

The impact of the Korean War on Soviet-American relations.

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Abstract

This paper will examine the impact of the Korean War on the world system that existed during the Cold War. There are two key strands of this examination; firstly, the impact on the Soviet-American Cold War mentality, as a result of the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950; secondly, how Soviet aggression was interpreted by the US. Issues to be considered within the examination are the indirect military conflict that results, psychological reactions and the heightened tension between the two superpowers during this time.

Keywords: Korean war, cold war, Soviet Union, USA, IR.

Introduction

On Sunday 25 June 1950 the North Korean People's Army (KPA) crossed the 38th parallel (Sandler, 1999). In so doing they began a most peculiar conflict. Although the war was deliberately contained within a certain geographical space, its ramifications were global. Between 1950 and 1953, these limitations would delineate the context in which the Cold War could be fought. The advent of nuclear weapons and the reciprocal possession of these by both the United States and the Soviet Union gave a nominal parity of destruction so terrifying that it changed the context in which conflicts were fought.¹

¹ In 1950 the nuclear parity remained only nominal as the US still possessed not only more nuclear weapons, but more crucially the bases to deliver them to Soviet territory. While the Soviet bombers could not reach American cities they could however reach Western Europe and the value of deterrence was therefore considerable.

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The crossing into South Korea by the KPA had a great psychological impact. It reinforced the Western image of an aggressive and cynical Soviet Union in charge of a monolithic Communist bloc. The directness of the assault by the communist forces in Korea brought out the spectre of interwar aggression in the minds of many Europeans and Americans. This mental image of Communist aggression brought about the greatest peace time military mobilization in the history of the United States. It brought cohesion to the Western alliance and it helped bring about a bipolar world structure. The Korean War shaped Soviet-American relations in almost contradictory terms; on the one hand, Korea established a pattern of *voluntary restraint*, yet at the same time it intensified the Cold War struggle into a global *zero-sum* condition.

The impact of the Korean War on Mentality: the legacy appeasement and the creation of a bi-polar world

All history has taught us the grim lesson that no
nation has ever been successful in avoiding the terrors of
war by refusing to defend its rights by attempting to
placate aggression. (Eisenhower , March 1959)

Kathryn Weathersby, who has investigated Soviet documents made available after the end of the Cold War, argues that the North Korean offensive on June 25 1950 was prepared by the North Koreans with substantial Soviet aid over a period of several months. This was also the perception of the contemporary Western leaders. By agreeing to an overt Communist attack on South Korea, Stalin failed to perceive its implications on Western mentality. The tactics of a rapid advance from the North were militarily sound but Stalin failed to see the immediate parallel to interwar aggression committed by Nazi-Germany and Japan (Weathersby, 2005). The directness of the Communist aggression in Korea changed the Cold War game. It had been assumed in the West that the Soviet Union would promote its interest by subversive and indirect means, but the North Korean attack was a display of blunt aggression. Such actions demanded a response; there would be no appeasement policy towards the Soviet Union (Lundestad, 2005).

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Throughout the late 1940s many US policy makers had ambivalent views towards the Soviet Union; it was considered expansionist, yet cautious. With the outbreak of the Korean War the more benign views quickly succumbed to the belligerent perspective (Jervis, 1980). It was a generally accepted belief in Washington that if the aggression towards Manchuria in 1931 and at Munich in 1938 had been firmly resisted then the Second World War would not have occurred. After careful deliberation the Truman administration had decided to shift political focus away from the Asian mainland. However, the North Korean surprise assault appear too similar to Pearl Harbor for American comfort, and the North Korean actions therefore cut directly at the post-war American mentality, bringing about a reversal of US policy. In this sense the Korean War affected Soviet-American relations by bringing American involvement *back* to the Asian mainland.

Mutual mistrust and suspicion were crucial factors in the onset of the Cold War and the Korean War compounded these attitudes, seemingly confirming their validity. For the Western world, these suspicions were rooted in the image of Munich and the record of appeasement. It was felt that Stalin's behaviour increasingly resembled that of interwar Nazi-Germany. Stalin, for his part, also feared a spectre of the interwar years as he was suspicious of a revived Anti-Comintern Pact, a 1936 German-Japanese anti-Communist agreement, which would include the United States, France and the United Kingdom (Whelan, 1990). Thus the advent of the Korean War heightened the old dictator's suspicions of Soviet encirclement as the Western powers drew together under the auspices of the United States.

The psychological impact of the Korean War helped create the bi-polar international system of the Cold War. While the Korean War itself involved several dyads of interaction and conflict, such as between the two Koreas, the principal outcome of the conflict was an increasingly polarized Cold War. The incompatibility of the capitalist and socialist systems was developed as the 'two camps concept' in a speech by Stalin in 1946, which became institutionalized and centred around the United States and the Soviet Union.

Prior to the Korean War it had been hoped, especially in the US State Department, that a Sino-Soviet division might occur. Therefore the Chinese intervention in particular helped create the view of the Communist world as a single monolithic bloc (Lundestad, 2005). The Western leaders became convinced that the outbreak of the Korean War constituted an attempt to divert attention from Western Europe (Sandler, 1999). The intervention of the People's Republic of China (PRC)

seemingly confirmed suspicions that the Chinese were diverting US resources to neglect European defence, for the advantage of the Soviet Union. To Washington the main protagonist was Moscow, and Korea was in Truman's words 'a gigantic booby trap' to bog down the United States in conflict with China (Whelan, 1990). The Western perception of the Communist world as a solid, coordinated and aggressive bloc created fear in Europe and contributed to polarization by drawing Western Europe closer to the United States (Merriman, 1996). When Kim Il Sung visited Moscow in March-April 1950 to gain Stalin's consent for a military offensive, one of his primary arguments was that the United States would not intervene because they would recognize the Sino-Soviet support for the North Korean cause (Weathersby, 2005). In fact the image of the solid Communist bloc had the exact opposite effect and sharpened US determination to intervene. With reference to the Japanese puppet state of the 1930s Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk insultingly referred to the PRC as the 'Manchukuo' of the Soviet Union, thus implying that China was but the pawn of the Soviet Union (Rusk as cited by Sandler, 1999). This process was, however, reciprocal. Precisely due to the fact that the Korean War intensified Sino-American antagonism it strengthened the Sino-Soviet alliance; Mao had 'proven' that he was not another Tito.² The United States had also 'proven' itself, not so much on the battlefield as in its commitments to its allies, something that was of key importance to American prestige and credibility (Whelan, 1990). In summary, the Korean War promoted the polarization of a bi-polar world by creating the image of a solid aggressive Communist bloc, by strengthening Sino-Soviet cohesion and by the US demonstration of willingness to protect allies.

Zero-Sum competition and the Domino Theory

You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock
over the first one, and what will happen to the last one
is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.
So you could have a beginning of a disintegration

² Years after the Korean War Mao explained its impact on Sino-Soviet relations; 'After the victory of the revolution [Stalin] ... suspected China of being a Yugoslavia, and that I would be another Tito... When did Stalin begin to have confidence in us? It was at the time of the [Korean] War from the winter of 1950.' (Mao's speech of September 1962 cited in Yahuda, 1996, p. 28.)

that would have the most profound influences. (Eisenhower, 1954)

After the 'loss of China' in 1949 the main interests of the USA were connected with Japan and the other Pacific Islands, and the exclusion of mainland Asia from the US defence perimeter therefore made sense (Lundestad, 2005). The US involvement in the Korean War hence meant a change in rationale. The American approach to the Cold War changed from 'security spheres' to a zero-sum condition and it is in this context we must understand Eisenhower's domino theory.

As a result of the Korean War, containment evolved from its initial purpose of limiting Soviet power to a policy of opposing Communism in all forms, wherever it might occur (Yahuda, 1996). The zero-sum condition in international politics developed from the change in mentality and polarization of the Cold War brought about by the conflict in Korea; increased fears of Soviet aggression transformed into greater bloc cohesion on both sides and a condition of bi-polarity resulted. Under bi-polar conditions the international system became more rigid; the expansion in influence of one side by definition reduced the influence of the other. Bi-polarity made the concept of peripheries redundant; counter-pressure would always be applied to prevent one side from gaining the upper hand (Waltz, 2010).

The concept of falling dominoes became the theoretical axiom of US foreign policy and international relations became a zero-sum condition; Secretary of State John Foster Dulles argued that it was necessary to hold firm in Korea to demonstrate 'our confidence and resolution' and, he argued, should that fail then the United States could 'expect an accelerated deterioration of our influence in the Mediterranean, Near East, Asia and the Pacific' (Dulles as cited by Buckley, 2002, pp. 64-6).

The Soviets never explicitly expressed a zero-sum concept of global politics, however, their conceptualization of two ideological camps can implicitly be taken to imply a zero-sum mentality, especially so as the Cold War became stratified into a bi-polar structure. More concretely the Soviet Union came to see the actions of the United States as part of what they referred to as the 'global correlation of forces', meaning the international balance of power, and that shifts in patterns of alliances and power capabilities greatly affected this relationship (Mackintosh, 1983). This concept of global correlation of forces was a more eloquent way of saying that the gain of one was the loss

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of the other. In a bi-polar world the 'global correlation of forces' became a zero-sum game both in Washington and Moscow.

How the Korean War Shaped the Cold War Patterns of Conflict

The new terror brings a certain element
of equality in annihilation. Strange as it
may seem, it is to the universality of potential
destruction that I think we may look with
hope and even confidence. (Churchill as cited by
Gaddis, 2005, p. 65)

The Korean War established the critically important Cold War framework that both sides could sustain nuclear weaponry yet choose to fight protracted and brutal wars without their use. In Korea the superpowers set the standard for Cold War conflict by rejecting unlimited nuclear war. Instead, the actors accepted the Clausewitzian principle of war as 'the continuation of politics by other means.'³ The reciprocal decision not to employ nuclear weapons in Korea did something as remarkable as reversing 'a pattern in human behaviour so ancient that its origins lay shrouded in the mists of time: that when weapons are developed, they will be used' (Gaddis, 2005, p. 55).

The danger of nuclear conflict constituted the destructive framework in which the Korean War was developed as a limited conflict. The Korean War established a Cold War diplomatic pattern of 'diplomacy of constraint' as both sides sought to avoid direct superpower-conflict (Lee, 1995). Nuclear weapons increased the threshold of superpower conflict by dramatically increasing the potential destructiveness of war (Mearsheimer, 1990). The Korean War is important because as the first hot war directly involving a standoff between the two blocs it established the concept of mutual

³ This essay accepts John Lewis Gaddis interpretation of Clausewitz' famous statement as a rational for limiting war, that is, if the object of war is politically and rationally defined it must necessarily be limited in nature and seek to avoid total annihilation (Gaddis, 2005). However, his essay is also aware of the substantial critique that exist of Clausewitz because his book is often seen as the theoretical rational for massive mobilizations and excessive violence in search for the 'decisive battle.' One such critique is offered by John Keegan in his book *A History of Warfare* (Keegan, 2004). For Clausewitz classic quote see *On War* (Clausewitz, 2010).

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restraint.⁴ Neither the massive American B-36 nor the nuclear capable Soviet TU-4 bombers were employed.⁵ The change in the paradigm of Cold War conflict was expressed by the US commander of the Eighth Army Matthew B. Ridgway, who wrote that 'Before Korea, all our military planning envisioned a war that would involve the world' (Ridgway, 1967 as cited by Sandler, 1999). Upon entering office in 1953 Eisenhower's 'New Look' for a time returned the US strategic thinking to an 'all or nothing' policy. However, the Korean War had effectively set a standard for future Cold War conflicts with a pattern of proxies and limited wars.⁶ Like Korea these later Cold War flashpoints would often be territorially limited, but global in their political ramifications.

The rigid bi-polar structure of the Cold War established in Korea might have helped prevent direct superpower conflict and promoted proxy conflicts, but it also created the Cold War phenomenon of the 'tail wagging the dog.' The rigid zero-sum assumptions of the superpower struggle meant that the sheer presence of one superpower prompted the presence of the other. This created leverage for local actors to exploit the Cold War conflict for individual benefit, often at great economic cost to the Superpower sponsor. This cost to the superpowers was not only economic, but also ideological. The United States accepted un-democratic regimes, such as that of Syngman Rhee in South Korea, as long as they were anti-communist. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union provided massive military and economic aid to non-communist countries such as Egypt and Syria in return for base rights and political influence.

⁴ Other wars involving communist-non-communist conflict such as the Greek Civil War, Chinese Civil War and the Malaya insurgency were not, and were not perceived as, directed confrontations between the West and the Soviet Union. The Korean War became an international war to an extent, but the other conflicts taking place between 1945 and 1950 did not.

⁵ Neither the UN forces nor the Communists threw everything they had into the war; whilst US pilots complained about being unable to attack Communist airfields in Manchuria, the Communists had also shown restraint, for instance, by not using submarines to assault UN transport ships that were both slow moving and sailed without convoy escort (Sandler, 1999).

⁶ The 'New Look' policy of President Eisenhower was to cut back military spending by nearly a third and increase reliance on massive nuclear deterrence thus seemingly contradicting the concept of limited conflict established in Korea. However, the credibility of massive retaliation might be relevant for Western Europe or Japan, but not in more obscure regions. Hence the 'New Look' brought a reversal in strategic thinking, but the lessons from Indochina, Angola, the Middle East and Afghanistan would confirm the pattern of limited conflict established in Korea. Ultimately the 'New Look' policy became the institutionalization of the containment policy; by accepting the prospect of a long Cold War, Eisenhower effectively accepted the division and stalemate implicit in the Panmunjom Cease-fire agreement on a global scale (Judge and Langdon, 2010).

NSC-68, Militarization and Alliance Systems

Korea does not really matter now. I'd never heard
of the bloody place until I was seventy-four. Its
importance lies in the fact that it has led to the
rearming of America (Churchill 1953, cited by
Halliday and Cummings, 1990, cited by Buckley, 2002).

The Korean War became a catalyst for the remilitarization of the United States and for the construction of a global system of alliances effectively encircling the Soviet Union. The Korean War did this by changing the strategic rationale through the image of the inherently aggressive and unified Communist bloc. This change in rationale removed Truman's opposition to increasing the defence budget and allowed the administration to implement National Security Council Report 68 (NSC-68) (Tucker, 1999). Architected principally by Paul H. Nitze NSC-68 was finished on 7 April 1950 and became a blueprint for American Cold War policy (Young, 1999). It rested upon two basic assumptions; the first was the polarization of the world into Soviet and American dominated camps, and secondly, it assumed an inherently aggressive and expansionistic Soviet Union (Lafeber, 2002). NSC-68 suggested an expansion of American conventional forces on a massive scale.⁷ It stated that 'a substantial and rapid building up of strength in the free world is necessary to support a firm policy intended to check and roll back the Kremlin's drive for world domination' (NSC-68, 1950, cited by Judge and Langdon, 2010). The Korean War was critically important for the implementation of NSC-68, without the impact of the war on US mentality and public opinion the document would most likely never have been passed. One of Acheson's aides later admitted that 'we were sweating over NSC-68, and then, thank god, Korea came along' (Paterson et al. cited by Whelan, 1990, p. 74).

⁷ The NSC-68 advocated that by 1952 the United States should have 18 divisions, 397 Surface ships, and 95 air wings; a doubling of military personnel to 3,211,000 men (Young and Kent, 2004).

When in light of the Korean War NSC-68 was revised as NSC-114 in 1951, it was found that the Soviet propensity for risk acceptance and military aggression was even greater than previously thought. NSC-114 considered the West to be in immediate danger of a communist onslaught until the process of rearmament was completed (Young and Kent, 2004).⁸ The implementation of NSC-68 meant the largest peace-time mobilization of the United States in history (Sandler, 1999). As a percentage of gross national product military spending was higher in 1953 than during the Vietnam War or during the Reagan build-up.⁹ This dramatic increase in military expenditure indicates the extent of the psychological impact of the Korean War on the Cold War climate.

A counter-argument could be constructed by looking at the Soviet military expenditure in the same period. Stalin's death in 1953 led to a reduction in military expenditure and an increase in production of consumer goods as advocated by what was referred to as Malenkov's 'New course', a policy also embraced by Khrushchev (Sakwa, 1998). However, the power of the military curtailed such reformist attempts and by 1960 the capabilities of the Soviet Union had become *mono-dimensional*; it maintained its competitive edge only in the military sphere.¹⁰ The conflict on the Korean Peninsula increased the bi-polar nature of the international system, and under this increasingly rigid system the Soviet Union could hardly afford not to respond to the American militarization. Because the state capabilities of the Soviet Union were mono-dimensional, focused solely on military strength, its claim to superpower prestige became mono-dimensional as well. The

⁸ This view was not universally accepted and opposed by State Department men like Charles Bohlen, George Kennan, and the Ambassador in Moscow. However the State Department itself was increasingly besieged by Senator McCarty and likeminded people. Senator Joseph R. McCarty consistently charged the State Department with containing a number of communist affiliates. In a speech to the US Senate in 1950 he proclaimed that '[i]n my opinion the State Department... is thoroughly infested with Communists... One thing to remember when discussing the Communist in our Government is that we are not dealing with spies who get 30 pieces of silver... We are dealing with a far more sinister type of activity because it permits the enemy to guide and shape our policy' (McCarthy, 20 Februar 1950, cited by Judge and Langdon, 2010, p. 320).

⁹ The US defence expenditure rose from 4.8 per cent of GDP in 1949 to 14.2 per cent in 1953. This is the highest figure achieved after the Second World War. During the Vietnam years it never reached above 9.4 per cent, recorded in 1968. During the Regan years it actually never reached beyond 6.2 per cent, recorded in 1986 (U.S. Government Printing Office, 2004).

¹⁰ The concept of describing state capabilities as *multi-dimensional* and *mono-dimensional* is introduced by J.L.Gaddis (Gaddis, 1997).

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Korean War thus not only militarized the Cold War, it also helped define the Cold War in terms of military competition.

The polarization of the Cold War and the redefined American understanding of containment firstly increased the cohesion of the alliances already in place, NATO and the Sino-Soviet agreement, and secondly brought about a whole range of new alliance systems in Asia and the Middle East. The United States signed bi-lateral agreements with South Korea and Japan, created the ANZUS pact with Australia and New Zealand in 1951, SEATO in 1954, and supported the creation of the Baghdad Pact in 1955, although not itself a formal member. Through these organizations the United States implemented a near continuous containment belt around the fringes of the Communist bloc (Lundestad, 2005). Traditional Soviet fears of encirclement were thus intensified. While the new alliances were created in the Third World the greatest impact was in Europe; with the creation of NATO Acheson had testified that German disarmament and demilitarization would be 'complete and absolute' (Lafeber, 2002, p. 90). In 1955 West Germany joined NATO and the Communist bloc responded with the Warsaw Pact. There can be little doubt that the Korean War accelerated the West German integration into NATO by intensifying West European fears of the Soviet Union. When the Western perception of the 'common threat' intensified following the Korean War this promoted the institutionalization and militarization of NATO, that is to say, NATO cohesion was achieved under the perception of the Soviet threat (Rafferty, 2003). The creation of the alliance systems, both Western and Communist, institutionalized the military competition between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Economic Impact of the Korean War

The Korean War stimulated demand for industrial and military hardware, and by outsourcing some of this demand to its allies the United States helped in the economic recovery of Western Europe and Japan. In the US the war stimulated an economic boom which helped reduce criticisms of increased taxation (Sandler, 1999). The creation of conditions of favourable demand helped facilitate the unprecedented growth experienced in Western Europe and Japan between 1950 and 1973 (Kenwood and Lougheed, 1999). In Japan the economic growth helped make tighter defence ties with the United States politically more acceptable to the Japanese population. This closer defence cooperation between Japan and the United States resulting from the Korean War

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represented a major backlash to Soviet and Chinese intentions who had hoped that instability on the Korean peninsula would preclude a US-Japanese defence agreement (Buckley, 2002). The United States, Western Europe, and Japan all emerged economically better off after the Korean War (Stueck, 2010). In an age when modernity was defined by industrial output the Korean War represented an impetus for growth.

The Soviet Union responded to the closer economic integration of the West by intensifying the industrialization of Eastern Europe thus tying the COMECON economies more closely to Moscow (Stueck, 2010). As a result the Korean War did not only increase political polarization of the Cold War, but also economic polarization. While this followed logically from the ideological incompatibility between market and centrally planned economies it further stratified Soviet-American relations into a condition of rivalry.

Conclusion

There is, in this moment of sober satisfaction, one
thought that must discipline our emotions and steady
our resolutions. It is this: we have won an armistice on
a single battleground, not peace in the world.

(Eisenhower, 1953, cited by Whelan, 1990, p. 370)

Eisenhower was right in his assessment of the Korean War; it was a sobering moment in the history of the twentieth century. In Korea the rules of Cold War engagement were laid; superpower competition would take place through proxy conflicts and be limited in territorial extent and constrained to conventional arms. The United States launched a massive remilitarization, vastly extended its global commitments, re-forged its containment policy into a global zero-sum approach and established a pattern of propping up anti-communist regimes, irrespective of their democratic credibility. The Soviet Union and China were for a time driven closer by the conflict, and this development was enhanced by the Western perception of a single monolithic communist bloc. The Western perception of Soviet aggression triggered a backlash not to Moscow's liking; the United

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States built up a network of alliance systems which came to include West Germany and Japan. This meant the Soviet Union was surrounded by a system of armed and hostile countries, seemingly validating its historically conditioned siege mentality.¹¹

The Korean War demonstrated the global scope of the Cold War, and this would have great consequences for Soviet-American relations, not only in Europe, but in Indochina, the Middle East, and beyond. The world had illustrated its interconnectedness; the perception of Soviet aggression in Korea had caused a backlash in Europe. The image of appeasement coupled with the global scale of the Cold War produced the Domino Theory of containment, which produced a zero-sum condition in international affairs. This zero-sum condition stratified the Cold War system into a condition of bi-polarity and military competition.

Most importantly the Korean War established the diplomacy of constraint in Soviet-American relations. In the atomic age absolute war meant absolute destruction. It was accepted that a total war of total destruction would have no purpose; it would be manmade Armageddon with no paradise to follow. J.R. Oppenheimer predicted that 'if there is another major war, atomic weapons will be used' (Bird and Sherwin, cited by Gaddis, 2005, p. 262). Eisenhower drew the only rational conclusion; 'the only way to win the next world war is to prevent it' (Eisenhower, 1956). Khrushchev made it similarly clear at the twentieth Party Congress; 'either peaceful coexistence or the most destructive war in history. There is no third way' (Khrushchev, 1956, cited by Gaddis, 1997). That the US and Soviet leaders both reached this conclusion was instrumental in shaping the structure and framework of Cold War competition.

The Korean War intensified the Cold War by increasing international polarization and remilitarizing the United States, a challenge which could not go unanswered for a Soviet Union whose claim to superpower status had become mono-dimensional. The Korean War therefore heightened international tension and stratified East-West bloc mentality, while simultaneously institutionalizing the rules of that wider conflict. Perhaps most importantly the Korean War cemented the image of the enemy as both sides saw the ghosts of the interwar period in the actions of the other; whether a resurgent Anti-Comintern Pact in the eyes of the Soviets, or the memory

¹¹ The Soviet 'siege mentality' originated with the Civil War and the foreign interventions that took place which seemed to prove the Marxist analysis that Capitalist states would collude to destroy the Socialist state.

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of the Blitz and Pearl Harbor for the Europeans and the US. The image of the vanquished enemy became transferred onto the new, and in this sense the Korean War did as much in shaping Cold War mentalities as it did in constituting its rules of engagement.

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