CIA Analysis of the North Korean Invasion

CIA Intelligence Memorandum No. 302 July 8, 195

Subject: Consequences of the Korean Incident

I. Soviet Purposes in Launching the Northern Korean Attack

A. Apart from immediate strategic advantages, the basic Soviet objectives in launching the Northern Korean attack probably were to: (1) test the strength of U.S. commitments implicit in the policy of containment of Communist expansion; and (2) gain political advantages for the further expansion of Communism in both Asia and Europe by undermining the confidence of non-Communist states in the value of U.S. support.

B. The Soviet estimate of the reaction to the North Korean attack was probably that: (1) U.N. action would be slow and cumbersome; (2) the U.S. would not intervene with its own forces; (3) South Korea would therefore collapse promptly, presenting the U.N. with a fait accompli; (4) the episode would therefore be completely localized; and (5) the fighting could be portrayed as U.S.-instigated South Korean aggression and the Northern Korean victory as a victory of Asiatic nationalism against Western colonialism.

II. Probable Developments from the Korean Incident

There are at present four major alternative courses of action open to the U.S.S.R. They are not mutually exclusive courses of action. In particular, it is estimated that the U.S.S.R. is very likely to try to prolong the fighting in Korea (alternative "B" below) for the short run and then within a few weeks or months, if conditions appear favorable to Soviet leaders, shift them to the more aggressive course of creating similar incidents elsewhere (alternative "C" below). The alternatives are examined not in order of probability, but in order of increasing risk of global war and increasing expenditure of effort on the part of the U.S.S.R.:

Alternative A: The U.S.S.R. may localize the Korean fighting, permitting U.S. forces to drive the North Koreans back to the 38th Parallel and refrain from creating similar incidents elsewhere. In the meantime, the U.S.S.R. would remain uncommitted in Korea and would develop the propaganda themes of U.S. aggression and imperialistic interference in domestic affairs of an Asiatic nation.

1. This alternative is the most cautious course for the U.S.S.R. to take. Its adoption would indicate complete surprise at the U.S. reaction to the Korean incident and would suggest strongly that the U.S.S.R. was unwilling to run even a minimum risk of provoking a global conflict involving the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

2. U.S. prestige and political influence would be substantially augmented, particularly with Western

European allies and other nations aligned with the U.S.

3. Soviet prestige and influence would be damaged, but there would be compensations in the form of secondary political gains that would accrue as a result of:

(a) promoting the "peace campaign" and portraying the U.S. as military aggressor;

(b) exploiting the theme of Asian nationalism versus Western imperialism;

(c) maintaining the North Koreans and Chinese Communist threat to South Korea as an embarrassment to development of a constructive U.S. or U.N. policy in Korea.

4. This alternative course of action is unlikely; Soviet advantages would be secondary, comparatively long range, and intangible, while Soviet disadvantages would be immediate.

Alternative B: The U.S.S.R. may localize the Korean fighting, still refrain from creating similar incidents elsewhere, but in order to prolong U.S. involvement in Korea, give increasing material aid to the North Koreans, perhaps employing Chinese Communist troops, either covertly or overtly. The U.S.S.R. would remain uncommitted in Korea and would develop the propaganda themes of U.S. aggression and imperialistic interference in domestic affairs of an Asiatic nation.

1. This alternative is a moderately cautious course for the U.S.S.R. to take. The U.S.S.R. would probably consider that its adoption would involve only a slight risk of provoking a global conflict involving the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

2. U.S. prestige would be seriously damaged if the U.S.S.R. succeeded in prolonging the incident in this way. Western European allies and other nations aligned with the U.S. would question the immediate military value of U.S. commitments even though expecting them to be honored.

3. Soviet prestige would be augmented if the fighting in Korea were prolonged without an open Soviet commitment.

4. The U.S.S.R. would obtain appreciable secondary, comparatively long-range gains in political influence as a result of promoting the "peace-campaign" and portraying U.S. as imperialistic Western aggressor in Asia, unless successfully countered by a U.S. "Truth" campaign.

5. Deep involvement of U.S. military forces in Korea would seriously limit U.S. capabilities to support similar commitments elsewhere. Moreover, the Western European allies of the U.S. would feel dangerously exposed for some time (even if the U.S. began a partial mobilization for war.)

6. The U.S.S.R. probably will adopt this alternative course of action at least for the short run, since there would be few Soviet disadvantages or risks and the Soviet gains would be appreciable.

7. This alternative will appear especially attractive to the U.S.S.R. because at any time, if conditions

appeared favorable to Soviet leaders, the U.S.S.R. could shift to the more ambitious program (alternative "C," immediately below,) in which alternative "B" would merely be a first phase.

Alternative C: The U.S.S.R., while attempting to prolong the fighting in Korea as in alternative "B," may also attempt to disperse and perhaps overstrain U.S. military forces-in-readiness by creating a series of incidents similar to the Korean affair. Without directly and openly involving Soviet forces, such incidents could be created in Formosa, Indochina, Burma, Iran, Yugoslavia, and Greece. The effects of such incidents could be aggravated by renewed pressure on Berlin and, possibly, Vienna.

1. This alternative would be a comparatively aggressive course for the U.S.S.R. to take. Its adoption would indicate willingness to run an appreciable risk of provoking a global conflict because of the possible U.S. reaction. The U.S.S.R. could easily turn to this alternative at any time, but it is not likely to turn to it until the U.S.S.R. has fully analyzed the implications of the U.S. commitment in Korea.

2. Having employed its armed forces in support if its commitment in Korea, the U.S. will have to honor similar commitments or lose most of the advantages of the policy of supporting the Korean commitment.

3. The U.S. does not have the military forces-in-readiness to honor its commitments with U.S. military forces and equipment in many areas other than Korea (perhaps none) without a substantial increase in U.S. military forces and industrial productivity in the military field, bringing about what would amount to at least a partial (as distinguished from a general) mobilization for war.

4. Deep involvement of U.S. military forces in the Far East or Near East would leave Western Europe even more dangerously exposed than at present.

5. At some point further Korean-style incidents (requiring the commitment of U.S. forces to stabilize the situation) presumably would force the U.S. to adopt one of the following alternatives:

(a) revise the policy of general containment by limiting U.S. commitments and by planning to combat Soviet aggression only at those selected points where existing U.S. military strength would permit;

(b) begin partial military and industrial mobilization in an attempt to enable the U.S. to combat any further Soviet-sponsored aggression anywhere in the world; or

(c) begin total mobilization to enable the U.S. to threaten to meet any Soviet or Soviet-sponsored aggression with war against the U.S.S.R.

6. The U.S.S.R. probably will adopt alternative "C" sooner or later if Soviet leaders do not estimate the risk of global war involved to be substantial or are prepared for a global war if it develops.

7. If Soviet development of this alternative course of action leads to a general U.S. mobilization, it appears at this time that the U.S.S.R. probably would in that event continue limited aggressions, accompanied by the customary "peace" propaganda, discounting actual U.S. initiation of a general war and perhaps estimating that the political and economic strains of mobilization would weaken or

discredit the U.S. and its foreign policy. The U.S.S.R., however, may:

(a) desist from further aggression of the Korean type, fearing a global war and taking mobilization as an indication of greater risk than Soviet leaders had anticipated in choosing this course of action; or

(b) expecting U.S.-initiated global war, attempt to seize the initiative by immediately attacking the U.S. (in effect turning to alternative "D," below.)

Alternative D: The U.S.S.R. may consider U.S. intervention in Korea either as the prelude of an inevitable global war or as justification for beginning a global war for which it is prepared -- in either case immediately attacking the U.S. and its allies.

1. Nothing in the Korean situation as yet indicates that the U.S.S.R. would deliberately decide to employ Soviet forces in direct military action precipitating global war. Such a decision is unlikely if, as now seems probable, Soviet leaders believe that:

(a) there are continuing opportunities to expand Soviet influence by the comparatively cheap and safe means of Soviet-controlled Communist revolutionary activity (including propaganda, sabotage, subversion, guerrilla warfare, and organized military action by local Communist troops -- as in Korea,) which can be supported by Soviet diplomacy and the mere threat of Soviet military strength-in-readiness; and

(b) there is substantial risk involved for the U.S.S.R. in the global war that almost certainly would ensue from direct military action by Soviet forces.

2. The U.S.S.R. would appear to have little reason to be pessimistic about gains by methods short of global war, particularly by adopting the courses of action described in Alternatives "B" and "C" above.

3. The U.S.S.R. is unlikely to choose the alternative of deliberately provoking global war at this time in view of: (a) the general superiority of the U.S. and its allies in total power-potential; and (b) the fact that the present Soviet atomic capability is insufficient to neutralize U.S. atomic retaliatory capabilities and to offset the generally superior power-potential of the U.S. and its allies by interfering with the U.S. military and industrial mobilization.

III. Effects of a Failure of U.S. Forces to Hold South Korea

A. The immediate consequences of a failure to hold South Korea would be a damaging blow to U.S. prestige with loss in political influence greater than the loss that would have been incurred if the U.S. had not undertaken to support its moral containment in South Korea.

B. The U.S. would be confronted with a choice between two undesirable alternatives: (1) accepting the loss of U.S. prestige; or (2) attempting to regain as much prestige as possible by committing substantial U.S. military resources in a different and costly invasion of an area which is not of primary strategic importance to the over-all U.S. military position. In either case U.S. foreign policy and

military capabilities would be discredited at home and abroad.

C. If U.S. forces were expelled from Korea, the U.S.S.R. would probably adopt alternative "C" as described above (Section II.) It might be tempted, however, to postpone further aggressive action elsewhere until it had determined whether, as a result of the loss of world confidence in the effectiveness of U.S. aid, other areas might not be brought within its sphere of influence through intimidation alone.

CIA Intelligence Memorandum No. 304 July 10, 1950

Subject: Effects of a Voluntary Withdrawal of U.S. Forces from Korea

CONCLUSIONS

Voluntary withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea would be a calamity, seriously handicapping efforts to maintain U.S. alliances and build political influence among the nations on whose strength and energetic cooperation the policy of containment of Soviet-Communist expansion depends. It would discredit U.S. foreign policy and undermine confidence in U.S. military capabilities. Voluntary withdrawal would be more damaging than a failure to send U.S. troops to Korea in the first place or than a failure of U.S. forces to hold Korea. Not only would U.S. commitments be shown to be unreliable when put to a severe test, but also considerable doubt would be cast on the ability of the U.S. to back up its commitments with military force.

DISCUSSION

1. U.S. withdrawal from intervention in Korea on behalf of the U.N., especially since U.N. action resulted mainly from U.S. initiative, would disillusion all nations heretofore hopeful that U.S. leadership within the framework of the U.N. could preserve would peace. As a voluntary act of the U.S., a withdrawal would damage U.S. standing in U.N. affairs and would undermine the effectiveness of the U.N. as a device for mobilizing Western resistance to Soviet-Communist aggression.

2. The Western European allies and other nations closely aligned with the U.S. would lose confidence in the military value of U.S. commitments to assist them against armed aggression. This lack of confidence would militate against energetic measures to oppose the expansion of Soviet-Communism through NATO and MDAP programs. Although some slight credit still might accrue to the U.S. for initially attempting to honor its commitment in South Korea, most of the nations allied or aligned with the U.S. are more concerned about U.S. ability to counter threats of Soviet aggression than about U.S.

intentions to do so.

3. Pro-U.S. governments, particularly in areas where the U.S.S.R. could initiate limited military aggressions without openly using Soviet forces, political control of the country or feel compelled to seek an accommodation with the U.S.S.R. (for example, Indochina, Iran.)

4. Whether or not U.S. forces withdraw from Korea, the U.S.S.R. has the capability of creating a series of incidents generally similar to the Korean affair, each one threatening either to bankrupt the U.S. policy of containing Soviet expansion or to disperse and overstrain U.S. military forces-in-readiness. Without directly and openly involving Soviet forces, such incidents could be created in Formosa, Indochina, Burma, Iran, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey. The U.S.S.R. will proceed with limited aggressions similar to the Korean incident if it does not estimate the risk of global war to be substantial or is prepared for a global war if it develops. Voluntary U.S. withdrawal from Korea probably would encourage rather then discourage Soviet initiation of limited wars in other areas.

5. Upon withdrawal from Korea or certainly after another Korean-style incident, the U.S. presumably would be forced to adopt one of the three following alternatives:

(a) Drastically revise the policy of general containment by reducing or limiting U.S. commitments and by planning to combat Soviet-inspired aggression only at selected points where existing military strength would be adequate for the task;

(b) Begin partial military and industrial mobilization in an attempt to enable the U.S. to combat any further Soviet-inspired aggression anywhere in the world; or

(c) Begin total mobilization to enable the U.S. to threaten to meet any Soviet or Soviet-sponsored aggression with war against the U.S.S.R.

6. If the U.S., under the pressure of Soviet-sponsored aggressions, did not drastically revise the policy of general containment but began mobilization on a fairly large scale, it would be politically and psychologically more advantageous for the U.S. to mobilize in support of U.S. and U.N. intervention in Korea rather than to mobilize after a voluntary withdrawal from Korea.

(a) U.S. mobilization after a voluntary withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea would do little to reduce the disillusion and defeatism that would spread in the Western world as a consequence of the withdrawal itself. While this disillusion and defeatism might not be fatal, it would seriously handicap military, political, and economic efforts to strengthen the North Atlantic community.

(b) If the U.S. should withdraw its forces from Korea and then begin partial mobilization, Soviet leaders would be more likely to anticipate war aimed directly at the U.S.S.R. than if the mobilization were begun in support of the U.N. intervention in Korea. It is possible that the U.S.S.R., if it should anticipate global war, would try to seize the initiative by attacking the U.S.

CIA Weekly Summary Excerpt July 7, 1950

Subject: The Korean Situation: Soviet Intentions and Capabilities

Two weeks after the beginning of hostilities in Korea, the world was still waiting for some firm indication of Soviet intentions regarding not only Korea but other countries on the Soviet periphery. It became clear, however, that the North Koreans were not to be intimidated by U.S. involvement in the fighting and that the all-out effort to overrun South Korea would continue unabated. As long as the North Korean advance continues; the U.S.S.R. can remain aloof; the crucial moment will come when and if the battle turns in favor of U.S. and South Korean forces. At that time, the U.S.S.R. must decide whether to permit a North Korean defeat or to take whatever steps are necessary to prolong the action.

Soviet Intentions:

At the moment, the Soviet and Communist propaganda line offers no clue regarding Soviet intentions. Soviet propagandists would have no difficulty in using the present line as a basis either for withdrawal from South Korea or for prolongation of hostilities, even including armed action in other areas. The key to the fateful Soviet decision will be the extent to which the U.S.S.R. desires to risk instigating global war. All evidence available leads to the conclusion that the U.S.S.R. has substantial capabilities, without directly involving Soviet troops, for prolonging the fighting in Korea, as well as for initiating hostilities elsewhere. Thus, although the U.S.S.R. would prefer to confine the conflict to Korea, a reversal there might impel the U.S.S.R. to take greater risks of starting a global war either by committing substantial Chinese Communist forces in Korea or by sanctioning aggressive actions by Satellite forces in other areas of the world. The decisiveness of the U.S. reaction to the Korean invasion will thus cause the Kremlin to move cautiously, but the danger still exists that the U.S.S.R., as it did two weeks ago, will again miscalculate the Western reaction to any future moves it may feel are necessary.

The Far East:

The Korean invasion has had its most immediate and compelling impact on the Far East, particularly as it has affected international Communist intentions to speed the expansion of Communism throughout the area through the instrumentality of the Peiping regime. Pending clarification of the Soviet position, the Peiping regime has not yet committed itself and, as far as Korea is concerned, will probably not take any action at least as long as North Korean forces continue to advance. Meanwhile, Chinese Communist troop strength and dispositions would permit military aggression in a number of places with little or no warning, and the Peiping regime can be expected to give strong support to guerilla activities and subversion throughout Southeast Asia.

Military Potential:

The Korean invasion has produced a deluge of reports of Chinese Communist troop movements indicating a Chinese intent to support the North Korean invasion. Most of these reports, however, have

emanated from Chinese Nationalist sources and are merely propaganda for U.S. consumption. Actually, the Communists are apparently still strengthening their forces opposite Taiwan, and possibly Hong Kong, and no significant changes have occurred in troop dispositions along Southeast Asian frontiers. Reported movements of large troop formations from South and Central China toward the Northeast are largely discounted. Communist troops already in North China and Manchuria are sufficient to provide substantial support to the North Koreans and of these approximately 40-50,000 are of Korean nationality. Despite these reported troop movements and Chinese Communist capability to launch simultaneous and successful military actions in Korea, Hong Kong, Macao, and Indochina, no immediate action is expected. With regard to Taiwan, the U.S. commitment to defend the island has almost certainly delayed the invasion timetable if only because it will make occupation of the island too costly an operation for the Peiping regime to undertake without outside assistance.

Non-Military Action:

Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist regime will continue and probably increase its efforts short of military aggression to further the spread of Communism throughout Southeast Asia. Political support and military supplies will be granted Ho Chi Minh's forces in Indochina, efforts will be made to strengthen the insurgent movement in Malaya, and the tempo of organizational activity among labor and political groups will be stepped up. In this campaign, efforts by the Peiping regime to use the nine million Overseas Chinese will be impeded by its recent loss of popularity at home and a growing anticipation in Overseas Chinese communities that the spread of Communism may be reversed as a result of U.S. action in Korea. An intensification of Peiping's efforts to gain control of the Overseas Chinese may well lead to a split which, while reducing the exploitability of the Overseas Chinese as instruments for extending Chinese Communist influence, may also result in the adoption of more militant tactics by the pro-Communist faction. An immediately explosive situation in South-East Asia, however, derives from the presence in northern Burma of approximately 2,000 Chinese Nationalist troops. The Peiping regime has demanded their internment, the Burmese Government is apparently incapable of doing so, and the Chinese Communists thus have a legal "excuse" for carrying out local or major military operations in Burma.