The Berlin-Korea parallel: Berlin and American national security in light of the Korean War

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The Korean War had a profound impact on the ways in which American policymakers perceived the Cold War. Nowhere was this more fact evident than in the case of Berlin. Despite the geographical separation between the two countries, policymakers became concerned with what they identified as the ‘Berlin-Korea parallel.’ Holding the Soviet Union responsible for North Korea’s aggression, Washington believed that in North Korea’s attack it was witnessing a new Soviet capability that could give the USSR a decisive edge in the Cold War. Until that time, US defence planners directed their efforts toward preparing for the Red Army sweeping through Europe and for other equally absolute threats. The North Korean attack, however, cast into doubt their assumptions. ‘War-by-proxy’, or the use of troops from Soviet satellites to probe Western intentions and capabilities without actually using Soviet troops, would add a new, less direct dimension to the East-West conflict. Every indication led Washington to believe that Moscow could and probably would employ the ‘Korean model’ in Berlin. Indeed, the War Department warned US commanders in Europe within days of the outbreak of hostilities that the North Korean attack ‘may indicate riskier Soviet policy henceforth of using Satellite armed forces in attempting to reach limited objectives for the expansion of Communism.’ Historian Ernest R. May put it more succinctly: the attack ‘was widely viewed as a rehearsal for a comparable effort in Europe’.

Ultimately, of course, the Soviet Union did not send East German troops to attack the West’s position in Berlin, and more recent sources have revealed that, quite apart from the debate about Stalin’s intentions, such a move was never a viable option. Yet the prospect – and it was the perception of a threat that was the core issue – led to extensive revision of existing national security policy designed to maintain the American presence in the city. As it was eventually tabled in 1952, in the form of National Security Council (NSC) 132/1 ‘US Policy and Courses of Action to Counter Soviet or Satellite Action Against Berlin’, Washington’s Berlin policy underwent a striking shift during the
Korean War from relatively straightforward planning for the contingency of another blockade, to defending against a more sophisticated and ambiguous threat – an attack on Berlin by recently formed East German paramilitary forces. This new policy reflected the intersection of a conceptual shift and practical experience.

This transformation has, for the most part, been neglected in the historiography of the Berlin issue. Diplomatic historians have produced important accounts of the impact of the Korean War on NATO, particularly the massive injection of funds and military buildup for which the war acted as a catalyst. There are many accounts of Washington’s response to the Berlin blockade, and there are numerous references on the crisis period from 1958 to 1962, but the intervening period in relation to Berlin has been under-appreciated. Yet the record clearly shows that Washington did not simply forget about the Berlin problem in 1949, after the lifting of the blockade, only to be reminded of the threat when Khrushchev presented his ultimatum in November 1958. Moreover, the policy upon which the Eisenhower administration based its response to Khrushchev’s challenge was very different to that which had emerged immediately after the blockade; in the intervening period was a crucial process of transition that has not been adequately explored. The relevant NSC papers, including the policy papers and memoranda of conversations and action, are now fully declassified, as are the bulk of papers from State, Defense, Intelligence, and White House sources. They make clear the depth of Washington’s concern about the Berlin-Korea parallel and that this situation led directly to America’s Berlin policy being revised and re-written. Specifically, the experience of the Korean War led to more sophisticated US policy that accounted for a much broader range of contingencies.

In his international history of the Korean War, William Stueck pointed out that ‘the [Korean] war’s impact was global, despite the limited geographical scope of the fighting’. Essential elements of the experience of the Korean conflict were not limited in application to the Far East; rather, they remained valid for situations on other parts of the globe. In this respect, the ‘lessons of Korea’ were valuable to American policymakers in what they seemed to reveal about Soviet capabilities, and in respect to the practical implementation of containment. The accuracy of American estimates of Soviet military strength in the early Cold War, and the influence these assessments exerted on the policymaking process was, and remains, contentious. However, most contemporary estimates rested upon the assumption that the threat was a World War II-style invasion of
Europe in which Moscow would risk all. A Soviet preponderance of conventional military forces, compounded by a new albeit incipient atomic capability, posed a serious threat for which military planners strove to account. ‘War-by-proxy’, however, could effectively render meaningless American assessments of Soviet military strength, irrespective of how accurate they were. In short, in the mid-1950s Washington recognised that, despite the tremendous resources it had devoted to assessing Soviet military strength, it had not prepared to face a threat to its vital interests in Berlin modelled on the Communist invasion of South Korea.

The origins of the Korean War were a complex interplay of Korean, Chinese, Soviet, and American influences. Bruce Cummings, in his seminal study of the origins of the Korean War, even went so far as to argue that ‘Who started the Korean War?’ was a question best not asked. However, American policymakers in 1950 did need to ask and felt certain they had the answer. Seen from Washington, the march of North Korean Communist troops on South Korea on 25 June 1950 could be nothing other than International Communism’s military aggression, carefully orchestrated by the Kremlin.

Whether the ‘Kremlin’s Korean venture’ was the opening move in a global offensive was less certain. What Washington did know was that the Korean War could signal the start of a global offensive. What was more, the military aggression of the North Koreans revealed a dangerous new Soviet capability; and for an administration increasingly framing policy on Soviet capabilities rather than intentions this demanded attention. Even if the threat of further Soviet action on many geographical fronts seemed logistically questionable, it was certainly real enough to warrant considerable study and planning by the highest policymaking bodies in the administration, including the National Security Council. Even Charles Bohlen, who believed many in Washington were over-reacting to the situation, had to concede that ‘there is not sufficient evidence to justify a firm opinion that the Soviet Union will not take any one or all of the actions which lie within its military capabilities’. Secretary of State Dean Acheson agreed. In fact, he said, the next crisis might come at any one of a dozen places.

Assuming a monolithic and coherent structure of International Communism controlled by the Kremlin, Washington feared that Moscow might employ in Europe a method of aggression modelled on Korea. The North Korean’s invasion had been unexpected for many reasons, not the least of which was the
assumption, long-held in policymaking circles, that any conflict with the Communist world would come as blatant aggression from the Soviet Union, and would face Soviet military forces against US military forces; an assumption Henry Kissinger identified as ‘the major flaw’ of containment.14 In early 1950, however, policymakers were beginning to recognise a new threat. The administration’s comprehensive Cold War policy blueprint, NSC 68 ‘United States Objectives and Programs for National Security’, dismissed global war as a Soviet intention.15 It was unlikely, therefore, that Moscow would initiate direct military aggression with the risk of uncontrolled escalation it entailed. Yet at the same time, NSC 68 warned of the dangers of ‘piecemeal aggression’ whereby the Soviets could threaten American interests without resorting to direct military confrontation. By exploiting Washington’s unwillingness to engage in atomic war unless directly attacked, Moscow might pose a military threat by other, more abstruse methods, that could potentially throw American defence policy into disarray. When North Korean troops marched on South Korea on 25 June, Washington believed that it was witnessing a demonstration of this new and dangerous capability; one that came to be known as ‘war-by-proxy’. Moreover, there seemed no doubt that the Soviets would exploit this new capability. Many believed, as US Ambassador to the USSR Alan G. Kirk did, that ‘Korea was only a short step forward’ and was likely to be followed either by another local attack somewhere else or, at minimum, sabre rattling at sensitive points.16

Such warnings indicated that American policymakers viewed the situation not so much as a localised insurrection but rather in a global context.17 Consequently, they re-evaluated the threat to other US strategic interests. Of all the potential trouble spots where the Soviets might conceivably employ the ‘Korean model’, Berlin seemed the most likely. Two years earlier President Harry S. Truman had defined Berlin as a vital security interest. When he had decided in July 1948 that the US would stay in Berlin ‘come what may’, he had committed America to defend its interests there with all of the resources at its disposal, including its atomic arsenal. In May 1949 Western resolve paid off and Stalin lifted the blockade, but Washington still considered the contest for the city to be central to the Cold War. Moreover, Washington believed that the issue was equally prominent in Soviet priorities. Therefore, the threat appeared immediate; if the Soviets could mobilize puppet troops in the Far East, they could presumably mobilize those of their satellites in Eastern Europe. Even George F. Kennan, who was critical of policymakers’ attempts to see simplistic patterns of aggression in Soviet foreign policy, warned of this. At the same time
as downplaying the global significance of the Korean conflict, he predicted that the Soviets would continue to build up armed strength in East Germany which would place them in a position to employ the Korean pattern should they decide to do so. More generally, Kennan expected the Kremlin to exploit the situation by intensifying ‘efforts to frighten us and our friends, to divert our attention, and to test our firmness’.

Yugoslavia, Iran, and other areas were initially considered further scenes of Soviet action, but these fears faded within days as the ‘distraction’ scenario lost weight. Berlin, however, offered long-term parallels that concerned Washington. Both Germany and Korea had been occupied following World War II, albeit with different regimes. Both were divided into Communist and non-Communist halves. Most importantly, both had been initially disarmed. The Koreans had since rearmed, the West Germans had not. Consequently, in the immediate postwar period, both relied heavily on international forces, especially the United States, to guarantee their security. Indeed, West German insecurities aroused by the Korean War acted as a major rationale in the delicate issue of arming the Federal Republic.

As it stood at the outbreak of hostilities, American policy to maintain the position in Berlin was relatively simple: in 1949, a Soviet-imposed blockade was the only serious threat to Berlin that the NSC saw and the one toward which its contingency planning was directed. On 13 May, only a day after the blockade was lifted, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Omar Bradley, suggested to his fellow Joint Chiefs that they prepare recommendations for a military response to a reimposed blockade. Days later, the NSC, in an effort to increase its own role in policymaking and minimise the improvisation that had characterised the US response to the blockade, made its own request of the Joint Chiefs. The result, a relatively brief policy paper, NSC 24/3 ‘Possible US Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade’, ensured that the US had in place policy to deal with such a crisis. According to the report, Washington should recognise that ‘a new blockade may be more severe and that its basis might be a determination to force [the West] out of Berlin by taking any steps necessary to make the airlift abortive or, perhaps, to bring about a major war issue’. Acheson, though concurring with the report, stressed upon the President and the NSC the seriousness of a decision by the Soviets to renew the blockade because it would be ‘without any basis except hostility’ and create a situation ‘perilously close to
war'. While the Foreign Ministers were meeting in Paris, ostensibly to negotiate a solution to the German problem, Truman approved NSC 24/3 on 15 June on the condition that the Air Force remained sufficiently alert to implement a full airlift within 90 days.

The confidence in the contingency policy spelled out in NSC 24/3 was, based on the assumption that any future threat to Berlin would follow similar lines as it had in 1948; that is, that the Soviets would threaten access to the city by imposing a blockade. This confidence was dealt a severe blow when North Korean troops marched on South Korea on 25 June. The immediate issue was the pressure on US military resources involved with the diversion of equipment and personnel from Europe to the Far East. The readjustment of forces that the conflict necessitated meant that the 90-day readiness for a full-scale Berlin airlift imposed by the President and tabled in NSC 24/3 and NSC 24/4 was compromised when the aircraft and personnel required to achieve this were diverted to Korea. In July, the Joint Chiefs of Staff initiated a study on US capabilities in light of Korea, but before this review was barely underway Acheson told the US High Commissioner, John McCloy, that it was already apparent that 'it would be impossible to stage an airlift of the same magnitude' as that of 1948-49. In September 1950, in a memorandum to the NSC, Acting Secretary of Defence George C. Marshall admitted that US involvement in Korea had reduced the ability of the armed services to provide the airlift capacity which would be required to re-establish a Berlin airlift, but assured the NSC that this was temporary and would be reinstated as soon as practicable. Yet despite Marshall's assurances, the Korean action did compromise US strength in Europe, particularly in Berlin, while Soviet forces remained uncommitted. Officials perceived a threat that the Soviets might take action in Europe at the same time that US forces were engaged in the Far East and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with State’s concurrence, warned that it would be ‘militarily unsound under present conditions’ to divert large numbers of multi-engine aircraft from Europe to the Far East since these aircraft would be needed if the Soviets launched such an attack by threatening either Berlin or Vienna.

As well as the logistical challenges posed by the need to maintain military strength in two separate theatres, the Korean War had a profound impact on all aspects of US foreign policy and prompted an urgent reappraisal of national security assumptions and priorities. Policymakers struggled to place the outbreak of hostilities in Korea within the context of Soviet global strategy, since they feared that Korea, as McCloy warned, 'may only be in the nature of
Others shared this view. Chairman of the National Security Resources Board, Stuart Symington, asserted that the Korean War was the NSC’s wake-up call, requiring a fundamental re-evaluation of the very foundations upon which American national security policy rested. First, he said, Soviet strength was so great that it appeared impossible for the US to settle the Korean conflict for some months ‘Second’, he continued,

*is the serious current inadequacy of our own military forces, to the point where, even in order to settle this Korean incident...we are already being forced to seriously weaken the defences of the United States. As an example, if the Russians reimpose the Berlin blockade there are not enough airplanes available to handle simultaneously another Berlin airlift, the Korean campaign, and the absolute minimum airlift necessary for the military defence of the United States.*

Concurring with Symington’s assessment of the urgency of the situation and the need for a fundamental reassessment of the situation, the NSC immediately attempted to come to terms with the implications of the Korean conflict on American security interests on a global scale. The result was the NSC 73 series titled ‘Position and Actions of the United States with Respect to Possible Soviet Moves in the Light of the Korean Situation’. The NSC saw the Korean scenario as potentially a new method in the Soviets’ quest for worldwide Communist revolution – a method that took Washington by surprise and suggested the significant extent to which the USSR held the strategic initiative. It highlighted a new vulnerability of the West so clearly that the NSC had to admit that ‘the military capabilities of the United States are not adequate to its current commitments and responsibilities’, whereas the USSR, by now officially regarded as ‘the implacable enemy of the United States and the non-Communist world,’ had the capability to ‘occupy any country on its periphery, to invade Western Europe and the Near and Middle East, to make direct attacks upon the United Kingdom and Alaska and upon shipping, and to reinforce the Communist military effort in the Far East’.

Because Korea was not one of the military-industrial complexes identified by the Truman administration as the most valuable prizes of the Cold War, when US officials tried to determine Soviet intentions they saw areas of higher priority, specifically in Europe and the Middle East, and braced themselves for action there. As the NSC warned: ‘USSR action in regard to Korea, and its
employment of satellite forces there, should be regarded not as an isolated phenomenon but as possibly as part of a general plan which might involve correlated action in other parts of the world’. The Soviet Union had the capability of conducting the Cold War on many, localised fronts and could threaten American interests without directly engaging Americans troops. Soviet military forces were strong enough in their own right to be employed in Iran, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece, Afghanistan, Pakistan, or Finland. 'In addition to any one or more of these local operations', NSC 73/4 continued, ‘the Soviets would still be capable of conducting with surprise important operations simultaneously in Germany and Austria, in the Near, Middle, and Far East, and against the United Kingdom and the North American continent,’ but ‘unless the Kremlin is willing to accept global war’, which in NSC 68 Washington had already concluded was unlikely,32 ‘it will not commit Soviet armed forces to action in Germany and Austria’. More likely was a course of action patterned on Korea.33 The NSC assessed that by employing such a model, Moscow could face Washington with a sharp dilemma of 'abandoning positions of vital political and strategic importance, committing and dissipating available strength on the many fronts chosen by the USSR, or undertaking global war'. The United States was vulnerable, but there was hope. The NSC believed that the considerable range of Soviet capabilities could be countered by drawing upon the lessons of the past since, it said, ‘history has shown that Russia can be influenced to delay action or retreat from local objectives if strongly opposed’.34 In its recommendations for coping with specific threats the NSC advised that in the event the USSR reimposed the Berlin blockade, the US should react immediately and decisively, 'since the maintenance of our position in Berlin is of great importance to the interests of the United States'. In the event that position was threatened, the NSC recommended instituting a partial airlift, despite the logistical difficulties posed by the Korean conflict.35

The conflict was thousands of miles away, yet it provoked alarm bells in Germany because of the postwar parallels between the two countries. Presumably, if the Moscow could use Communist puppet-forces in Asia it could just as easily use them in Europe. Yet, what concerned the Germans most was the demonstration of American military impotence. It was one thing for policymakers in Washington to recognise that the US did not have the capabilities to meet the threat, but the Korean conflict was showing this weakness to the world. The implications of this situation were not lost on Acheson who observed that within weeks of the invasion, Europe's elation at American intervention in Korea was being replaced by petrified fright. If the
United States could not protect South Korea then what was the value of NATO? Acheson’s concerns were heightened when McCloy sent him cables describing the increasingly acute sensitivity of the Germans to their own defence. Some business firms and wealthy individuals had begun making secret financial contributions to the German communists in anticipation of soon being under their government, because, in McCloy’s words, ‘we are powerless at this time to withstand a Soviet invasion of Western Germany and every German on the street is fully aware of this fact’. Moreover, this insecurity was mirrored throughout Western Europe. On 8 July, Acheson instructed State’s public affairs officers in Germany to dilute US responsibility for recent reverses in Korea by emphasising the multilateral nature of the UN forces. Above all, he said, since military build-ups were slow, it was important not to raise false expectations of quick results. A week later he expressed his concern for the accumulating evidence of a worldwide decline in confidence of America’s ability to succeed in Korea. Although this was perhaps temporary, he said, the fact that it grew out of military defeats made it particularly urgent that US officials abroad do everything possible for put military developments and potentialities in better perspective.

A month later Acheson believed that the psychological damage that the Korean War was doing to American credibility, particularly in Germany, was becoming acute. Whatever remnants of memories remained of American military strength demonstrated in World War II could not ‘dispel their hopelessness when they feel, and perhaps rightly, that their Western civilisation could not survive another occupation – and this time at the hands of the Soviet Union’.

Within days of North Korea’s invasion, Adenauer, appearing to McCloy to be both alarmed and pessimistic, raised the prospect of the application of the Korean model in Germany. He was particularly concerned that, if faced with military aggression from East German paramilitary forces, the Allies might withdraw their troops to the Rhine or even further west, leaving the Federal Republic undefended. He pressed his point to add urgency to NATO’s consideration of rearming Germany. Though Acheson had expected Adenauer to use this argument as a ‘gambit’ in his campaign to strengthen his government by creating a West German police force, the range and scale of German concerns could not be ignored. The US High Commission was receiving a flurry of reports from throughout Germany mirroring Adenauer’s concerns.
US officials in Germany looked to Korea for clues as to Soviet plans for Europe, which, they believed, were evolving toward an eventual use of the GDR in the same manner as the North Koreans were being used.\(^[41]\) Proceeding from the basic assumption that the Soviet Union was ‘prepared to go very close to precipitating world war in order to win whole of Germany within next few years’, the US High Commission for Germany (HICOG) speculated on Soviet intentions for Germany. The pattern of Soviet intentions seemed to indicate that they would employ a combination of ‘consolidation of power in East Germany, integration of East Germany within [the Soviet] orbit pressure vis-à-vis West Germany, subversion from within and preparation for ultimate attack by GDR with East German troops’. The tempo of the Soviet offensive in Germany might be altered by spectacular Soviet success, or defeat, but only the outbreak of global war or drastic Western actions were likely to alter its direction. The Soviets had made the West’s position in Berlin expensive and awkward, the report said, and they could be expected to continue to do so. A matter of particular concern was the recent psychological element of doubt and uncertainty resulting from the successful projection of Soviet strength, determination, political sophistication, and inevitability of victory.\(^[42]\)

By October, however, intelligence analysts expressed doubt that the Soviets would use a ‘Korean pattern’ in Germany. The CIA evaluated that ‘the Soviet Korean venture, a laboratory test in the use of non-Soviet communist forces to fight a local war of limited objectives, has ended in failure. The margin by which the North Korean forces failed to overrun and occupy all South Korea was narrow, and the test would have been a conspicuous success but for the intervention of UN forces’.\(^[43]\) Two months later, the Central Intelligence Group, a coordinated analysis body formed as a result of the failure of several intelligence agencies to predict the outbreak of hostilities in Korea, was even more doubtful that the Korean pattern would be used in Germany, judging in its December National Intelligence Estimate that ‘despite repeated communist emphasis on the parallel between Germany and Korea, it is unlikely in present circumstances that the Soviet Union will repeat the Korean pattern in West Germany unless it intends to precipitate general war’.\(^[44]\)

However, the credibility of the intelligence services had suffered badly with the general failure to predict the North Korean offensive, and the NSC was not convinced. While NSC 73/4 reviewed the global position of the United States, the NSC’s attempts to address what appeared to be a new threat to Berlin and Germany in light of the Korean experience were spelled out in NSC 89 ‘US
Policy with Respect to Berlin and Eastern Germany. \(^{45}\) Washington believed that if the US was willing and able to justify military intervention in Korea, it must also be prepared to risk war in order to defend Berlin. If passive and non-aggressive counteraction proved inadequate, an NSC Staff paper argued, 'the enormous political importance of Berlin to Europe, an importance which is at present at least as great as Korea's significance to Asia, would have to be taken into account'. \(^{46}\)

At this time, US officials in Europe were consolidating their warnings into a single voice, and in so doing, were playing a far more influential role than they had previously. The bulk of NSC 89 consisted of a paper jointly drafted by HICOG, European Command (EUCOM), and Berlin Command (USCOB) completed on 29 August, reviewing the Berlin situation from the perspective of European-based officials. \(^{47}\) The primary threat to Berlin would be Soviet unilateral recognition of GDR sovereignty after the elections of October 1950. Moscow would then, the paper predicted, declare that the Western Allies were illegally in Germany and transfer all responsibility for access controls to the East German regime; exactly the scenario threatened in Khrushchev's ultimatum eight years later. \(^{48}\) They saw the recently created German Democratic Republic (GDR) primarily as a 'façade behind which the Soviets can henceforth operate'. Moreover, Walter Ulbricht's regime was armed with a de-facto army, the Volkspolizei Bereitschaften, which provided 'the force in being for Soviet seizure of Berlin without involvement of the USSR or its forces'. Despite having been initially dismissed by the Intelligence establishment as a serious threat, \(^{49}\) the Korean conflict demonstrated how the Soviet Union might use these East German troops in a move against the West in Berlin and thereby hope to avert a direct clash of Soviet and American forces.

In Washington, the Joint Chiefs' reaction to the HICOG-EUCOM-USCOB report was to urge for calm and preparation, down-playing the alarmist tone of the report and calls to escalate potential hostilities until more concrete plans and objectives were established 'at the highest government level'. Until such time that the President had decided that general war was unavoidable, the Joint Chiefs believed that any armed action in Berlin should be met only by the Berlin garrison augmented by the Berlin police. This, however, was far from shunning America's responsibilities since they also argued that, it would be far more serious from a political and military point of view to accept a blockade imposed by the GDR than one by the Soviets, and that such a scenario would justify bolder US action than the earlier blockade had done. \(^{50}\) Yet the Joint
Chiefs recognised their military vulnerability in the region and hoped that State might take more active measures to deter a crisis.

In a February 1951 draft study on policy with regard to a possible new Berlin blockade the NSC Staff divided the possible ways of improving the US position in Berlin into three main categories: action designed to prevent or discourage a blockade; action to improve the supply and morale of the Berliners during a blockade; and actions designed to break or cause the lifting of the blockade.\(^{51}\) The second and third of these were essentially covered under NSC 24/3 and NSC 24/4. The city's stockpile was complete and could provide fuel, food, and medical supplies for 150 days without any airlift.

It was to the first category, namely deterrence, that Washington turned its attention. Believing that a stronger and more publicised stance might have prevented Soviet action in Korea, and having been attacked for Acheson's apparent abandonment of South Korea in a speech before the National Press Club on 12 January 1950, during which he appeared to place Korea outside of US security interests,\(^{52}\) the administration sought to make perfectly clear its interests. American officials were determined not to give any such green light for Soviet aggression in Europe. Consequently, Acheson incorporated into his speeches and discussions with foreign officials deliberate references to the determination of the US to remain in Berlin in order to convey to the Soviets the seriousness with which they viewed the situation. This increased emphasis on deterrence was partly to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, but more importantly, it was because the NSC had already determined that it was largely unable to force an end to a blockade.

The culmination of this new thinking was tabled in a report jointly drafted by State and Defence entitled NSC 132/1 'US Policy and Courses of Action to Counter Possible Soviet or Satellite Action Against Berlin', described by Acheson as 'an excellent analysis and a good strong policy' that offered America's best hope of remaining in Berlin.\(^{53}\) Although technically it superseded NSC 24/3, thematically it proceeded from NSC 89. The report began soberly: 'As long as Germany remains divided and Berlin is a land island in the Soviet Zone, the maintenance of our position in the city will not be an easy task. On the contrary, it is likely to be as nerve-wracking as it is important, and there is no easy way to make it otherwise'. Nevertheless, abandoning the city would result in a 'major political reverse' and it was therefore recommended that 'the Western powers should not voluntarily abandon the city
under Communist pressure even though the resulting situation may involve
great risk of general war'. Most of all, NSC 132/1 recommended flexibility to
avoid automatically involving the US in a war with one of the Soviet Union’s
satellites. An overt, direct attack on Berlin by Soviet forces was most unlikely.
Rather, the Kremlin would ‘seek to conduct themselves in a way which will
obscure their own responsibility and place responsibility on the Western
powers’, and there was little doubt that they would accomplish this by
employing East German forces. Though it would be made clear to the world that
the US considered the Soviet Union accountable for satellite actions,
‘circumstances might arise in which it would be desirable to draw a distinction
between overt Soviet action and overt satellite action’. Moreover, the US would
strive to avoid the situation that had occurred during the blockade in which
neither side could afford to back down without appearing to capitulate and
damaging its prestige. Hence, the report recommended that US determination to
remain in Berlin be conveyed through informal channels rather than formal
government statements that might be construed as ultimatums.54

NSC 132/1 provided for more sophisticated pursuit of deterrence by making
greater use of the various resources at the disposal of the US. These included
regular signals from high-ranking US officials during press conferences and
speeches that the US would take any measures necessary to defend its position
in the city. This official signalling would be supported by manipulation of
unofficial public channels, such as ‘news “leaks” and ‘black and gray
propaganda’ which, the NSC said, was ‘designed to buttress the foregoing
public statements with “authoritative” information and should be meshed with
public statements’. As well, the report recommended that the US should
periodically ‘brief’ West Berlin and West German authorities on the
determination of the West to support Berlin ‘with the expectation that such
information would reach the Communists’. 55

The bulk of NSC 132/1 consisted of contingency planning for a number of
courses of action to be taken in preparation for, or to counteract, Soviet or
satellite moves against Berlin. These courses of action were divided into groups
related to hypothetical situations of progressively increasing severity, ranging
from a situation in which access was not seriously impeded, through a blockade,
and finally to a military attack from Soviet or satellite forces. The report found
it ‘most unlikely’ that Moscow would use its own forces against the city; rather,
the Bereitschaften would be used in an operation modelled on Korea. Yet it was
also safe to assume ‘that the Soviet rulers will not use East German or other
satellite forces to drive the Western powers from the city unless they are prepared to accept the risk of general war'.\(^5\) Such a decision, however, could not be lightly dismissed.

The NSC recommended the US approach its allies to develop international contingency plans to deal with such potentialities, but that they refrain from making definite military commitments. Based on the experience of the earlier blockade, NSC 132/1 also reflected moves to make a new airlift and sustenance of the city under siege conditions more efficient.\(^6\) On the whole, NSC 132/1 reflected a growing awareness of the capabilities of both the Soviet Union and the United States. At the same time as assessing Soviet capabilities, the US was moving to make better use of the range of options at its disposal. By refining stockpiling and airlift methods the West would be in a better position to counter a Soviet threat to the city, whether it came in the form of a blockade or an attack by East German forces.

The process of re-writing Berlin policy to protect against the perceived threat that Moscow might exploit the Berlin-Korea parallel is a striking example of how the Truman administration was increasingly placing greater emphasis on Soviet capabilities rather than intentions. NSC 132/1 was very different from the policy papers it superseded. Apart from its thoroughness and detail, the new policy paper displayed the lessons that Washington was learning from the early Cold War and reflected both the conceptual shift and practical experience of the Korean conflict. As one of the earliest, and certainly one of the most dramatic moments of the early Cold War, the Berlin blockade had confirmed for Washington the fundamentally expansionist doctrine of the USSR. Yet, it had not been an overt provocation of the type that the United States could counter with direct military force. Rather, the Soviets had threatened with indirect methods – the blockade, they said, was the result of ‘technical difficulties’ rather than overt hostility – and Truman had been forced to respond with equally unconventional methods. Above all, however, the blockade had revealed that the Soviets wanted Berlin. Thus, when the Korean War broke out Washington saw both a motive and a method whereby the Soviets might threaten American interests in Berlin. That the Soviets intended to do so appeared certain. The Korean conflict showed that they could do so in a way that the US could not easily counter. Indeed, NSC 132/1 went far in demonstrating an awareness of the threat, but did not go so far in outlining workable plans if the US was actually faced with an attack by East German troops. The report did not contain a specific decision on the American reaction
to such an attack, but it did present many of the issues and options open to the President should he have to make a decision under crisis conditions. In this way, the NSC hoped to learn from Cold War experiences and to incorporate these lessons into American national security policy.

Thus, as one of the key experiences of the Truman administration, the Korean War was fundamental to Washington's understanding of the Cold War. Before June 1950, American assessments of the threat to the West's position in Berlin were based upon the experiences of blockade. A new blockade would be more serious, but would be, nonetheless, an easily identifiable threat. In the Korean conflict, however, Washington believed it saw a precedent for a dangerous new Soviet tactic. 'War-by-proxy' could face the US with a crisis not easily defined, and therefore difficult to counter. At all times the Korean model remained a potential course of Soviet action. But this potential, the NSC argued, warranted considerable attention. Based directly on what it saw as 'the Korean model', the NSC came to regard military action by East Germany's paramilitary force, the *Volkspolizei Bereitschaften*, as the primary threat to US interests in Europe.

In many respects it was a rational fear. Though the blockade had been lifted in May 1949, American policymakers, not without justification, continued to expect a Soviet move against the city. In 1949 the NSC saw only one method by which the Soviets might accomplish it objectives, but by 1952, looking at the Berlin problem in the light of Korea, the NSC saw a much broader spectrum of Soviet threats and developed more sophisticated policies to counter them. By recognising and preparing policy to counter these Soviet capabilities, Washington gained confidence to pursue programs such as the European Defence Community and the rearming of Germany – moves they knew were likely to provoke the Kremlin. The experience of Korea had opened Washington's eyes and led to a strengthening of US national security policy. Consequently, American policymakers were able to pursue their own objectives in Europe with some confidence that they could face the Soviet threat, at least in Berlin.
NOTES

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1 Dept of Army to CINCEUR, 28 June 1950, box 2, TS General 1949-52, US High Commissioner McCloy, RG 466, National Archives, College Park, MD.


10 Notably, General Douglas MacArthur argued that the Soviets were not necessarily behind the attack. Kirk to Acheson, 25 June 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*) 1950, vol. 7. p. 140.


16 Kirk to Acheson, 11 August 1950, Box 2, TS General, US High Commissioner McCloy, RG 466, National Archives.


18 Kennan, ‘Possible Further Danger Points in Light of the Korean Situation’, 20 June 1950, box 24, Kennan Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ.
In fact, some assessments concluded that the Korean War had actually added to Yugoslavia’s security. The US ambassador in Belgrade assessed that whereas before the Korean invasion a Soviet attack on Yugoslavia was an ever-present possibility, such a threat was now considerably reduced. He assessed that the primary threat to Yugoslavia had hitherto been direct Soviet aggression. The US reaction in Korea had, they believed, significantly reduced this threat. Embassy Belgrade to Dept of Army, 30 June 1950, box 6, General (Subject) 1949-52, US Secretary, Allied High Commission, US High Commissioner, RG 466, National Archives; and Kennan, ‘Possible Further Danger Points in Light of the Korean Situation’, 30 June 1950, box 24, Kennan Papers, Mudd Library.


Acheson to McCloy, 28 July 1950, box 2, TS General, US High Commissioner McCloy, RG 466, National Archives.

Marshall to James Lay, 26 September 1950, box 12, Policy Papers, RG 273, National Archives. Marshall was referring particularly to the redeployment of the 61st Troop Carrier Group. By November Defence had decided to make the redeployment permanent but promised a minimum of one more troop carrier group to Europe ‘as soon as the situation in Korea or the contemplated increases in the Air Force permit’. Lovett to Lay, 18 November 1950, *ibid*. See also

26 For the general posture of US military forces and assessments of the strength of Soviet military forces see Karber and Combs, 'The United States, NATO, and the Soviet Threat to Western Europe', pp. 420-23. Though clearly exceeding the 90-day limit, the JCS argued that 100 percent of Berlin's long-term requirements — that is, the materials to maintain the city without loss of morale — could be met by an airlift after seven months. JCS for JCS Representative to the NSC Staff, 20 October 1950, box 12, Policy Papers, RG 273, National Archives. Acheson also believed that it would be unwise to invest too heavily in Korea by using troops from Europe. Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman 1949-1953*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1982, p. 242.


28 McCloy to Acheson, 16 August 1950, box 2, TS General, US High Commissioner McCloy, RG 466, National Archives.


32 The NSC did, however, raise the prospect that this assumption was wrong. NSC 73, *FRUS 1950*, vol 1, pp. 336-337.

33 NSC 73/4.


35 Para. 42, *ibid.*


38 Acheson to HICOG, 8 July 1950, box 6, General (Subject) 1949-52, US Secretary, Allied High Commission, US High Commissioner for Germany, RG 466, National Archives.

39 Acheson to Douglas, 22 August 1950, box 2, TS General, US High Commissioner McCloy, RG 466, National Archives.

40 McCloy to HICOG Frankfurt, 28 June 1950, box 6, General (Subject) 1949-52, US Secretary, Allied High Commission, US High Commissioner for Germany, RG 466, National Archives.


42 McCloy to Acheson, 22 July 1950, box 6, General (Subject) 1949-52, US Secretary, Allied High Commission, US High Commissioner for Germany, RG 466, National Archives.

43 CIA 10-50 'Review of the World Situation', 18 October 1950, box 251, PSF, Truman Library.

44 NIE-15 'Probable Soviet Moves to Exploit the Present Situation', 11 December 1950, box 191, PSF, Truman Library.

45 NSC 89 'US Policy with Respect to Berlin and Eastern Germany,' 20 October 1950. For sanitised and partial text see *FRUS 1950*, vol. 4, pp. 867-887, 893-894. For full text, including JCS comments see box 12, Policy Papers, NSC, National Archives.


The paper foreshadowed the crisis of November 1958 by identifying a primary Soviet capability: ‘It is possible that the DDR may ostensibly be granted “full sovereignty” by the USSR in October and that thereafter Soviet forces may either be withdrawn from the Soviet occupation zone in Germany or that they will, more probably, be concentrated in a few strategic localities in East Germany. In any event, it is likely that the DDR will assert authority to speak and act for the whole of the German people following its “legitimation” in the October elections. As a corollary, the DDR would adopt the position enunciated by the SED Congress in July that the Western occupation authorities remain in Germany without benefit of legal status. Although the Allies would immediately reject all claims of this nature, they would be faced with the practical problem of whether to deal directly with representatives of the DDR on such administrative matters as documentation for goods and persons moving to and from Berlin’. Ibid.

The Bereitschaften was the subject of considerable study by US intelligence officials in Germany throughout 1950. A detailed report on the Bereitschaften, prepared by HICOG’s Office of Intelligence in February 1950, concluded that ‘military capabilities are at present negligible and will remain so for at least eight months’. The report also included leaked reports of East German self-evaluations of the Bereitschaften that concentrated on inefficiencies and shortcomings. HICOG Office of Intelligence, Special Intelligence Report no.1 ‘Status of the Soviet Zone Alert Police’, 17 February 1950, box 2, Allied High Commission, US Secretariat, RG 466, National Archives. See also HICOG Office of Intelligence, Special Intelligence Report no 4 ‘Normal Police Activities in the Soviet Zone,’ 16 June 1950, ibid.


See Acheson, Present at the Creation, pp. 467, 476, 534, 880; Bohlen, Witness to History, pp. 294; and Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, The Wise

Martin Hillenbrand has argued that this experience of being blamed for the Korean War led to him taking increasingly extreme positions that were later to come into play during the Kennedy administration in dealing with the issues of Berlin and Cuba. Hillenbrand said: ‘Acheson could never forget the attribution of the blame to him for the Korean war. He was haunted by this for the rest of his life. He was determined never to be blamed again for being a soft-liner, for allowing an adversary to miscalculate that the United States was too soft or complacent to fight. He therefore played the role of an elderly “enfant terrible,” if you will, trying to stir up complacency wherever he believed he found it. He knew his hard-line views wouldn’t all be accepted, but if only part of it was, he would, in his view, have achieved his central purpose’. Martin Hillenbrand, ‘Nuclear Crisis Project: Berlin Crisis Working Group with Martin Hillenbrand’, 11 October 1988, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, in Burr (ed.), The Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962, document no. 02945.

53 For a sanitised version of NSC 132/1 see FRUS 1952-54, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 1261-1269. For the full text, recently declassified, see, NSC 132/1 ‘US Policy and Courses of Action to Counter Possible Soviet or Satellite Action Against Berlin,’ 12 June 1952, box 18, Policy Papers, RG 273, National Archives. For Acheson’s view see MemCon, Lay to Truman, 12 June 1952, box 220, PSF, Truman Library.

54 NSC 132/1.

55 Ibid.


57 Ibid.

58 SE-30; Riddleberger to Acheson, 10 June 1952; and W.J. McWilliams to Acheson, 6 June 1952, ibid.