

**From Disengagement to Intervention: The Chinese Civil War, Korean War, and the
Paradigm Shift of the U.S. Foreign Policy in East Asia**

Hosung Jung
Dr. Benjamin Wetzel
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On the brink of the Cold War, two wars formed the geopolitical terrain of East Asia after 1945: the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) and Korean War (1950-1953). The former led to the emergence of united China under the Communist rule, while the latter shaped what may be called the Cold War Order in East Asia by solidifying the separation of North and South Korea, as well as the Mainland China and Taiwan. As the United States emerged as a major player in East Asia after the fall of the Japanese Empire, it was substantially involved in both wars. However, America showed quite contrasting foreign policies in each war. Whereas the U.S. constantly refused to intervene militarily in the Chinese Civil War at all, it did so on a large-scale in Korea. It chose to abandon China but decided to rescue Korea. The United States displayed an opposite attitude and policy in the Korean War which broke out just a short time after the Chinese Civil War. Why was this so? This paper aims to reply to this question by analyzing the factors that affected the U.S. decision-making in respective wars. It should be argued that while the U.S. disengagement in China was due to its pre-Cold War policy maintained in spite of the impending Cold War reality, the following intervention in Korea signified a paradigm shift of the U.S. East Asia policy to the Cold War interventionism.

As General Marshall assessed, the moribund Nationalist government would not be able to win the civil war in China unless the United States intervened with a direct, large-scale military force, including the ground ones.¹ However, such a policy of direct intervention was never adopted or even considered throughout the war. Remarkably, even the critics of Harry Truman administration's China policy, the supporters of Chiang Kai-shek in the Congress as well as the

¹ Tsou Tang, *America's Failure in China, 1941-1950* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 364.

“China bloc” in the State Department, who would pressure the administration for more aid and support for the Nationalist government, did not dare suggest such an option.²

In fact, the U.S. government indeed had no intention of intervening in the Chinese Civil War even before the conflict actually began. President Truman himself had made it clear in his statement on *United States Policy toward China* on December 15, 1945, that in spite of the U.S. recognition and support for the Nationalist government of China, the “U. S. support will not extend to U.S. military intervention to influence the course of any Chinese internal strife.”³ Such resolution did not change in spite of the revolutionary shift of the U.S. foreign policy from the WWII-collaboration with the Soviet Union to the Cold War strategy of containment that came in the following years. The U.S. policy of no-intervention was a result of the pre-Cold War agenda and it was maintained consistently regardless of what came after.

It should be asked, then, why the Truman administration did not change its initial policy in spite of the intensification of the Cold War since 1947 and why it chose to abandon China when it was given with only two options: an overall military intervention and total withdrawal. According to Hee Seung Lee, five factors affected the U.S. abandonment of the Nationalist government⁴: 1) Fear of casualties by engagement in a large war after World War II, as it would have to mobilize and deploy one to two million forces to China; 2) the U.S. did not estimate that the communized China would be a serious threat to its national security, given the far distance between the two countries, judgment of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) autonomy from

² Tsou, *America’s Failure*, 473, 476.

³ Department of State United States, *United States Relations with China, with Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949* (Washington, DC: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1949), 608. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.forrel/usrelatchi0001&i=651>.

⁴ Hee Seung Lee, “The Study about the Alliance Strategy of the United States for National Civil War,” *Military Studies*, no. 140 (2015), 227-229, <https://doi.org/10.17934/jmhs..140.201512.203>.

the Soviet directions, and the lack of hostility between the U.S. and CCP back then; 3) the communized China was not considered a great threat to American interests; 4) While Chiang Kai-shek's government had strengthened ties with the Republicans during the 1948 election, assuming Thomas Dewey's victory, Truman got re-elected and refused the request for aid; 5) the spread of anti-American sentiment in China and the incompetence and corruption of the Nationalist government discouraged the U.S. intervention.

Tang Tsou also lists a number of similar elements for the U.S. refraining from intervention in China. On the brink of the Civil War, what discouraged the intervention was the misjudgment of the nature and intention of the CCP shared by some of the high officials of the State Department, at least until late 1945, that the CCP was something other than dedicated communists guided by Russia.⁵ Though such a wishful misperception rapidly declined thereafter, the incompetence of the Nationalist government and its obstinate resistance against American advice for reform discouraged any moral cause for intervention.⁶ For example, in 1949, an American consul general reported that Americans in Tientsin, the key port in North China, felt like "our global policy of opposition to Communism should not oblige us to support a hopelessly inefficient and corrupt government which has lost the support of its people."⁷ Plus, the U.S. belief that its intervention could not be justified unless Soviets overtly intervened or supported Chinese communists, as well as its fear of Soviet intervention, also thwarted the military intervention option.⁸

⁵ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 356-357.

⁶ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 356-357.

⁷ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 496.

⁸ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 367-368.

Not only that, the beginning and intensification of the Cold War in Europe further discouraged and practically disabled the U.S. intervention to China, given America's finite resources and military capabilities. As Tang Tsou pointed out, the "events in China moved toward a climax during America's intensified struggle with the Soviet Union over the fate of Europe [e.g. the communist coup in Czechoslovakia, Berlin Blockade, etc.] ... Confronted with historic tasks in Europe and a hopeless situation in China, the administration steadfastly adhered to its decision against armed intervention and the related decision against any action which would degenerate into armed intervention."⁹ American resources had to be concentrated in Europe since 1947 and the limited tolerance of the Congress and the public for costly programs made Washington's choice on how much resources should be allotted to what part of the world even more difficult.¹⁰ Plus, not to mention the military postulate shared by George Marshall (who served as the United States Special Envoy to China in 1945-1947 and then the Secretary of the State from 1947 to 1949), the Congress, and the State Department officials that American ground forces should never be used for combat in China,¹¹ America was indeed incapable of deploying large ground forces to the battlefields in China due to rapid demobilization after WWII.¹² In 1948, when the Nationalist government was clearly facing imminent collapse without an active external intervention, "the actual strength of the army and airforce was only 898,000 men with 140,000 deployed in the Far East."¹³

⁹ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 358.

¹⁰ William Whitney Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy toward China and Korea, 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 5.

¹¹ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 362.

¹² Tsou, *America's Failure*, 365.

¹³ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 473.

Whereas the United States steadfastly maintained the principle of no intervention during the Chinese Civil War and let the Communists take over the country, it showed a contrasting policy towards the Korean War which broke out just a year after the end of the other: a rapid commitment of American forces to Korea. It took only six days after the outbreak of the war for the United States to decide intervention with ground combat forces. How could such a drastic reversal of the U.S. foreign policy take place in such a quick time? It is even more surprising given that the United States had created an impression to the world that it was going to abandon Korea by pulling out the U.S. forces from the country in 1949, “the public exclusion of the country from the Pacific defense perimeter by Secretary of State Dean Acheson and the open admission of the peninsula’s indefensibility by Senator Connally, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.”¹⁴

Since the North Korean invasion began at 3 p.m. on June 24, 1950 (Eastern Time), the first official report by John Muccio, the American ambassador in Korea, reached the State Department at 9:26 p.m.¹⁵ At 10:30 p.m., Muccio’s cable was reported to Secretary Acheson, who telephoned President Truman in Independence, Missouri in less than an hour.¹⁶ As Glenn Paige says, “the officials at the State Department, the President, and the Secretary of State had all agreed immediately that the correct initial response to the North Korean invasion should be to bring it to the attention of the United Nations.”¹⁷ Thus, at the request of the U. S. government, the Security Council of the United Nations was convened the next day which passed the

¹⁴ Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean Decision: June 24 -30, 1950* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1968), 66-69.

¹⁵ Paige, *The Korean Decision*, 90.

¹⁶ Paige, *The Korean Decision*, 91-93.

¹⁷ Paige, *The Korean Decision*, 98.

resolution calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of the North Korean armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel.¹⁸

Meanwhile, President Truman, who came back to Washington on June 25, presided over the first conference at the Blair House with the nation's top diplomatic and military leaders. There was the consensus that "the Soviet Union was using its Korean satellite as a pawn and probably was still not ready to wage a global war,"¹⁹ and it was decided to provide arms and equipment for the South Korean armed forces via General Douglass MacArthur, to protect the evacuation of Americans with the Air Force, and to send the Seventh Fleet to Taiwan Strait to prevent any conflict in the area.²⁰ Virtually, it was the decision to intervene and the subsequent decisions were made in alignment with the result of the first Blair House conference.²¹

As the situation worsened on 26th, the second conference took place and the President approved Secretary Acheson's recommendations which included the authorization of the Air Force and the Navy activities to give full support to the South Koreans below 38th parallel and the proposal of a new resolution at the Security Council calling on U.N. members to aid South Korea to repel the attack and secure peace.²² The next day, 27th, the Security Council passed this

¹⁸Russell Buhite, *The Dynamics of World Power: A Documentary History of United States Foreign Policy 1945-1973*, ed. Arthur Schlesinger, vol. 4 (New York, NY: Chelsea House, 1983), 365.

¹⁹ Paige, *The Korean Decision*, 133.

²⁰ Nam Gyun Kim, "President Truman's Direction of the Korean War: Avoiding a Third World War," *Military History* null, no. 87 (2013): 5, <https://doi.org/10.29212/mh.2013..87.1>.

²¹ Nam Gyun Kim, "President Truman's Direction," 5.

²² Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), 407-408.

new resolution which justified the U.S. intervention.²³ Subsequently, on 29th, Truman approved the operation of the Navy and the Air Force in northern Korea above the 38th parallel.²⁴

On June 29th, Tokyo time, General MacArthur himself, the Far Eastern Commander, flew to Korea to view the situation, looking out upon the defense line made south of Seoul which had fallen into the enemy's hands.²⁵ There he decided that only the commitment of the American combat forces could prevent the invaders taking over South Korea.²⁶ His report urging the commitment of the ground forces was transmitted to the Pentagon at 3 a.m., June 30th, and in the morning the same day, the President authorized MacArthur to use certain ground units under his command.²⁷ Thus began the largest military commitment after WWII.

One can easily observe that the United States government was generally in favor of the intervention throughout its decision making process. What could have been motives for such attitudes and actions? How did the United States perceive the situation in Korea that it decided to intervene so quickly?

First of all, the decision makers of the nation, such as President Truman, understood the North Korean invasion in terms of the international challenge of Soviet communism which, if responded with indifference and complacency, might bring a great disaster to Western democracies as did WWII. Coming back to Washington at the news of the War, President

²³ Nam Gyun Kim, "President Truman's Direction," 5.

²⁴ Nam Gyun Kim, "President Truman's Direction," 6.

²⁵ Paige, *The Korean Decision*, 235-236.

²⁶ Paige, *The Korean Decision*, 236.

²⁷ Nam Gyun Kim, "President Truman's Direction," 6.

Truman recalled the precedents of Manchuria, Ethiopia, and Austria.²⁸ He believed if the Western democracies failed again to take action and let the aggressors take over what they want, it would further encourage them to keep moving on,²⁹ which “would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents had brought on the second world war.”³⁰ Therefore, the war in Korea was not perceived as an “internal strife,” as in China a year ago, but as a serious challenge of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc.

Such a view was expressed by the members of the first Blair House conference. General Omar Bradley remarked that Russia was “obviously testing” the United States in Korea, and President Truman also said that the Russians were gambling that America “would be afraid of starting a third world war and would offer no resistance.”³¹ In his statement on June 27, Truman said that the “attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war.”³²

That the American leaders understood the invasion in an international context explains some of the first measures they had taken: deployment of the Seventh Fleet to Taiwan strait, acceleration of military aid to Philippine and French Indochina.³³ This indicates that the containment strategy, which had been usually applied only to European theater by far, now began

²⁸ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs. Years of Trial and Hope*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 333.

²⁹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 333.

³⁰ Truman, *Memoirs*, 333.

³¹ Truman, *Memoirs*, 335.

³² Buhite, *The Dynamics of the World Power*, 366.

³³ Acheson, *My Years*, 408.

to be implemented in Asia as well.³⁴ However underestimated the strategic importance of the Korean peninsula had been, the perception of the nature of the attack made the land vital to the U.S. interest, as it concerned the American credibility everywhere else.³⁵ Thus, the Korean War brought the full implementation of the containment policy in East Asia, and it would signal the beginning of the American policy of active intervention in the region for the following years.

In summary, the Chinese Civil War and Korean War swept East Asia after the fall of the Japanese Empire and brought about the new Cold War order in the region. The contrasting U.S. approaches to the respective wars are a good example that snapshots the paradigm shift of the U.S. foreign policy in the region from collaboration with the communist bloc (i.e. Soviet Union) to containment during the interim period between WWII and the intense Cold War in the 1950s. The basic principles of the U.S. policy regarding the Chinese Civil War was outlined and structured by the end of WWII. Though substantially due to the war's civil and internal nature, the United States maintained those principles despite pressures of the impending Cold War. On the contrary, the U.S. policy in the Korean War, which broke out when the Cold War had already taken place, was structured on the existing containment strategy, based on the Cold War mindset of conflict, and impacted the future U.S. policy toward the region. It precipitated the return of the U.S. to the region it had seemed to withdraw from. Thus the two consecutive wars show an

³⁴Il Su Kim and Hye Young Yoon, "Cold War and American Internationalism: A Case Study on U.S. Foreign Policy toward the Korean Peninsula," *Korean Journal of Northeast Asian Studies* 61 (December 2011), 199-200, <http://lps3.www.dbpia.co.kr.libproxy.puts.ac.kr/pdf/pdfView.do?nodeId=NODE07432924>.

³⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment : A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107, <https://web-s-ebshost-com.ezproxy.taylor.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHhuYV9fMTc5OTMyX19BTg2?sid=82709f7a-9253-41af-acbf-48d4979aaafc@redis&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

extreme reversal of the U.S. foreign policy in East Asia from disengagement to intervention which has led to its strong presence in the region since then.

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