

**THE KOREAN WAR AS CATALYST FOR NATO REINFORCEMENT IN 1950-1951**

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The Korean War was a catalyst in the drive to solidify the foundations of US political and defense strategy after World War II through its impact on NATO. The conflict spurred President Truman to fight in 1950-51 for reinforcement of US ground forces in Germany to counter the growing Soviet threat.<sup>1</sup> US priorities shifted from getting more defense protection for less expenditure through integration to accelerating the development of a “pre-integration organization”<sup>2</sup> into a full fledged defensive alliance.

The US and Europe focused on strengthening their economies after World War II; defense was secondary and military expenditures and troop strength dropped steeply from 1945. The USSR concerned Washington, but US nuclear capability was believed sufficient to make up for numerical inferiority on the ground in Europe. This changed in April 1950, when the National Security Council published NSC-68. The paper called for a quick build-up of US military forces in Europe to counter the Soviets.<sup>3</sup> European allies were reluctant to follow this path, fearing that it could provoke the USSR and hurt their recovering economies. Neutralism was strong in Europe, and governments in France, the Netherlands, and the UK, opposed NATO reinforcement even after the Korean conflict began on June 25, 1950;<sup>4</sup> the wisdom of backing an organization that could not guarantee their safety in a conflict with the USSR was suspect. Moreover, Germany’s role caused concern, as a successful defensive alliance appeared to need a German component, but the defeated nation was not to be rearmed and was not part of NATO or its defense plans in 1950.<sup>5</sup>

The Korean War accelerated the shift away from pure nuclear deterrence; President Truman announced on December 19, 1950, his intention to send additional US troops to Europe.<sup>6</sup> General MacArthur was disappointed by the proposed reinforcement, as he wanted more divisions to stop China’s advance in Korea. The “Great Debate” ensued, focusing on the

President's power to send troops overseas. The debate centered on Senate Resolution 8, proposed on January 8, 1951, the same day that China reached the 37<sup>th</sup> parallel.<sup>7</sup> Senator Wherry of Nebraska, a MacArthur ally, sponsored the resolution,<sup>8</sup> and was supported by Senator Taft of Ohio, a leading Republican conservative. Taft argued against the expansion of presidential power and entangling the US in Europe's affairs.<sup>9</sup> The Senate Armed Services Committee debated hotly the proposal and the public supported Congressional oversight against the President,<sup>10</sup> but the Wherry Resolution eventually was tabled. The Great Debate ended on April 4, 1951, with passage of a resolution that authorized the transfer of four divisions to NATO and the appointment of General Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander Europe.<sup>11</sup>

The Korean War shifted US political strategy by changing the domestic climate such that NATO reinforcement could take place, thereby altering US policy from a verbal commitment to protecting Europe to a physical move to put forces on the ground that could counter the Soviets. The North Atlantic Treaty was on its way from a "political guaranty,"<sup>12</sup> to the central lynchpin of US military organization. Congress became more willing to approve higher defense budgets. In addition, the Great Debate expanded executive power by obfuscating the need for the President to get Congressional approval to send troops overseas. Moreover, the changed environment enabled President Truman and later Eisenhower to push through heretofore unpopular policies, including NATO expansion to Turkey and Greece in 1952, and West Germany in 1955.<sup>13</sup>

The domestic political impacts were complemented by affects on US relations with its European allies and the Communist threat. There had been no call for the US to reinforce its two divisions stationed in Germany or for a supreme NATO commander at the May 1950 NATO Council meeting;<sup>14</sup> the Korean War changed this. Reinforcement solidified US commitment to Europe and quieted concerns in Paris and London that the US might shift its strategic focus to

Asia. It also underscored the possibility that Moscow might have to fight the US on two fronts, pushing Stalin to avoid direct conflict and setting the stage for the Cold War. The USSR maintained a strong advantage in Europe even after the 1951 reinforcement, but Moscow's willingness to engage in open conflict with the US, which had been a major concern of Secretary Marshall and others in Washington, decreased.

Political strategy impacted military strategy and structure. Reinforcement focused military strategy on Europe, even while the Korean War eventually forced the US military to station thousands of soldiers in Korea to maintain the armistice and prodded the US to guarantee Taiwan's safety. Europe also became the focus of military structure, as the Supreme Allied Command near Paris emerged as the key US military command.

US military doctrine also shifted due to the Korean War and NATO reinforcement. Collective security and coalition warfare, which already had become important for the US in World War II, became predominant. Conversely, although 1954-55 has been called the "Golden Age" of relations between Beijing and Moscow,<sup>15</sup> NATO reinforcement helped to pressure the USSR not to send ground forces to aid the North Koreans and Chinese in 1950-51. The Soviets provided limited air support, but integrated ground actions were precluded, preventing coalition military doctrine from taking root in the Communist world. This helped thwart the formation of a firm military foundation between Moscow and Beijing, contributing to the Sino-Soviet split over political and military strategy during the Indochina War.

It is facile to argue that one event sets policy for decades to come, however the experience of 1950-51 was a critical second step after NATO's formation, toward the US's emerging political and defense strategy in the Cold War. NATO reinforcement focused strategy on Europe, helped weaken the Communist threat, paved the way for the 1955 inclusion of West

Germany in NATO, and contributed to a tense if relatively stable geopolitical status quo in East Asia. “Vague commitment ... became specific guarantees ... as the Treaty was transformed into a military organization capable of defending Europe on the ground against attack from the East.”<sup>16</sup> The Korean War in 1950-51 played a crucial role in the development of NATO, thereby setting events and policies in motion that provided the bedrock for US political and military strategy during the Cold War.

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<sup>1</sup> James, D. Clayton, Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea 1950-1953, The Free Press, New York, 1993, p.20

<sup>2</sup> Kaplan, Lawrence S., NATO and the United States: The Enduring Alliance, Twayne Publishers, New York, 1994, p.37

<sup>3</sup> Kaplan, Lawrence S., The United States and NATO: The Formative Years, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, 1984, p.147

<sup>4</sup> Osgood, Robert Endicott, NATO: The Entangling Alliance, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, pp.81-2

<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, The United States and NATO: The Formative Years, p.158

<sup>6</sup> Ireland, Timothy P., Creating the Entangling Alliance: The Origins of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, p.225

<sup>7</sup> Jian, Chen, Mao's China & the Cold War, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2001, p.92

<sup>8</sup> Ireland, p.208

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, The United States and NATO: The Formative Years, p.165

<sup>10</sup> Caridi, Ronald J., The Korean War and American Politics, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1968, p.129

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.137

<sup>12</sup> Jervis, Robert, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Dec 1980, p.571

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, The United States and NATO: The Formative Years, p.146

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.573

<sup>15</sup> Jian, p.62

<sup>16</sup> Kaplan, The United States and NATO: The Formative Years, p.145