27, 1948 in defense of his "doctrine," at *Public Papers of the Presidents 1948*, online [here](#).

¹³ See Paige, *The Korean Decision*, pp. 98-100

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹⁷ See John G. Stoessinger, *Nations in Darkness: China, Russia, and America*, 4th ed. (New York: Random House, 1986), chap. 4.

¹⁸ Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

¹⁹ Zhang Baijia, "'Resist America': China's Role in the Korean and Vietnam Wars," in Michael D. Swaine and Zhang Tuosheng, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises: Case Studies and Analysis* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996), pp. 187-88, 190.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 186.

²¹ See his telegrams to Stalin and Premier Zhou Enlai in October 1950, in *New York Times*, February 26, 1992, p. A4.

²² Zhang Baijia, "Resist America," p. 190. One other Chinese motive was revealed by Mao in once-secret internal talks: his need to demonstrate his revolutionary credentials to Stalin. Mao would say that only when China sent troops into Korea did Stalin trust him. Stuart Schram, ed., *Chairman Mao Talks to the People: Talks and Letters, 1956-1971* (New York: Pantheon, 1974).

²³ See Allen S. Whiting, "U.S. Crisis Management vis-à-vis China," in Swaine and Zhang, eds., *Managing Sino-American Crises*, pp. 218-19.

²⁴ See William Appleman Williams et al., eds., *America in Vietnam: A Documentary History* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), pp. 54-55, 90-91, 105-6.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 93-97.

²⁶ The documents cited in this paragraph are from Neil Sheehan et al., eds., *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam, 1971), pp. 9, 27-32 [hereafter, *PP(B)*], and in the much larger "Gravel Edition" of the Pentagon Papers published by Beacon Press.

²⁷ *PP(B)*, pp. 36-37.

²⁸ See, for instance, the cables of Ambassador (to Saigon) Henry Cabot Lodge in *PP (B)*, pp. 208-10 and his comments at a meeting of the policy-making principals in July 1965, in Hunt, ed., *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 352-53: "We have to do what we think we ought to do regardless of what the Saigon government does. As we move ahead on a new phase—it gives us the right and duty to do certain things with or without the government's approval." That is clearly what happened in November 1963 when Kennedy in all but executive order authorized U.S. agreement to Diem's elimination. The latest once-secret information on that episode is available from the National Security Archive at nsarchiv.org.

²⁹ W. W. Rostow, "Guerrilla Warfare in the Underdeveloped Areas," *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 45, No. 1154 (August 7, 1961), pp. 233-38.

³⁰ Most emphatically in a speech of April 20, 1961, following on the disastrous attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro's government in the landing at the Bay of Pigs. Text in Williams et al., eds., *America in Vietnam*, pp. 189-91.

³¹ *PP (B)*, p. 372.

³² Memo from McGeorge Bundy to Lyndon Johnson, February 7, 1965, *ibid.*, p. 426.

³³ Draft memo from John T. McNaughton, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, to McNamara, March 24, 1965, *ibid.*, p. 438.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

³⁵ Memo from Rostow to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, November 23, 1964, *ibid.*, pp. 419-23.

³⁶ Memos of meetings with Johnson and advisers, July 21-22, 1965, in Hunt, ed., *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy*, pp. 351-58.

³⁷ Russell Baker, "What L.B.J. Knew," *New York Times*, March 18, 1997, p. A19.

³⁸ Here I rely especially on Zhang Baijia, "Resist America," pp. 197-208.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 208. The scholar does not consider, however, how that trust was easily undermined by later developments, such as the U.S. invasion of Cambodia under Nixon, which drew very sharp Chinese criticism.

⁴⁰ Morton H. Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1974), pp. 11-12.

⁴¹ See Melvin Gurtov and Konrad Kellen, "Vietnam: Lessons and Mislessons," RAND Corporation Paper P-4084 (June, 1969).

⁴² Unlike in Korea, "the forgotten war," the Vietnam War produced a huge literature on the political and cultural history of the country—but only after the United States had been involved for about a decade. That output shows no sign of slowing. Still, the Korean War has produced a number of distinguished works, including Bruce Cumings' two-volume history cited previously; William Stueck's *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995) and later works; Chen Jian's *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and David Halberstam's *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007).

⁴³ Ernest R. May, *Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973, chap. 3.

⁴⁴ James C. Thomson, Jr., "How Could Vietnam Happen? An Autopsy," in Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick, eds., *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 5th ed., pp. 291-302.

⁴⁵ See the testimony of Gordon Adams before the U.S. Senate Committee on the Budget, February 23, 2010 [here](#). "The total resources requested [by the Obama defense department] are, in constant dollars, 16% higher than the 1952 Korean War budget peak, 26% higher than the peak defense budgets of 1985, and 36% higher than the 1968 peak year for Vietnam War-era defense budgets."

⁴⁶ When, for example, the British objected to American domination of decision making on the war and proposed that a committee might run it, Truman and General Omar Bradley responded that if anyone didn't like the way the war was being waged they could withdraw; the United States was in charge. Minutes of conversation with Prime Minister Attlee, December 6, 1950, in Hunt, ed., *Crises in U.S. Foreign Policy*, p. 222.

⁴⁷ The War Powers Resolution was intended to restrict presidential prerogative with respect to the dispatch of troops abroad without Congressional authorization. But the resolution has never kept presidents from acting as they pleased, whether with reference to the WPR or not. Efforts in Congress to invoke the WPR have typically failed, usually due to deference *in Congress* to presidential power in foreign affairs. Such was the case recently when Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-OH) tried to use the war powers bill to force U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan within 30 days or by the end of 2010 at the latest. See Carl Hulse, "House Rejects Plan to Leave Afghanistan By Year's End," *New York Times*, March 11, 2010, p. A6.

⁴⁸ For an excellent general argument on behalf of a U.S. foreign policy of nonintervention, see Earl C. Ravenal, *Never Again: Learning from America's Foreign*

Policy Failures (Philadelphia, Penna.: Temple University Press, 1978).

⁴⁹ See my *Superpower on Crusade: The Bush Doctrine in US Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2007) as well as Christopher Layne and Benjamin Schwarz, "American Hegemony—Without an Enemy," *Foreign Policy*, No. 92 (Fall, 1993), pp. 1-7.

⁵⁰ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 323.

⁵¹ Thus, according to Michael T. Klare ("Two, Three, Many Afghanistans," *The Nation*, April 26, 2010, pp. 21-24), the Pentagon's latest Quadrennial Defense Review indicates that Obama, like Kennedy in the 1960s, "seeks to fashion a new military posture that shifts the emphasis from conventional combat to brush-fire wars and counterinsurgency." This "new posture" does not alter the overall U.S. strategy, which remains (as Klare quotes the QDR) that "The strength and influence of the United States are deeply intertwined with the fate of the broader international system. The U.S. military must therefore be prepared to support broad national goals of promoting stability in key regions, providing assistance to nations in need, and promoting the common good."