

17.42 / Causes and Prevention of War  
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THE COLD WAR (1947-1989) AND KOREA (1950-1953)

I. THE COLD WAR IN A NUTSHELL

- A. Duration: ~1947-1989. Ended by the Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe, 1989.
- B. Wars of the Cold War: Korea 1950-53, Vietnam 1950-75, Afghanistan 1979-89, Cambodia 1979-89, Nicaragua 1983-90, Angola 1975-1990s, El Salvador 1979-90, Soviet intervention in Ethiopia 1970s; massacres in Indonesia 1965, East Timor 1975. Millions were killed.
- C. US-sponsored coups in Iran 1953, Guatemala 1954, Chile 1973, Congo 1960, Brazil 1964, Greece 1967, maybe Indonesia 1965, East Timor 1975.
- D. Crises: Berlin 1948; Berlin 1958-62; Cuban Missile Crisis 1962; War Scare of 1983; China offshore islands, 1950s.

II. HOW THE COLD WAR ERUPTED: EVENTS

- A. Poland and Eastern Europe:
  - 1. Warsaw uprising, 1944. Stalin drew the Polish non-communists into a futile rebellion against Hitler, then watched passively while Hitler slaughtered them. Americans wondered what else Stalin intended.
  - 2. Stalin made a vague promise at Yalta (Feb. 1945) to allow democracy in Poland. Then he imposed communist dictatorship instead.
- B. Iran 1946: Stalin wouldn't leave northern Iran until pressured.
- C. Turkey 1946: Stalin said "I want some Turkish territory!" Instead Truman sent the Missouri to the Mediterranean as a show of force.
- D. Greece 1947: the West thought Stalin was instigating the Communist revolution in Greece. (He wasn't. Yugoslavia's communist Tito government was aiding the Greek communists, but not Stalin.)
- E. The Berlin Crisis of 1948-1949. This grew from a Soviet-American struggle to control Germany.
- F. Military aspects:
  - 1. The U.S. had false fears of Soviet military superiority. U.S. intelligence and the Western press depicted a vast Soviet conventional superiority in Europe and downplayed the implications of the U.S. atomic monopoly. Hence a Soviet threat that was

largely political--the Soviets had some capacity to disrupt or subvert Western Europe--was also perceived as military.

2. The Soviets explode an atomic bomb, August 1949. Now the West is really scared. What if Stalin isn't deterrable?

Western responses: the Marshall Plan (1947); the Berlin airlift (1948-49); the formation of NATO (1949); and a vast American military buildup (1950-54), following a plan defined in NSC 68 (1950). This triggered a large Soviet counter-buildup.

The Soviet threat, US response, 1944-50: a natural experiment testing offense-defense theory, balance-of-threat theory?

### III. WHAT CAUSED THE COLD WAR? WHO CAUSED THE COLD WAR? SEVEN EXPLANATIONS

- A. Communist totalitarian expansionism? "The totalitarian Soviets were the aggressor, the democratic West the defender. Soviet aggression sprang from the aggressiveness of Communist political systems. Communist governments are aggressive because they are (a) inherently messianic--Communist ideology preaches global communist rule; and/or because they are (b) frail, hence aggressive for Orwellian reasons--they needed enemies to legitimate their totalitarian rule."

Variant #1: Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe threatened U.S. security, causing the Cold War.

> The US prime interest: to maintain the political division of industrial Eurasia. Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe positioned the USSR to destroy that interest by achieving Eurasian hegemony.

Variant #2: The Soviets conquered the homelands of powerful U.S. ethnic groups--especially Polish-Americans--when they seized Eastern Europe. These ethnic groups then pushed Washington to respond.

- B. Communist totalitarian cruelty and barbarism? "The U.S. opposed the USSR less because the USSR was aggressive than because it was tyrannical. The Cold War was a Western human rights crusade." But if true, why didn't the Cold War blossom fully in 1919?
- C. U.S. softness? "U.S. softness early in the Cold War made things worse--the U.S. led the Soviets forward by appeasement. Instead the U.S. should had given Stalin an ultimatum in 1946: 'Get out of Eastern Europe or we'll throw you out!'" The Soviets would have left, removing

the Cold War's cause!" (Adam Ulam.)

- D. Capitalist expansionism? "The capitalist U.S. was the aggressor, the socialist Soviet Union was the defender. The U.S. feared a new depression. It hoped to avoid such a depression by finding market outlets for surplus goods. It sought to control Eastern Europe to compel it to be such a market. U.S. imperialism in Eastern Europe collided with a defensive Soviet desire to maintain a neutral buffer to its west." This is the now-largely-discredited left-revisionist view. See e.g., writings by Gabriel Kolko and Lloyd Gardner.
- E. Revolutionary vs. oligarchic states? "Both sides were aggressors, for reasons Stephen Walt describes. Revolutionary states are messianic and frightened; their neighbors are defensively aggressive, and polluted by emigres." But if true why didn't the Cold War blossom fully in 1919?
- F. The unshaped postwar European order/collapse of German empire? "The lack of a clear Soviet-American wartime agreement on the postwar partition of the German empire caused a collision of the two major allied powers in a zone of uncertainty. Had each side's sphere of influence been more clearly delineated earlier the Cold War might have been milder." Shades of the 7 Years' War.
- G. The international system: Bipolarity and the security dilemma? "The world's two strongest states rarely get along well because each is the main threat to the other. They will always compete for security. The Cold War was an inevitable result of the rise of the U.S. and USSR to the pinnacle of world power."

Variant #1: The two superpowers were in fact insecure and contended for resources of real value--especially the industry and buffer room of Eastern Europe.

Variant #2: The superpowers were secure due to the nuclear revolution, their vast size, and their distance from each other. But didn't know it; and they contended for assets (Eastern Europe) of no real value. Soviet control of Eastern Europe made the USSR less, not more, secure by provoking the rest of the world into a hostile stance against the USSR.

Variant #3 (spiral model variant): The two superpowers felt insecure and contended for security but both thought the other pursued unprovoked aggression for non-security reasons and overreacted accordingly.

What does this systemic explanation portend for the

future of U.S.-China relations?

#### IV. THE KOREAN WAR, 1950: WHAT HAPPENED

- A. The U.S. and USSR agreed to partition Korea at the 38th parallel in 1945.
- B. The U.S. pulled its troops out of Korea in 1949. A U.S. blunder?
- C. Communist victory in China in 1949 triggered a bitter "who lost China?" debate in the U.S.
- D. Dean Acheson gave a speech at the Washington Press Club in January 1950 delineating an "American defense perimeter in Asia." He omitted South Korea! Another U.S. blunder?
- E. North Korea attacked South Korea by surprise, June 25, 1950. Why? Kim Il Sung and Stalin expected the U.S. would not intervene, or that the North could crush the South before the U.S. could intervene effectively. A huge miscalculation by them.
- F. Truman decided to intervene. Reasons:
  1. To preserve American credibility. But was it engaged in Korea?
  2. To avert a worldwide pro-Soviet bandwagon effect. U.S. leaders feared that other states would align with the USSR, thinking it the tide of the future, if Soviet-allied North Korea seized South Korea. But ... absent US intervention, was a worldwide pro-Soviet bandwagon effect likely? Do states generally bandwagon or balance?
  3. Domestic politics. Truman feared being pilloried for losing another Asian country to Communism.
- G. U.S. forces landed at Inchon on Sept. 15, 1950 and routed the North Korean army from South Korea.
- H. In late September 1950 Truman decided to cross 38th parallel and conquer North Korea. Part of the U.S. reasoning: "We must punish the aggressors to deter them from other aggression elsewhere." An American mega-blunder.
- I. September/October 1950: China decided to enter the war against the U.S. if the U.S. invaded North Korea. Why?
  1. China's leaders feared that after the U.S. conquered North Korea it would destabilize Communist rule in northeast China (Manchuria) or even invade China directly. Mao wrote Stalin on October 2, 1950 that "if we allow the United States to occupy all of Korea ... the American invaders will run more rampant, and have negative effects for the entire Far East." On

October 13 he wrote that U.S. victory in North Korea "will be most disadvantageous to Manchuria; all of the South Manchurian electricity will be threatened." > because U.S. power will then be adjacent to China, and > because the U.S. and anti-communist Chinese will be emboldened by U.S. victory in Korea. "The arrogance of reactionaries at home and abroad [will] grow," threatening Manchuria. See telegrams attached to lecture notes.

The U.S. was unaware of these Chinese fears.

Is the U.S. approach to the Yalu is a "natural experiment" that tests (and corroborates) offense-defense theory? The U.S. applied a large, rapid insecurity "treatment" to China. China responds with great violence despite long odds and high risks.

2. Chinese leaders hoped for total victory over U.S. forces. Mao suggested that "our forces can destroy the American forces in Korea," and that "the scope of this war will not be great, and the duration will not be long." "If the American forces are defeated, the Korean problem is, in fact, finished."

J. Oct. 3, 1950: China warned the U.S.: "Don't cross 38th parallel or it's war with us!" Truman and Acheson didn't listen. UN troops crossed the 38th parallel on Oct. 7. Why?

1. The warning came via an Indian diplomat not trusted by Dean Acheson (so said Acheson later).
2. China didn't explain the reasoning behind its warning or convey the warning directly to Congressional Republicans.
3. The Administration had already decided to cross the parallel in late September; backtracking is painful.
4. Truman feared attacks from Republican hawks if he stayed south.
5. U.S. contempt for Chinese military capability. One U.S. commander told his troops they faced "a bunch of Chinese laundrymen" before China's attack.
6. Some U.S. officials argued that (paraphrasing) "China would have entered the war in July, when it had a chance to win, if it meant to enter at all. It makes no sense for China to enter now when its prospects are far worse." U.S. leaders dismissed the possibility that security fears would drive China to enter.

K. Chinese baiting of the US:

1. U.S. forces encountered small Chinese forces in Korea, 26 Oct. 1950. MacArthur thought: "If this is all they can do they'll be a pushover," and ordered an advance to the Yalu River. Another mega-blunder.
  2. Chinese warnings of the U.S. all but ceased on October 13, with only one later exception. Instead Chinese officials released US POWs with happy waves and good wishes in October/November.
- L. China launched a massive surprise attack on U.S. forces in North Korea on Nov. 26, 1950 and routed the U.S. army, driving it from North Korea. This was the worst ground defeat in U.S. military history!
- M. A long and bloody war ensued, Dec. 1950-summer 1953, ending in a tie. China tried and failed to drive the U.S. from Korea. Note: this war included a long-hidden Soviet-American air war!
- V. KOREAN WAR, U.S.-CHINA WAR: WHAT CAUSED THEM?
- A. Background misperceptions:
1. American self-sugar-coating: "We've always been nice to China--so China has nothing to fear from us!"
  2. Chinese myths about U.S.: "The U.S. helped Japanese aggressors in the 1930s! The U.S. is plotting to rebuild and unleash Japan in Asia again!" Marxist-Leninist dogma shaped Chinese thought.
- B. Non-strategy: By the USA? No--the problem was that Acheson **did** state US strategy, but **misstated** it. A misstated strategy is worse than none. By China? Yes. China told the US in late September that it wouldn't intervene, then changed its mind too late.
- C. Absence of Sino-American diplomatic relations. A mega-blunder by both sides.
- D. McCarthyism in the U.S.? A powerful force. What caused it? Some blame the China Lobby, which fed lots of information to McCarthy.
- E. First-strike advantage. This is the likely reason why China never issued an ultimatum and sought to convince the U.S. of China's weakness.
- F. U.S. window after Inchon ----> too-hasty diplomacy, Sept. 15-Oct. 7.
- G. False optimism by everyone.
- H. The security dilemma, and unawareness of it. Security was the basic goal pursued by both the U.S. and China but neither realized this of the other.
- I. War ----> War
1. U.S. aims widened due to the war itself:

- a. "We must conquer the North to punish the aggressor."
  - b. "We should hold POWs to scare future communist aggressors into thinking we'll do it again."
2. Chinese aims also widened in wartime. Mao inferred malign U.S. intent from the interposition of the U.S. fleet off Taiwan in June 1950 and the October 1950 U.S. invasion of North Korea. He responded by expanding China's aims to include expelling the U.S. from South Korea.

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