

September 9, 1950
**National Security Council Report, NSC 81/1, "United
States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea"**

Citation:

"National Security Council Report, NSC 81/1, "United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea"", September 9, 1950, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Truman Presidential Museum and Library
<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116194>

Summary:

The National Security Council reports to President Truman on possible US courses of action in response to the North Korean invasion of South Korea.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Original Scan

NSC 81/1

~~TOP SECRET~~

September 9, 1950

NOTE BY THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

on

UNITED STATES COURSES OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO KOREA

- References: A. NSC Actions Nos. 354 and 338
B. NSC 81
C. Memo for NSC from Executive Secretary, same subject, dated September 8, 1950
D. Memos for NSC from Executive Secretary, subject: "Future United States Policy with Respect to Korea", dated July 17 and August 30, 1950

At its 67th Meeting the National Security Council and the Acting Secretary of the Treasury considered a draft report on the subject prepared by the NSC Staff (NSC 81), and adopted it for consideration by the President, subject to redrafting by the Departments of State and Defense to reflect the views expressed at the meeting by the Secretary of State and the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. The revised report, as redrafted by the Departments of State and Defense, is enclosed herewith.

Accordingly, the National Security Council and the Acting Secretary of the Treasury recommend that the President approve the Conclusions contained herein and direct their implementation by all executive departments and agencies of the U. S. Government.

JAMES S. LAY, JR.
Executive Secretary

cc: The Secretary of the Treasury

NSC 81/1

~~TOP SECRET~~

WARNING

THIS DOCUMENT CONTAINS INFORMATION AFFECTING THE NATIONAL DEFENSE OF THE UNITED STATES WITHIN THE MEANING OF THE ESPIONAGE ACT, TITLE 18, U.S.C., SECTIONS 793 AND 794. ITS TRANSMISSION OR THE REVELATION OF ITS CONTENTS IN ANY MANNER TO AN UNAUTHORIZED PERSON IS PROHIBITED BY LAW.

The President

~~TOP SECRET~~

NSC 81/3

COPY NO. 1



A REPORT
TO THE
PRESIDENT
BY THE
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

on

UNITED STATES COURSES OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO KOREA

September 9, 1950

WASHINGTON

DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 13526, Sec. 1.4 and 1.5
NSC 81-3
Date: 11/24/00
By: NLT/ML, NARS Date: 2/14/01

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~REPORT BY THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

on

UNITED STATES COURSES OF ACTION WITH RESPECT TO KOREATHE PROBLEM

1. To determine what United States course of action with respect to Korea would be best calculated to advance the national interests of the United States.

ANALYSIS

2. The present United Nations action in Korea is being taken in pursuance of the Security Council resolutions of June 25 and June 27, 1950. The Resolution of June 25 called for "the immediate cessation of hostilities", called upon "the authorities of North Korea to withdraw forthwith their armed forces to the thirty-eighth parallel", and called upon all U. N. members to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution and to refrain from giving assistance to the North Korean authorities." The Resolution of June 27 noted the failure of the North Korean authorities to comply with the resolution of June 25 and recommended that "the Members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area."

3. In a third resolution (July 7, 1950), the Security Council requested the United Nations to designate a Commander for all the forces of the members of the United Nations in the Korean operation, and authorized that these forces fly the U. N. flag. In response to this resolution, General MacArthur has been designated Commander of the U. N. forces in Korea. The Republic of Korea has also placed its forces under General MacArthur's command.

4. The political objective of the United Nations in Korea is to bring about the complete independence and unity of Korea in accordance with the General Assembly resolutions of November 14, 1947, December 12, 1948, and October 21, 1949.

5. The United States has strongly supported this political objective. If the present United Nations action in Korea can accomplish this political objective without substantially increasing the risk of general war with the Soviet Union or Communist China, it would be in our interest to advocate the pressing of the United Nations action to this conclusion. It would not be in our national

NSC 81/1

- 1 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

interest, however, nor presumably would other friendly members of the United Nations regard it as being in their interest, to take action in Korea which would involve a substantial risk of general war. Furthermore, it would not be in our national interest to take action in Korea which did not have the support of the great majority of the United Nations, even if, in our judgment, such action did not involve a substantial risk of general war.

6. As U. N. forces succeed in stabilizing the front, driving back the North Korean forces, and approaching the 38th parallel, the decisions and actions taken by the United States and other U.N. members which are supporting the Security Council resolutions, and those taken by the Kremlin, will determine whether hostilities are confined to operations against the North Koreans or spread so that the danger of a third world war is greatly increased.

7. It is unlikely that the Soviet Union will passively accept the emergence of a situation in which all or most of Korea would pass from its control, unless it believes that it can take action which would prevent this and which would not involve a substantial risk of general war or unless it is now prepared to accept such risk. The Soviet Union may decide that it can risk reoccupying Northern Korea before United Nations forces have reached the 38th parallel, or the conclusion of an arrangement with the North Korean regime under which Soviet forces would be pledged to the defense of the territory of the "People's Republic of Northern Korea". Alternatively, the Soviet Union might initiate some move toward a negotiated settlement while hostilities are still in progress south of the 38th parallel. In view of the importance of avoiding general war, we should be prepared to negotiate a settlement favorable to us. Such a settlement should not leave the aggressor in an advantageous position that would invite a repetition of the aggression and that would undermine the authority and strength of the United Nations.

8. Although politically unlikely, it is possible that Chinese Communist forces might be used to occupy North Korea, even though the Soviet Union probably regards Korea as being in its own direct sphere of interest. Similarly, it is also a possibility that Soviet or Chinese Communist forces may be openly employed in major units in the fighting in the southern part of the peninsula. Soviet decision in this regard would depend on whether the USSR or the Chinese Communists or both are ready to engage in general war at this time for this objective. It is possible that the Soviet Union, although this would increase the chance of general war, may endeavor to persuade the Chinese Communists to enter the Korean campaign with the purpose of avoiding the defeat of the North Korean forces and also of fomenting war between the United States and the Chinese Communists should we react strongly.

9. It is possible, but politically improbable, that no action will be taken by the Soviet Union or by the Chinese Communists to reoccupy Northern Korea or to indicate in any other way an intention to prevent the occupation of Northern Korea by United Nations forces

NSC 81/1

- 2 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

before the latter have reached the 38th parallel. In this unlikely contingency there would be some reason to believe that the Soviet Union had decided to follow a hands-off policy, even at the expense of the loss of control of Northern Korea. Only in this contingency could the U. N. ground forces undertake to operate in or to occupy northern Korea without greatly increasing the risk of general war. It is difficult to appraise this risk at this time, and our action in moving major forces north of the 38th parallel would create a situation to which the Soviet Union would be almost certain to react in some manner. If only the Republic of Korea (R.O.K.) forces operate in or occupy Korea north of the 38th parallel, the risk of general hostilities would be reduced, although the possibility of Soviet or Chinese Communist intervention would not be precluded. U. N. operations should not be permitted to extend across the Manchurian or USSR borders of Korea. It should be the policy not to include any non-Korean units in any U. N. ground forces which may be used in the north-eastern province bordering the Soviet Union or in the area along the Manchurian border.

10. It will be desirable to bear in mind in the contingency stated in paragraph 9 both the importance of securing support of the majority of U. N. members for any action that might be taken north of the 38th parallel and the advantage of establishing a record that will clearly show that every reasonable effort has been made to avoid carrying the military struggle into a new phase by a land offensive beyond the 38th parallel. Therefore, at some point after the U. N. forces begin to take the initiative and to drive back and destroy the North Korean forces, terms of surrender should be offered. The question of the acceptance of such terms by the North Koreans would of course be determined by the USSR in the light of its appraisal of its interests under all the circumstances then existing.

11. The U. N. forces are clearly committed by the Security Council resolutions to compel the withdrawal of the North Korean forces behind the 38th parallel and there is a clear legal basis for taking such military actions north of the 38th parallel as are necessary in accomplishing this mission.

12. Military actions north of the 38th parallel which go beyond the accomplishment of this mission as, for example, to accomplish the political objective of unifying Korea under the Republic of Korea, are not clearly authorized by existing Security Council resolutions. Accordingly, United Nations approval for military actions in furtherance of this political objective is a prerequisite to their initiation. Should such approval not be forthcoming, or should the USSR announce its intention, or take military action, to prevent the accomplishment of this political objective, its accomplishment would not be feasible. It would have to be recognized that a stalemate freezing the U. N. forces indefinitely in Korea or returning to the status quo ante June 25, would be undesirable.

NSC 81/1

- 3 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

13. Soviet domination of North Korea has brought with it the pattern of police and propaganda control well known throughout the Soviet world. Since the existence and stability of a unified Korea must in the long run depend largely upon the Korean people themselves, the tasks of the United Nations will include the reorientation of the North Korean people toward the outlook of free peoples who accept the standards of international behavior set forth in the United Nations Charter.

CONCLUSIONS

14. Final decisions cannot be made at this time concerning the future course of action in Korea, since the course of action which will best advance the national interest of the United States must be determined in the light of: the action of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists, consultation and agreement with friendly members of the United Nations, and appraisal of the risk of general war.

15. The United Nations forces have a legal basis for conducting operations north of the 38th parallel to compel the withdrawal of the North Korean forces behind this line or to defeat these forces. It would be expected that the U. N. Commander would receive authorization to conduct military operations, including amphibious and airborne landings or ground operations in pursuance of a roll-back in Korea north of the 38th parallel, for the purpose of destroying the North Korean forces, provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea. Since such operations would involve a risk of major war with the Soviet Union and would directly involve the interests of other friendly governments, the U. N. Commander should, prior to putting any such plan into execution, obtain the approval of the President in order that he may give consideration at the time to the various elements involved. U. N. operations should not be permitted to extend across the Manchurian or USSR borders of Korea. It should be the policy not to include any non-Korean units in any U. N. ground forces which may be used in the north-eastern province bordering the Soviet Union or in the area along the Manchurian border.

16. Concurrently the Joint Chiefs of Staff should be authorized to direct the Commander of the U. N. forces in Korea to make plans for the possible occupation of North Korea. However, the execution of such plans should take place only with the explicit approval of the President of the United States, and would be dependent upon prior consultation with and the approval of members of the U. N..

17. The United Nations Commander should undertake no ground operations north of the 38th parallel in the event of the occupation of North Korea by Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, but should

NSC 81/1

- 4 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

reoccupy Korea up to the 38th parallel. Air and naval operations north of the 38th parallel should not be discontinued merely because the presence of Soviet or Chinese Communist troops is detected in a target area. If the Soviet Union or the Chinese Communists should announce in advance their intention to reoccupy North Korea and give warning, either explicitly or implicitly, that their forces should not be attacked, the matter should be immediately referred to the Security Council with the stated purpose of securing the cooperation of the Soviet Union (or the Chinese Communists) in U. N. action to achieve the unity and independence of Korea. Since such cooperation would not be forthcoming, an attempt should then be made in the General Assembly to secure the condemnation of the Soviet Union (or the Chinese Communists) for flouting the will of the U. N. majority. Action north of the 38th parallel should not be initiated or continued, and if any U. N. forces are already north of the 38th parallel they should prepare to withdraw pending further directives from Washington. It is assumed that Soviet occupation down to the 38th parallel would be accompanied by the withdrawal of North Korean forces behind the 38th parallel. Otherwise new decisions would have to be made as to the nature of U. N. military operations in the area.

18. In the event of the open or covert employment of major Soviet units south of the 38th parallel, the U. N. Commander will assume the defense, make no move to aggravate the situation, and report to Washington. The same action should be taken in the event that U. N. forces are operating north of the 38th parallel and major Soviet units are openly employed. In either of these events the United States in common prudence would have to proceed on the assumption that global war is probably imminent. The United States should then take steps immediately to:

a. Make every effort in the light of the circumstances to localize the action, to stop the aggression by political measures and to ensure the unity of the free world if war nevertheless follows, such measures to include direct diplomatic action and resort to the United Nations with the objectives of:

(1) Making clear to the world United States preference for a peaceful settlement and the conditions upon which the United States would, in concert with other members of the United Nations, accept such a settlement.

(2) Consulting with members of the United Nations regarding their willingness to join with the United States in military opposition, if necessary, to the aggression.

b. Give consideration to the possibility of a direct approach to the highest Soviet leaders.

c. Consult with selected allies to perfect coordination of plans.

~~TOP SECRET~~

d. Place itself in the best possible position to meet the eventuality of global war, and therefore prepare to execute emergency war plans; but should, in so far as it has any choice, enter into full-scale hostilities only at the moment and in the manner most favorable to it in the light of the situation then existing.

e. While minimizing United States military commitments in areas of little strategic significance, take action with reference to the aggression to the extent and in the manner best contributing to the implementation of United States national war plans.

19. In the event of the open or covert employment of major Chinese Communist units south of the 38th parallel:

a. The United States should not permit itself to become engaged in a general war with Communist China.

b. As long as action by U. N. military forces offers a reasonable chance of successful resistance, the U. N. Commander should continue such action and be authorized to take appropriate air and naval action outside Korea against Communist China. The latter action should be continued pending a review of U. S. military commitments in the light of conditions then existing to determine further U. S. courses of action.

c. The United States should take the matter to the Security Council with the purpose of condemning the Chinese Communists as aggressors.

20. In the event of an attempt to employ small Soviet or Chinese Communist units covertly south of the 38th parallel, the United Nations Commander should continue the action.

21. The United States should immediately make an intensive effort, using all information media, to turn the inevitable bitterness and resentment of the war-victimized Korean people away from the United States and to direct it toward the Korean Communists, the Soviet Union, and, depending on the role they play, the Chinese Communists, as the parties responsible for the destructive conflict. Special assistance should be given to the field commander and the U. S. Embassy in Korea to augment their present propaganda and information programs. The Government of the R.O.K. should be encouraged to increase its propaganda output and should be given material assistance in this effort.

22. In order to effect the reorientation of the North Korean people, to cause defection of enemy troops in the field, and to train North Korean personnel to participate in activities looking to unification of the country, the following steps would be appropriate:

NSC 81/1

- 6 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

a. Establish the principle that the treatment of POW's, after their transfer to places of internment, shall be directed toward their exploitation, training and use for psychological warfare purposes, and for the tasks specified above.

b. Set up immediately on a pilot-plant scale an interrogation, indoctrination and training center for those POW's now in our hands in Korea. Personnel in charge of this project must be selected with the greatest care, taking into consideration Korean or Far Eastern experience, language qualifications, and temperamental aptitude. Full advantage should be taken of World War II experience in the indoctrination of German and Japanese prisoners of war, of experiences in Greece, and of recent experience with escaped Soviet detainees.

23. In preparation for the possible eventual retreat or sudden collapse of North Korean forces, the United States should immediately discuss with certain friendly members of the United Nations the terms to be offered the North Korean forces. This will serve to develop support for action north of the 38th parallel to accomplish the political objective of the United Nations in Korea in the event that the terms are rejected and there is no evidence of a substantial risk of a clash with Soviet or Chinese Communist forces. If the terms offered are not accepted, the U. N. Commander should continue his efforts to destroy as many of the enemy as possible before they retreat across the 38th parallel and only if so directed should continue operations north of the 38th parallel with major forces for the purpose of occupying North Korea.

24. If operations are undertaken to occupy northern Korea, the United Nations Commander should, in consultation with the Government of the R.O.K., determine the timing and method of subjecting occupied territory north of the 38th parallel to its jurisdiction. He should forbid, as commander of the U. N. forces, reprisals against the forces, officials, and populace of North Korea, except in accordance with international law, and take such measures as are within his power to secure compliance with this directive.

25. In performing their mission beyond the 38th parallel, the general posture of the United Nations forces should be one of liberation rather than retaliation. An effort should be made to encourage the voluntary adherence of ever larger areas of North Korea to the R.O.K.. The United Nations forces should attempt to exert a stabilizing influence during the transition period. They should endeavor to conduct themselves in such a way as to emphasize the non-aggressive and temporary nature of the U. N. occupation in any part of Korea, and non-Korean forces should be removed as soon as practicable.

26. When organized armed resistance by the North Korean forces has been brought substantially to an end, the United States should attempt to reduce its share of the U. N. responsibilities for Korea, including withdrawal of its own forces as soon as practicable, and

NSC 81/1

- 7 -

~~TOP SECRET~~

~~TOP SECRET~~

announce its desire to do so, without, however, implying any unwillingness to fulfill its U. N. commitments. The R.O.K. forces, operating under principles established by the U. N. Commission for Korea, or such body as may be established to take its place, should take the lead in disarming remaining North Korean units and enforcing the terms of surrender. Guerrilla activity should be dealt with primarily by the forces of the Republic of Korea with minimum participation by U. N. contingents, unless the Korean forces alone should prove unable to cope with the guerrilla activities.

27. The United States should recognize that the Government of the R.O.K. will have to take strong measures against Communist efforts to cause trouble in Korea and that it may require support in these measures from the United States. At the same time, the United States should recognize that social and economic reforms will be necessary in order to reduce the Communist menace to manageable proportions.

28. The United States should advocate in the United Nations the adoption of the following principles to govern the action of the United Nations in Korea in the post-hostilities period:

a. The unification of Korea should be arranged by representatives of the Korean people chosen in free secret-ballot elections on the basis of universal adult suffrage, the elections to be held under the auspices of the United Nations.

b. The Government of the R.O.K. should be re-established in Seoul and recognized as the only lawful government in Korea and should be consulted on problems arising in connection with the unification of Korea. That Government should be expected to exercise its powers with full regard to the desirability of eliminating the spirit of vengeance.

c. An obligation rests upon the members of the United Nations to contribute to the solution of the tremendous economic, social and political problems certain to confront a unified and independent Korea. Asiatic members of the United Nations should be urged to make a substantial contribution to the assistance program in view of their special regional interest in Korea.

29. In consonance with the above principles, the United States should take the following steps:

a. Take vigorous action through diplomatic channels and in the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly to assure and solidify United Nations support of necessary action in Korea.

b. Be prepared to announce in the United Nations its determination to seek a solution of the Korean problem within the

~~TOP SECRET~~

general framework of previous United Nations Resolutions and in a manner consistent with the United Nations Charter and the general aims and principles which the United States believes should underlie such a solution.

c. When such an announcement is made, the United States should recommend or urge others to recommend the creation of an appropriate United Nations body which would study and make recommendations to the General Assembly on the future of Korea in accordance with the principles enumerated above. It might be appropriate for the representative of India to act as chairman of such a body.

30. The United States should urge that the U. N. Commission on Korea or such body as may be established to take its place be charged with continuing consideration of Korean problems and instructed to make recommendations as to the size and character of the military and internal security forces needed by the R.O. K. The U. S. should recommend that the U. N. Commission should consider the desirability of permanent neutralization of Korea accompanied by political undertakings by the R.O.K. and by other states separately, including the USSR, to refrain from any aggression. The question of U. N. guarantee should be studied but no U. S. commitment on this point should be made at this stage.

31. The United States should urge that U. N. forces be retained in Korea until and only until a unified and independent state has been firmly established and should be prepared to make available United States forces as a contingent of the U. N. forces for the purpose of deterring renewed aggression or internal strife. These forces should be removed from Korea as early as practicable. Meanwhile, and in any event, the number of our forces should be reduced so far as possible, and they should serve only in conjunction with other U. N. contingents, preferably including some Asiatic contingents

NSC 81/1

~~TOP SECRET~~

- 9 -