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Dean Acheson and the Place of Korea in American Foreign and Security Policy, 1945-1950

Michael F. Hopkins

(University of Liverpool)

Korea looms large in any evaluation of the career of Dean Acheson. President Harry Truman regarded the military intervention in response to the North Korean attack in 1950 as one of the major achievements of his administration - “Most important of all, we acted in Korea.”¹⁾ And he praised Acheson for his decisive role. In a personally written note to his Secretary of State, the President observed, “Your initiative in immediately calling the Security Council of the UN on Saturday night and notifying me was the key to what followed afterwards. Had you not acted promptly in that direction we would have had to go into Korea alone.”²⁾ Acheson’s critics, on the

1) Harry S. Truman, “Farewell Address to the American People,” January 15, 1953, accessed November 26, 2012, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=14392&st=&st1=.

2) Yale University, Dean Acheson Papers, box 30, folder 390, Truman to Acheson, July 19, 1950.

other hand, have suggested that Korea was an avoidable war. Republican politicians during the war and later scholars singled out Acheson's speech of January 12, 1950, saying it encouraged the North Koreans and more particularly Josef Stalin to believe that an assault could be undertaken with little risk of an American reaction.³⁾ In a speech to Congress on June 28, 1950, Senator Robert Taft said that the crisis was caused "first, by the outrageous, aggressive attitude of Soviet Russia, and second, by the bungling and inconsistent foreign policy of the administration." He then called on Acheson to resign, since his "policies precipitated the dangers of war."⁴⁾ Bruce Cumings goes further, accusing Acheson not of incompetence but of cynical calculation: he deliberately provoked the North and the Soviet Union into an attack, which would then allow Washington to develop its grander global strategy.⁵⁾

These two schools of criticism - the bungler or the cunning conniver - turn on their examination of the six or seven months before the June attack. Acheson's admirers also concentrate on this period.⁶⁾ However, any effective evaluation of such verdicts requires

3) See, for example, John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72-75.

4) Taft speech, June 28, 1950, in Barton J. Bernstein and Alan J. Matusov, *The Truman Administration: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 439-442; Congressional Record, 81st Congress, Senate, 2nd Session, 1950, pp. 9319-9323.

5) Bruce Cumings developed, and refined, his argument in a series of publications: "Introduction: The Course of Korean-American Relations, 1943-1953," in *Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943-1953* ed. Bruce Cumings (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1983), 3-55; *The Origins of the Korean War. Volume 2: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 408-438; and *The Korean War* (New York: Modern Library, 2010), 72-73.

a thorough understanding of his interest in, and influence on, American policy to Korea from the end of the Second World and the beginning of Washington's direct engagement with the country to the assault of June 1950. For most of that period Acheson held senior positions in the US government. He served first as Under Secretary of State from August 1945 to June 1947; and then as Secretary of State from January 1949 to June 1950. Although a number of books have examined American policy between 1945 and 1950,⁷⁾ it is surprising how little has been written about Acheson and Korea. Ronald McGlothlen is the only scholar to have subjected his activities in this period to detailed scrutiny, and even he gives scant attention to 1945-1946.⁸⁾ This article aims to correct this omission and present a fuller appreciation of Acheson's role in American policy to Korea.

6) See, for example, Gaddis Smith, *Dean Acheson* (New York: Cooper Square, 1972) and David McLellan, *Dean Acheson* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1976).

7) Charles M. Dobbs, *The Unwanted Symbol: American Foreign Policy, the Cold War, and Korea, 1945-1950* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981); William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Toward China and Korea, 1947-1950* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); and James I. Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

8) Ronald McGlothlen, "Acheson, Economics, and the American Commitment in Korea, 1947-1950," *Pacific Historical Review*, 58.1 (1989): 23-54; Ronald McGlothlen, *Controlling the Waves: Dean Acheson and US Policy in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Korea, August 1945-June 1947

Dean Acheson served as Under Secretary to James F. Byrnes from August 1945 to January 1947, and then to George C. Marshall for the first six months of 1947. Byrnes was away from Washington for a substantial part of his term: he was abroad for 62 per cent of his time. Marshall was also regularly overseas, being absent for 47 per cent of his period in office.⁹⁾ This meant that Acheson frequently served as Acting Secretary. He was able to discharge these responsibilities in an effective manner because he soon developed very good relations with the President, who was willing to allow the State Department a leading role in framing policy, so long as he was properly consulted. Acheson and Truman shared the same strategic vision of America's role in the world. But on Korea (until June 1950) Acheson was more engaged than the President. Truman said and did little on the peninsula until encouraged by Acheson in spring-summer 1947 and again in 1949 and 1950.¹⁰⁾

Korea had been part of the Japanese empire since the victory over Russia in 1905 and was formally annexed in 1910. During the Second World War the Roosevelt administration looked sympathetically toward its people. Officials noted how Koreans had resisted Japanese

9) James F. Byrnes, *Speaking Frankly* (New York: Harper, 1947), 245; Henry Wriston, "The Secretary of State Abroad," *Foreign Affairs*, 34:4 July 1956, 523.

10) According to McGlothlen, "Acheson, Economics, and the American Commitment in Korea," 32, Truman, when asked about Korea in press conferences, either denied knowledge of details or declined comment. See *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1963), 191, 240, 247, and 282.

pressure to join their armed forces, and decided, therefore, that they would not treat Koreans in the United States and Hawaii as enemy aliens.¹¹⁾ A number of decisions in 1945 determined American involvement with postwar Korea. In the first place, President Roosevelt had suggested that Britain, China, the United States and the Soviet Union should form a four-power trusteeship of Korea, which was finally endorsed by Stalin in a meeting with the President's special envoy, Harry Hopkins. Roosevelt thereby ensured that the trusteeship was a working assumption in discussion at the Potsdam conference of July-August.¹²⁾ During the conference the Soviets also confirmed that they would enter the conflict in Asia, declaring war against Japan on 8 August. The dropping of atomic bombs on 6 and 9 August brought Japan to the brink of surrender and gave rise to the second issue for decision - where Washington and Moscow would place their forces in Korea. James Dunn of the State Department asked General Lincoln of the Army Operations Division for advice on the deployment of US forces into Korea. Lincoln consulted Colonel C. H. Bonesteel and Colonel Dean Rusk, who examined a *National Geographic* map, "Asia and Adjacent Areas." The three men agreed that the 38th parallel should form the dividing line between the occupying forces, with Soviet troops north

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- 11) NARA, Record Group 131, Records of Office of Alien Property, Foreign Funds Control Committee Files, General Correspondence, 1942-1960, box 237, Japan: Chosen folder, White to Kahn, January 29, 1942.
- 12) Foreign Relations of the United States [hereafter FRUS]: Conference at Berlin (Potsdam) I, 14 (Memorandum of Conversation by Grew, May 15, 1945), 47 (Memorandum of 3rd Conversation at Kremlin, May 28, 1945, 6pm), 234 (Harriman to Truman and Byrnes, July 9 [8], 1945), 309-310 (Memorandum by Elyse, nd but submitted July 1, 1945), 310-315 (Briefing Book Papers).

of that line and American ones to its south. On August 16 Stalin agreed to the proposal. The line was the same as that suggested as a division between Japan and Russia in 1896.¹³⁾

Soviet forces entered Korea on August 10, while an American advance party arrived on September 4 and the main force came on September 9. General John Hodge led the American Military Government with a force of 45,000 troops. He confronted difficult circumstances. James Schnabel suggests that the “Korean economy was in a perilous state” and the “political atmosphere was turbulent and tense.”¹⁴⁾ If Korean patriots conceded the temporary need for the presence of foreign forces, they bitterly resented the scheme for a great powers’ trusteeship. They welcomed the commitment to Korean independence at the Cairo conference in 1943, but resented its qualification “in due course.”¹⁵⁾ Hodge faced frequent disturbances and violence and tried to find a means of involving Koreans. In the judgment of Arnold Offner, however, Hodge was a hard-nosed conservative who worked with the most conservative Korean politicians, such as Kim Ku, President of the Korean Provisional

13) FRUS 1945 VI, 1039; *Stalin’s Correspondence with Churchill, Attlee, Roosevelt and Truman, 1941-1945* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1958), 261-266. See also Bruce Cummings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate States* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 120-122; William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 11-12; and James F. Schnabel, *The United States Army in the Korean War. Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1972), 8-11.

14) Schnabel, *US Army in Korean War. The First Year*, 18.

15) FRUS: Cairo and Tehran Conferences 1943, 448-449, Final Communiqué, November 22, 1943. Stalin agreed to the Cairo declaration at the Tehran conference; see FRUS Cairo and Tehran Conferences 1943, 566, Roosevelt-Churchill-Stalin luncheon meeting, November 30, 1943, 1:30pm.

Government in Chungking (Chongqing), and its representative, Syngman Rhee, who called himself Chairman of the Korean Commission in the United States.¹⁶⁾ Meanwhile, Moscow encouraged like-minded politicians in its zone. On February 8, 1946, the Soviets created in their occupation zone the North Korean Interim People's Committee, headed by Kim Il Sung. In the course of 1946 and 1947 the Soviets worked with Kim to suppress alternative political voices in their zone. According to Offner, the Americans had a twin-track approach of Hodge seeking to establish a bulwark against communism while Byrnes sought international cooperation through the trusteeship. The Soviets, he maintains, were ready to see an independent Korea, so long as it was neutral or friendly.¹⁷⁾ This seems a rather generous view of the Soviet position.

Acheson displayed no distinctive outlook on Korea in the first months after the war's end. He shared the consensus view of the State Department's Asian experts led by John Carter Vincent, Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs, who argued in favor of cooperation with the Soviet Union. Vincent urged Hodge not to favor any particular Koreans because such support "might greatly complicate the political problems facing the military government, as well as encourage the Soviet commander to sponsor a similar group in his zone and thus postpone establishment of a unified Korea." It would appear that Vincent was unaware that the Soviets were already making just such arrangements in their zone. John J. McCoy,

16) Arnold Offner, *Another Such Victory: Harry Truman and the Cold War* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2002), 351.

17) *Ibid.*, 351-353.

Assistant Secretary of War, argued that Vincent was ignoring “the pressing realities facing us in Korea,” namely, Hodge’s concern that the “communists will seize by direct means the government in our area,” Soviet refusal to cooperate with the United States, and SHOULD READ the communists’ growing domination of the North. Vincent, however, secured Secretary of State Byrnes’s endorsement of the policy of cooperation with Moscow: “it would be safer... to negotiate with the USSR before attempting to introduce a new idea such as a governing commission.”¹⁸⁾ Alan Millett accurately summarises Acheson’s belief in this period that “postcolonial nations” like Korea “should pass through some period of education on Western political values and practices and economic development before receiving international recognition as sovereign states.”¹⁹⁾

The third decision of the year on Korea came at the December 1945 Council of Foreign Ministers in Moscow. Secretary of State Byrnes signed what was soon known as the Moscow Agreement, which spoke of tutelage and trusteeship and a joint commission to create a provisional government. Hodge quickly recognized its unpopularity among Koreans, so he tried to downplay the references to trusteeship. Vincent and others in the State Department criticized Hodge for undermining the Moscow Agreement. However, Acheson, according to Millett, “immediately distanced himself from John Carter

18) FRUS 1945 VI, 1114 [1113-1114], (Vincent to Vittrup, War Department, November 7, 1945), 1122-1124, (McCoy to Acheson, November 13, 1945), 1127-1128 (Vincent to Acheson, November 16, 1945), 1137-1138 (Byrnes to Langdon, November 29, 1945); see also Dobbs, *The Unwanted Symbol*, 53-54.

19) Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945-1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 67.

Vincent and the Asian specialists,” when Truman “openly questioned Byrnes’s judgment.”²⁰⁾

The US-Soviet joint commission began its work in March but soon ran into difficulties, when the Soviets said they would only speak to “democratic” Korean politicians, saying that neither Rhee nor Ku qualified. So the commission adjourned sine die on May 16. Offner argues that the Americans then pursued a separate government for their zone. But it is not clear that they had reached such a definite conclusion by mid-1946.²¹⁾ During that summer Edwin Pauley, the president’s special representative on reparations, went on a tour of the Far East, including Korea, to explore what would be done about Japanese reparations. In a letter on 22 June 1946 Pauley told Truman that he was “greatly concerned” about Soviet behavior in Korea, which hindered the achievement of the American goal of a democratic and independent Korea. He regarded this as “an ideological background on which our entire success in Asia may depend.” In his reply of July 16, Truman agreed. The President’s response was based on a draft of July 6 by John Carter Vincent, which he sent to Acheson, who approved it and passed it to the President. It is easy to conclude that this was a harbinger of conflict with Moscow. The President, however, was more measured than Pauley, saying that he favored continued efforts to persuade the Soviets to comply with the Moscow agreement, while increasing informational educational efforts to build up a self-governing and

20) *Ibid.*, 71; Millett offers no documentary support for this claim.

21) FRUS 1946 VIII, 681-682, Memorandum on meeting of Secretaries of State, War and Navy, May 22, 1946. See also, Offner, *Another Such Victory*, 351-353.

democratic Korea.²²⁾

Acheson continued to support efforts to negotiate with Moscow and issued public statements saying this in August and October. He said that the United States wanted to see “a united, independent, and democratic Korean government established as early as possible.” Americans wished to carry out the Moscow declaration, including the endeavors of the joint commission. He stressed the need to pursue efforts to solve social and economic problems in the country. He also emphasized that the United States intended staying in order to carry out its duties.²³⁾

George C. Marshall became Secretary of State in January 1947. Korea was a pressing issue but he was preoccupied with the next meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, scheduled to take place in Moscow in March-April. So he delegated a leading role on Korea to Acheson. Policy on Korea had to be framed in the face of two conflicting pressures. On the one hand, the War Department faced

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- 22) Announcement of Pauley mission, *Department of State Bulletin* 14.358 (May 12, 1946): 821; FRUS 1946 VIII, 504-505, Acting Secretary to Ambassador in Soviet Union (Smith), April 26, 1946; FRUS 1946 VIII, 706-709, Pauley to Truman, June 22, 1946, 713-714, Truman to Pauley, July 16, 1946. Acheson and Truman were also cautious about how Pauley presented his findings. They did not want him to comment before they had reached agreement in the Far Eastern Commission, a body of eleven countries set up in December 1945 with the task of overseeing Japan’s fulfillment of its surrender terms. Pauley acceded to Acheson’s request that they only issue an anodyne statement. See FRUS 1946 VIII, 592, Pauley to Secretary of State, November 12, 1946, 592-593, Acting Secretary to Pauley, November 15, 1946; press release, November 17, *Department of State Bulletin* 15.386 (November, 24, 1946): 957-959.
- 23) Dean Acheson, “US Objectives in Policy Toward Korea,” *Department of State Bulletin* 15.375 (September 8, 1946), 462; Dean Acheson, “US Policy in Korea,” *Department of State Bulletin* 15.380 (October 13, 1946), 670.

budget cuts and concluded that withdrawal from Korea would be a good way of trimming expenditure. On the other hand, the State Department, and Acheson in particular, argued for the importance of Korea, especially its value as a source of food and as a market for Japanese exports. In February came the report by Raymond Harrison's special committee on food, which shared Acheson's outlook that Korea was an important source of food for Japan.²⁴⁾ The State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (SWNCC), which addressed issues that crossed traditional departmental boundaries, set up an inter-departmental committee to examine Korea and concluded that withdrawal would mean "complete defeat" by the Russians. It supported Acheson's proposal that there should be a three-year program of aid totalling \$600m. Under this scheme there would be \$250m for fiscal year 1948, rather than \$137m the War Department was proposing.²⁵⁾

The debate on Korea coincided with a major re-evaluation of American foreign policy. The first initiative in this process owed a good deal to the advice of Acheson. Since the end of the Second World War in 1945 Britain had aided Greece's monarchists in their civil war with the communists; and it had assisted Turkey in its efforts to resist Soviet pressure to open the Straits to Soviet ships and to grant Moscow rights to establish military bases on Turkey's Black Sea coast. In spring 1947 the British needed to make major

24) NARA, RG59, Records of State Department, Central Decimal Files, 1945-1949, 894.5018/4-2447 CS/JEC, box7364, Acheson to Harrison, nd but May 1947, Harrison, "Supply of Food for Civilian Relief in Japan," February 19, 1947.

25) FRUS 1947 VI, 608-616, Memorandum by the Special Inter-Departmental Committee on Korea, February 25, 1947.

cuts in expenditure and told the Americans that this would mean an end to funds for Greece and Turkey. Acheson took the lead in persuading first Marshall and Truman and then leading figures in Congress that the United States should take over the British role. So, in a speech to a joint session of Congress on March 12, Truman announced his intention to assist countries facing external or internal threats to their integrity; and secured Congressional approval for \$400m aid to Greece and Turkey.²⁶⁾

Syngman Rhee was keen to utilise Truman's speech for his own purposes. On March 13 he sent a message of congratulations to the President and asked him to "instruct the American military authorities in Korea to follow your policy and abandon their efforts to bring about coalition between nationalists and communists." He advised the immediate creation of an interim independent government in the US zone, which would act as a "bulwark against advancing communism and bring unification of north and south." On March 21 Acheson responded by sending a message to Hodge's political adviser, William R. Langdon, drawing his attention to comments in a press conference. The department's press officer described the ideas in the letter as "Rhee's suppositions." He then explained that the administration was committed to strengthening the Korean economy and to bringing more Koreans into position of administrative responsibility in preparation for the American commitment to help Korea become a united self-governing independent nation. He added that the Americans

26) Harry S. Truman, Speech to Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947, accessed November 26, 2012, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12846&st=&st1=.

were still committed to negotiations with the Soviet Union on unification of Korea under the terms of the Moscow Agreement. In answer to a reporter's question, the press officer said that the United States had not given up hope in these talks.²⁷⁾

For all its wide-ranging language, Truman and Acheson never intended applying what became known as the Truman Doctrine to many countries. But he told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 13: "If there are situations where we can do something effective, then I think we must certainly do it." Senator Smith asked him to comment on a newspaper editorial by Walter Lippmann, who said that the United States should limit its commitments to certain strategic areas. Acheson replied by accepting that there were places, such as Poland, Rumania and Bulgaria, where America had no access; so it "would be silly to believe we could do anything effective" in such locations. However, he continued: "There are other places where we can be effective. One of them is Korea, and I think that is another place where the line is clearly drawn between the Russians and ourselves."²⁸⁾

Spring and early summer 1947 also saw growing anxieties in Washington about the economic problems in the world. Although most accounts of this period focus on Europe's difficulties, Acheson and other officials were also disturbed by difficulties in Asia. On May 8, 1947, Acheson delivered a speech in Cleveland, Ohio that prefigured the Marshall Plan scheme for reconstructing the European

27) FRUS 1947 VI, 620, Rhee to Truman, March 13, 1947, 620-621, Acheson to Langdon, March 21, 1947.

28) Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Historical Series, *Legislative Origins of the Truman Doctrine* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 17, 21-22.

economy. He spoke of the need to rebuild both Germany *and* Japan.²⁹⁾ Japan's economy was vital to the whole of East Asia and it was in trouble - its exports in 1947 were only one-tenth of the 1934 level. Together with Defense Secretary James Forrestal and supported by George Kennan, head of the Policy Planning Staff in the State Department, Acheson argued for abandonment of the tough policies of General Douglas MacArthur, who led the US occupation regime as Supreme Commander American Forces, Pacific (SCAP). These policies included purging business executives linked with military aggression and dismantling some of Japan's manufacturing capacity. Acheson feared that the Japanese economy might collapse if the United States did not do more to promote the country's economic growth. Although Acheson did not succeed in changing the American strategy in Japan while he was still in office, he had contributed significantly to the pressure for a shift in policy. As a result, in January 1948 SWNCC recommended a new approach, which was immediately adopted as policy by the Truman administration and communicated to the Far Eastern Commission. The American statement was released to the press and sent to MacArthur. Industrial growth and foreign trade would be encouraged so that Japan could make its "proper contribution to the economic rehabilitation of the world economy." The Japanese government, under the supervision of SCAP, should act "energetically and effectively" to make Japan "economically self-supporting at the earliest possible time."³⁰⁾

29) Dean Acheson, "The Requirements of Reconstruction," *Department of State Bulletin* 16.411 (May 18, 1947): 991-994.

30) Michael Schaller, *The American Occupation of Japan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 72-120; FRUS 1948 VI, 654-656, Statement to Far

It was in this context that Acheson sought to persuade Congress to pass a Korea aid bill. He recognised that there might be financial concerns about aiding Korea, coming after \$400m for Greece and Turkey and with the prospect of further funds for Europe. So he reduced the three-year figure for Korea to \$540m and the amount for 1948 to SHOULD READ \$215m£215m.³¹⁾ The military also questioned the strategic value of assistance for Korea. War Secretary Robert Patterson declared himself “convinced that the United States should pursue forcefully a course of action whereby we get out of Korea at an early date.” He complained that U.S. occupation forces in Korea were a “drain upon Army resources.” TWO QUOTATIONS, TWO CITATIONS; WOULD YOU PREFER TWO FOOTNOTES?³²⁾ Recognizing the growing resistance, Acheson approached Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to try and find a way of getting the measure through Congress. Vandenberg strongly discouraged him from bringing another bill to authorize further foreign expenditure in the present session.³³⁾

When Acheson left the State Department at the end of June 1947 the Korea aid bill was withdrawn. He was out of office until January 1949 and in the interval policy on Korea shifted to withdrawal of forces and more limited aid. In his absence the military arguments proved persuasive. The Joint Chiefs of Staff argued that “from the

Eastern Commission, January 21, 1948.

31) FRUS 1947 VI, 621-623, Acheson to Patterson, March 28, 1947.

32) FRUS 1947 VI, 625-628, Patterson to Acheson, April 4, 1947; Walter Millis, ed., *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 265.

33) NARA, RG59, State Department, Central Decimal Files, 1945-1949, 790.0119 Control Korea/6-2747, box 3818, Dean Acheson to Marshall and General Hilldring, June 27, 1947.

standpoint of military security, the United States has little strategic interest in maintaining the present troops and bases in Korea.”³⁴⁾ By February 1948 the Joint Chiefs of Staff declared that “eventual domination of Korea by the USSR will have to be accepted as a probability if US troops are withdrawn.”³⁵⁾ The State Department’s main advocate of aid to Korea was a more junior figure, W. Walton Butterworth, who had succeeded John Carter Vincent as Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs in 1947, and who declared that the United States was morally committed to do something to prevent the economic collapse of the south.³⁶⁾ By September the tide had turned against Butterworth: the majority of officials felt the United States should disengage from South Korea.³⁷⁾ Even George Kennan shared this view. On September 24 he told Butterworth that American policy should be “to cut our losses and get out of there as gracefully as we can.”³⁸⁾ Five days later, after consulting Secretary of State Marshall, he said that the American goal should be “to get the best bargain we can regarding Korea.”³⁹⁾ The Policy Planning Staff then reported: “Since the territory is not of decisive strategic importance to us, our main task is to extricate ourselves without too great a loss of prestige.”⁴⁰⁾ On April 8 Truman approved NSC 8, which proposed

34) FRUS 1947 VI, 817, Secretary of Defense Forrestal to Marshall, September 26 [29], 1947.

35) Quoted in Robert Ferrell, *Truman* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 318.

36) FRUS 1948 VI, 1137-1139, Butterworth to Marshall, March 4, 1948.

37) FRUS 1947 VI, 784-785, Stevens (Assistant Chief of the Division of Far Eastern Affairs) Memorandum, September 9, 1947.

38) FRUS 1947 VI, 814, Kennan to Butterworth, September 24, 1947.

39) FRUS 1947 VI, 818 note.

40) FRUS 1947 I, 776 [770-777], Report by Policy Planning Staff, Resume of

US military withdrawal and sufficient American military assistance to tackle internal threats.⁴¹⁾

Marshall also sought to revive the discussion of the US-Soviet joint commission on Korea. It met from May to August 1947 but again faced deadlock over Soviet refusal to talk to people who were not “democrats.” In consequence, there was inexorable movement toward separate Korean states. In November 1947 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to establish the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) to supervise elections by March 31, 1948. The Soviets denied UNTCOK access to the north. So, in February 1948 the UN General Assembly approved elections in South Korea. Financial aid totalling \$113m, administered through the Marshall Plan, was approved for Korea.⁴²⁾ In May Rhee won an election victory in the south; the new Republic of Korea was recognised by the UN in December 1948 and the temporary commission (UNTCOK) became a full commission (UNCOK). In September 1948 the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was created in the north and recognised by the Soviet Union in October.

Secretary of State Acheson and Korea, January 1949-June 1950

When Acheson became Secretary of State in January 1949, he

World Situation, PPS/13, November 6, 1947.

41) FRUS 1948 VI, 1164-1169, Report by the National Security on the Position of the United States with Respect to Korea, NSC 8, April 2, 1948.

42) FRUS 1948, VI, Truman to Marshall, August 25, 1948; McGlothlen, “Acheson, Economics, and the American Commitment in Korea,” 36.

inherited a policy of military withdrawal. But he immediately encouraged voices in the department favoring greater engagement with Korea. A State Department policy statement prepared before his arrival but issued days after he assumed office highlighted the “political and psychological repercussions throughout the Far East, as well as the strategic implications of a withdrawal which might lead directly or indirectly to Soviet domination of the entire Korean peninsula.”⁴³⁾ Acheson also oversaw the reconsideration of NSC 8, which Butterworth had persuaded Marshall to authorize as one of his last acts before resigning. In the revised document, NSC 8/2, the military withdrawal would still proceed. By June 30, 1949, American troops left South Korea, leaving an advisory group of about 500. But it also contained, thanks to Acheson, a commitment to continued political support and economic, technical, military and other assistance for South Korea.⁴⁴⁾

Acheson took the lead in securing legislation for this assistance. He obtained the backing of the President to endorse his proposal and began a campaign to win the approval of Congress. Under Secretary James Webb spoke to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, but he faced heavy criticism from Republicans. They attacked the administration’s Asian policy, and in particular its “inaction” in China: they charged Truman and Acheson with a failure to give

43) RG59, State Department, Central Decimal Files, 1945-1949, 711.95/1-3149, box 3441, Policy Statement, “Korea,” January 31, 1949.

44) FRUS 1948 VI, 1337-1340, Memorandum by Butterworth, December 17, 1948; FRUS 1949 VII Part 2, 969-978, Report by the National Security Council to the President, Position of the United States with Respect to Korea, NSC 8/2, March 22, 1949.

sufficient help to Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists in their fight with Mao Zedong's communists. They called the Korea aid program "too little and too late." But Acheson's testimony managed to gain the backing of the committee, when he warned that immobility would send "shivers of fear" around East Asia and after he said that to walk away "without giving these fellows who have trusted in us any possible chance to survive" was not a very American thing to do.⁴⁵⁾ A bill was sent to Congress on July 25 asking for \$1.4bn in military aid, which would include \$150m of it going to South Korea. By August 5 the Senate had a new bill. Senator Vandenberg claimed that the administration had been compelled to surrender 80 per cent of its original proposal. In fact, the new bill only approved about \$90 less than the original legislation. Aid would be disbursed to three different groups: the North Atlantic treaty countries; Greece and Turkey; and Iran, Korea and the Philippines.⁴⁶⁾ Although progress was still slow, Acheson and the department were not too dismayed because Congress passed deficiency appropriations of approximately \$30m approval every three months, and was thus providing \$120m a year to Korea.

The prospects for passage of the bill became much bleaker when the communists defeated the Nationalists and took power in China in October. This policy failure gave the Republicans a powerful means

45) William S. White, "Korea Aid Program Draws GOP Attack," *New York Times*, June 9, 1949; "\$150,000,00 Aid to South Korea Gets Backing of House Committee," *New York Times*, June 25, 1949; William S. White, "Vote Aid or Korea Will Fall in Three Months, Acheson Says," *New York Times*, July 2, 1949.

46) Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 309-310.

of criticizing Truman, saying the administration had neglected Asia. A so-called China lobby, comprised mainly of Republicans in Congress and their sympathisers in business and the media, emerged to attack the President and the Secretary for “losing” China and to insist that the administration should do much more to help the Nationalists who had retreated to the large offshore island of Taiwan.

As the new Congress convened and reconsidered the Korean aid bill in January 1950, Acheson delivered a major speech to the National Press Club about American policy in Asia. He did so partly in response to the rising tension with the new communist government in Beijing. US diplomats had been expelled from their premises in the Chinese capital. There were fears of action by the Chinese communists against Taiwan. He sought to balance his and the President’s desire to demonstrate American firmness in the face of Chinese action and the need not to say or do anything that might escalate tensions. And he had to do this in an atmosphere of growing pressure from the China lobby. In defining US strategic commitments in the region, the Secretary excluded Korea from the area within the American defensive perimeter. He was only enunciating official policy. General Douglas MacArthur first delineated this concept in 1948, before expressing it to a journalist in March 1949. He said the American defense line ran “from the Philippines and continues through the Ryukyu Archipelago... Then it bends back through Japan and the Aleutian Island chain to Alaska.” This outlook was endorsed in December 1948 in NSC 41/1 and NSC 48/2. A policy paper of November 14, 1949, declared that the United States would deal with any aggression against Asian states through

the United Nations, except where there was an American occupation.⁴⁷⁾

In the immediate aftermath of the speech, no commentator or politician criticized Acheson's outlook, not even Republican Senator Robert Taft, who only described the speech as an "invitation to attack," after North Korea's invasion in June.⁴⁸⁾ When the British Ambassador, Sir Oliver Franks, reported on the speech to London a few days afterwards, he did not even mention the exclusion of Korea from the American defensive perimeter, focusing instead on Acheson's attempt to distance the administration from the Chinese Nationalists.⁴⁹⁾

Various writers, however, are more critical. Bruce Cumings emerges in a number of studies as a leading sceptic. In his most recent book he declares that Acheson secretly committed the United States to Korea; after all, the early drafts of his speech included the country within the defensive perimeter. But he was obliged to be ambiguous, lest he encourage Rhee to action. Moreover, because the official text was unavailable for weeks, Cumings argues that the North Koreans and even the *New York Times* thought that Korea had

47) Dean Acheson, "Crisis in Asia - An Examination of U.S. Policy," *Department of State Bulletin* 22.551 (23 January 1950): 111-118; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 410; "M'Arthur Pledges Defense of Japan," *New York Times*, March 2, 1949, p. 22; Thomas H. Etzold and John Lewis Gaddis, *Containment: Documents on American Foreign Policy and Strategy, 1945-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 252-276; FRUS 1949 VII Part 2, 1212, Outline of Far Eastern Asian Policy for Review with the President, November 14, 1949.

48) Taft speech, June 28, 1950, in Bernstein and Matusov, *Truman Administration: A Documentary History*, 439-442.

49) The National Archives, Kew, London, FO 371/ 83013, F1022/5, Franks to Bevin, Despatch No. 37, January 16, 1950.

been included within the defensive perimeter.⁵⁰⁾ The text appeared in the *Department of State Bulletin* on January 23, eleven days later. The speech was reported in the *New York Times* on January 13 and focused on Acheson's remarks about China. It reported Acheson as saying that, contrary to the claims of Republicans, the Nationalists had not lost because of inadequate US military assistance but because "its forces melted away"; its government was not overthrown because "there was nothing to overthrow." The newspaper accurately reported Acheson's key points about US strategy in the region. It did not report the omission of Korea from the defensive perimeter. Rather, it recorded Acheson as saying that the defensive perimeter that ran from Ryukyu Islands and Aleutians off Alaska to Philippines continued to be upheld. It included his further remarks: "It must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack." "Should such an attack occur... [initial] reliance must be upon the people attacked to resist it and then upon... the United Nations which so far has not proved a weak reed to lean on."⁵¹⁾

Acheson was clearly committed to maintaining South Korean morale and to providing some degree of economic assistance. During hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Senator

50) Cumings, *Korean War*, 72. For a critique of Cummings' earlier studies, see John Edward Wilz, "The Making of Mr Truman's War," in Korean War Conference Committee, *The Historical Reillumination on the Korean War* (Seoul: War Memorial Service, 1990), [81-108], 93-94. Wilz finds Cummings' claim wholly unconvincing: had Acheson been baiting the communists to attack, then US forces would have been prepared, but these "troops were woefully unprepared."

51) Walter Waggoner, "Four Areas Listed. 'Attaching' Manchuria, Inner, Outer Mongolia, Sinkiang Cited," *New York Times*, January 13, 1950.

Knowland asked what would be the U.S. response to a Soviet-inspired attack on the South Korea. Acheson replied, "I do not believe we would undertake to resist it by military force." Vandenberg asked, "Independently?" and Acheson answered, "Independently. Of course, if under the [UN] Charter action were taken, we would take our part in that, but probably it would not be taken because they would veto it."⁵²) This was consistent with the American position for at least a year, but appeared a weak answer to the committee. It was no surprise, then that on January 19 the bill faced defeat. The President and Secretary expressed their "concern and dismay." They did manage, however, to persuade Congress to accept the attachment of a Korean appropriation (reduced to \$120m) to an extension of the China Aid Act, which would offer aid to Taiwan where Chiang's Nationalist forces had gone after their defeat on the mainland. It became law on February 14, 1950. On June 5 they secured a second year's appropriation of \$100m.⁵³)

Despite these successful efforts in obtaining funds for Korea, it is evident that Acheson's commitment was less substantial in 1949-1950 than it had been in 1946-1947. In testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in June 1949, he argued that without the aid he sought "Korea will collapse and Korea will fall into the communist

52) Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Historical Series, *Reviews of the World Situation, 1949-1950* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 191.

53) On these developments, see Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Historical Series, *Economic Assistance to China and Korea, 1949-1950* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979). House Committee on Foreign Affairs, *United States Policy in the Far East Part 2: Korea Assistance Acts* (Washington DC: USGPO, 1976), 406-407; cited by Dobbs, *The Unwanted Symbol*, 216n42. Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 358. McGlothlen, *Controlling the Waves*, 74-75.

area. If you do this, there is a chance it will not.” He added that “if the Soviet Union really puts its weight behind it... they would take the country over. There is nothing we can do about it.”⁵⁴⁾ His remarks to the Foreign Relations Committee in January 1950 repeated this diagnosis. Even as late as May 1950 he spoke about America’s attachment to South Korea but omitted any commitment of military assistance if it was attacked.⁵⁵⁾ Many years later, he said that he had shared the belief that Korea would slip behind the iron curtain as a result of guerrilla warfare, psychological warfare, or a combination of both, and there did not seem much to be done to stop this.⁵⁶⁾ Robert Ferrell suggests three ingredients in the Truman administration’s avoidance of a commitment to Korea: the experience of a costly failure in China; the US Army’s argument that it needed all its troops for Western Europe and other bases around the world, and for its reserve in the United States; and a fear that backing South Korea might draw the administration into another debacle over Taiwan (help for Korea was likely to bring calls for support of the Chinese Nationalists in Taiwan from the Republican supporters).⁵⁷⁾

From all this it seems quite clear that there was no American military commitment to South Korea. It is understandable, however, why Cumings might think that Acheson was readier in private to support deploying armed forces in defense of Korea, for spring 1950

54) US Congress, House of Representatives, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Hearings on H.R. 5330, 81st Congress, 1st Session, 1949, p.192; cited in Dobbs, *The Unwanted Symbol*, 164.

55) FRUS 1950 VII, 67n, Acheson press conference, May 3, 1950.

56) Ferrell, *Truman*, 319.

57) *Ibid.*, 318-319.

saw him espouse a tougher general strategy. In a press conference on February 8 and then in a speech on February 16 Acheson spoke of the need of a firm, thorough, and coordinated response to Soviet communism. The United States should develop “situations of strength” around the world and should involve all the agencies of government in a campaign of “total diplomacy.”⁵⁸⁾ Acheson argued that these “situations of strength” required much greater military strength. This led to the creation of a new policy document in April 1950-NSC 68. It described the Soviet Union as inherently expansionist and urged American resistance to communism everywhere. It recommended large-scale rearmament by the United States and its allies to meet the threat. Yet, it would be a mistake to extrapolate from this a readiness by the administration to send troops in defense of South Korea. While Truman backed Acheson’s call for a resolute approach to the Soviets, he resisted a massive increase in defence expenditure.⁵⁹⁾ Moreover, the President shared Acheson’s view of the need to be circumspect in Asia. On January 5 he told a press conference that there would be no American military aid or advice for Taiwan.⁶⁰⁾ On the eve of the North Korean attack Acheson and Truman were trying to perform what proved to be an unsuccessful balancing act between support for the government in

58) Acheson remarks at February 8, 1950, press conference, *Department of State Bulletin* 22.555 (February 20, 1950): 272-274; Dean Acheson, “‘Total Diplomacy’ to Strengthen U.S. Leadership for Human Freedom,” *Department of State Bulletin* 22.559 (March 20, 1950): 427-429; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 378-379.

59) FRUS 1950 I 234-292, NSC 68, April 7, 1950.

60) Harry S. Truman, Press Conference, January 5, 1950, accessed October 29, 2012 November 26, 2012, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=13678&st=&st1=

Seoul and avoiding unrealistic commitments in Asia.

Conclusion

Korea assumed a low significance for most American policymakers before 1950, especially among the military. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War Dean Acheson shared that perspective. But in the course of 1946 he developed an appreciation of the importance of the peninsula. While in office in 1946-1947 he urged the need to demonstrate American commitment to a democratic and independent Korea. But, above all, he pressed the economic case for assisting Korea, principally for its economic value to Japan. Contrary to the claims of Offner, he did not rush to make it a Cold War battleground. He advocated cooperation with the Soviet Union, which he continued to favor as late as spring 1947. Despite his best efforts, he failed to secure economic assistance from Congress. With his departure as Under Secretary in June 1947 the legislation was abandoned.

In his absence, Korea assumed much less importance for the administration; the military view of its strategic insignificance prevailed. However, when Acheson returned to office as Secretary of State in January 1949 he revived schemes for aid but had to concede that the peninsula was not a crucial strategic interest. His speech in January 1950 and his testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in June 1949 and to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in January 1950 demonstrate Acheson's desire to aid

Korea but also his reticence about what the United States could realistically promise. Cumings' claim that Acheson lured the North into an attack lacks supporting evidence, but there can be little doubt that he had made a strategic miscalculation. There was a strong element of wishful thinking and a desire to avoid another disastrous intervention in Asia. But it was not bungled diplomacy. Acheson's reaction to the attack of June 25 was tough and decisive but he was not completely at odds with the views he expressed since he became Secretary of State. He encouraged the President to make a firm response and aimed to channel American action through the United Nations; and he was more restrained than Defense Secretary Louis Johnson. American involvement increased in stages. But the blatant nature of the assault made it impossible for the President and Secretary, given their strong advocacy of resistance to communist threats, to do anything but intervene.

The eventually massive US military commitment was rooted more in the desire to deter aggression and to resist communist expansion than the wish to protect a strategically important territory. President and Secretary adopted the limited goal of restoring the pre-war borders. For a time, however, military victories seduced them into broadening their goals and believing they could unite the peninsula. But they opposed MacArthur's attempts to expand the war and restated their limited war strategy when the Chinese intervened; the risks of hostilities with China and its ally the Soviet Union were too great. Truman and Acheson might have spoken of Soviet-inspired aggression, but they were determined to localise the conflict. Acheson was the leading exponent of engagement with Korea in the Truman

administration, but his commitment was always qualified, even in wartime.

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Abstract

Dean Acheson and the Place of Korea in American Foreign and Security Policy, 1945-1950

Michael F. Hopkins

(University of Liverpool)

The Korean War was a vital part of the career of Dean Acheson and has justly attracted a considerable number of studies. His involvement in policy to the peninsula before 1950, however, has seen little detailed analysis. This article explores Acheson's view of Korea and his influence on policy to the country during his time as Under Secretary of State between August 1945 and June 1947, and as Secretary of State from January 1949.

It concludes that Acheson was committed to Korean independence and the development of its political institutions and to its economic rehabilitation. The country was an important component of his Asian policy. But the territory itself, even during the War, was never a strategic priority. Before June 1950 Acheson advocated aid, but this was limited by Congressional restrictions on funding. The massive US military commitment in response to the attack was designed more to deter aggression and to resist communist expansion than to protect a strategically important territory. For most of the conflict the Americans and Acheson favored a limited war. Acheson's outlook was realistic in terms of the geopolitical situation and domestic constraints.

Key Words

Dean Acheson, Cold War, Korea, American foreign policy, Harry Truman administration.