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The views expressed in this dissertation are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

No serious policy maker could allow himself to succumb to the fashionable debunking of “prestige” or “honor” or “credibility.” For a great power to abandon a small country to tyranny simply to obtain a respite from our own travail seemed to me—and still seems to me—profoundly immoral and destructive of our efforts to build a new and ultimately more peaceful pattern of international relations.

Henry A. Kissinger, White House Years, 1979

Immediately following the formal surrender of the Japanese empire in September 1945, American forces hastily occupied the southern portion of the Korean peninsula as the Soviets took control in the North. Since that time, U.S. actions concerning the Korean peninsula have been entwined with prevailing views and discourse about the Cold War and national security strategy. The concept of “credibility”—the idea that the United States would dependably execute its threats to enemies and keep its promises to allies—was one of the most important of these prevailing Cold War views.¹ Credibility’s significance was reflected, reinforced, and exemplified in the way many Americans explained the United States’ failure to deter the North Korean attack in 1950, how they justified the ensuing three-year war and subsequent continuous U.S. military presence in South Korea, and how they argued for the entry into and continuation of the Vietnam War.² In the 1970s, the strains and aftermath of the Vietnam War prompted American foreign policy leaders to debate the future of U.S. ground forces in Korea. Unsurprisingly, the issue of American credibility lay at the heart of the debate.


² Ibid., 455-57. See also, William W. Stueck, Jr., The Road to Confrontation: American Policy toward China and Korea, 1947-1950 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 7. As William Stueck noted, “the Soviet-American conflict [in Korea] after 1945 had led State Department officials to connect the United States’ position below the thirty-eighth parallel to American credibility worldwide. And this fact suggests a measure of continuity to American policy before and after the North Korean attack that heretofore has been largely ignored.”
U.S. troop reductions in South Korea had been enacted or contemplated by U.S. presidents ever since the mid-1950s, but the U.S. presidents of the 1970s were the first ones to contemplate a complete withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces there. In 1970, President Richard M. Nixon enacted the largest reduction in the postwar U.S. deterrent forces in Korea by withdrawing one of the two U.S. Army divisions in South Korea (approximately 20,000 troops) as part of his "Nixon Doctrine," an initiative that called on America's Asian allies to bear a greater burden of their own self-defense. Although Nixon had considered an eventual complete withdrawal of U.S. ground forces, he and President Gerald R. Ford declined to make subsequent additional troop reductions during their remaining tenures as president despite the advocacy of Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird and numerous congressmen for additional cuts. Shortly after the 1976 election, however, President Jimmy Carter renewed efforts to withdraw all U.S. ground forces from Korea. Carter's resolute but unsuccessful two-and-a-half-year attempt to withdraw all U.S. ground forces from Korea sparked a highly publicized civil-military rift and fueled one of many conservative criticisms of the Carter presidency that drew upon different understandings of the Cold War context.

As various U.S. presidents contemplated reducing military forces in Korea, their military commanders and other foreign policy elites reminded them that the success of the United States' deterrence of enemies and assurance of allies in the region hinged on U.S. credibility. The United States could expect to appear credible if it created the perception in other countries that it possessed: 1) the capability to carry out its threatened action with reasonable efficacy; 2) sufficient interest to take the threatened action if provoked; and 3) the resolve or fixity of

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3 Hundreds of thousands of U.S. forces remained in Korea for over a year after the signing of the Armistice. In 1954-55, Eisenhower reduced what was still essentially a wartime force of some 325,000 U.S. personnel into a standing deterrent force of about 71,000. In 1957-58, Eisenhower's concern about the cost of global containment prompted him to apply his "New Look" strategy to Korea and reduce the existing deterrent force by more than 15,000 while offsetting their deterrent effect through the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula. As in examined in chapter 3, President Johnson also considered a reduction in U.S. forces in South Korea.

purpose to endure the hardship of carrying out the threat. Consequently, credibility was at the heart of the debate because U.S. troop reduction and withdrawal could affect other countries’ perceptions of all three components of U.S. credibility with potentially adverse repercussions on and beyond the Korean peninsula. Reductions or withdrawal might prompt friendly and hostile observers to doubt that the United States retained sufficient capability to enact its threats effectively. Observers also might question if U.S. interests in the region had diminished or, as many officials worried, wonder if the United States’ resolve to extend its “umbrella” of deterrence to Cold War allies across Asia and throughout the world had waned. Thus, many U.S. and allied leaders viewed the U.S. troops in South Korea as having a larger symbolic value beyond just deterring North Korean leaders.

The emphasis on credibility in the troop withdrawal debate was influenced by and a constituent of an overarching and enduring traditional Cold War mindset that various prominent scholars have noted. Although they differ on what specific components they include or emphasize in their analysis, scholars generally agree that this identifiable mindset consisted of apparent lessons from World War II about appeasement and key assumptions made early in the Cold War about the nature of the Soviet enemy and the broader Cold War conflict that encouraged a “fixation” on U.S. credibility. A close examination of the decade of debate about the tangible and symbolic value of U.S. troops in South Korea and the potential ramifications of their reduction or withdrawal in the 1970s shows that key elements of this particular Cold War mindset of the 1950s continued to exert considerable influence on U.S. decision making as the

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5 The terms used to define credibility still vary within the literature and this unfortunately confuses discussions of deterrence and credibility. For example, RAND defines credibility as capability and intention whereas Huth defines credibility as capability and resolve (Austin Long, *Deterrence: From Cold War to Long War* (Pittsburgh: RAND Corporation, 2008) 11; Paul, K. Huth, “Reputations and Deterrence: A theoretical and empirical assessment,” *Security Studies* 7:1, 74.). Despite variations in terms used, credibility is always described as a function of capability and the willingness to use that capability, which implicitly or explicitly includes an interest component and a resolve component.

6 U.S. military forces in Korea (USFK) viewed themselves as a restraint on potential South Korean aggression as well. In addition to protecting East Asia from more communist expansion or unwelcome influence by the Soviet Union or China, they served as a stabilizing influence on the post-World War II tensions between Japan and the Asian mainland.
United States transitioned through the end of the Vietnam War. If the troop withdrawal debate is as emblematic of the prevailing tensions in the Cold War discourse of the 1970s as it appears, then policymakers’ views about the importance of credibility at the start of the second half of the Cold War were potentially as consequential as they were in the first half, even if key assumptions about credibility became more actively questioned or revalued in light of new circumstances and experiences.

As Robert McMahon noted in 1991, “the suggestion that throughout the Cold War era American leaders evinced great concern for the nation’s credibility hardly qualifies as either a novel or a controversial insight,” yet “most specialists in the history of American foreign relations continue to pay this psychological dimension of policymaking but a passing glance.”7 Although historians and political scientists have sporadically explored the influence of credibility concerns on U.S. foreign relations over the ensuring two decades, little has been done in the later Cold War outside the Vietnam War. Furthermore, deterrence credibility remains highly relevant in today’s political debates over how the U.S. government has handled provocative actions by Syria, Iran, Russia, and North Korea.

Of the extensive historiography of the Cold War, a few works stand out for their assessment of important prevailing mindsets of the time, but the vast majority of these remains focused on the early decades of the Cold War. Scholars still have not synthesized and fully explicated the complex system of interacting structural and ideational factors that made credibility such a powerful force within U.S. foreign policy prior to the Vietnam War, nor have they closely examined its ongoing influence in the post-Vietnam Cold War. Indeed, many imply that the “credibility imperative” faded as Americans learned lessons from the Vietnam War or realigned their conception of interests.8 To the contrary, diachronic analysis of the troop

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7 McMahon, “Credibility,” 458. Note that McMahon’s definition of credibility ignores the material aspects and makes credibility nearly synonymous with reputation for resolve.

withdrawal debate suggests that the recession in the prominence of credibility concerns was modest and temporary.

This dissertation argues that an identifiable, persistent, and relatively consistent Cold War mindset contributed to the credibility fixation in the United States during the Cold War because the mindset: embraced a “one-size fits all” Munich analogy of appeasement that predicted a high probability of follow-on aggression and falling “dominoes” regardless of context, conceived of the Soviet Union as a particularly aggressive and expansionist power bent on undermining the strength of the United States, characterized the international environment in stark bipolar and zero-sum terms, and feared that the threat of escalation to nuclear war would undermine U.S. resolve to respond adequately to small “piecemeal” attacks on members of the “Free World” by the Soviet Union. For simplicity, I refer to this as “the NSC-68 mindset” because, as I argue in Chapter 2, its components were consistent with views expressed in the foundational top secret Cold War strategy document, NSC-68 even though the widespread adoption of those views may not be directly attributable to NSC-68. Indeed, these interrelated characterizations of the budding Cold War amplified domino fears and all but compelled the authors and adherents of NSC-68 to strain all three constituent components of U.S. credibility by adopting an overextended deterrence posture and to emphasize the “psychological” interest of maintaining a reputation for resolve.

This dissertation also argues that if we extend our analysis of the NSC-68 mindset and its credibility imperative into the early post-Vietnam period, we find that this mindset and credibility fixation still exerted considerable influence on U.S. policymakers, sometimes distorted their decision making, and provided enemies and allies opportunities to leverage exaggerated U.S. concerns about credibility to their advantage. As in other debates over national security in previous decades, the concept of credibility exerted particularly powerful influence on policy

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elites and senior U.S. military commanders during the troop withdrawal debate of the 1970s because it was derived from the bipolar military structure of the Cold War, drew upon deep-seated American fears of both the expansionist and subversive threat of communism, reflected concerns about the dilemma of U.S. military overextension, and subtly entwined with culturally engrained values. The assumptions that Americans employed in their construction of the Cold War overarched the specific issues of the withdrawal debate and defined much of the conceptual space in which the debate could take place. Essentially, the stable, persistent elements of the NSC-68 mindset influenced the withdrawal debate of the 1970s in ways akin to the “deep currents” and “gentle rhythms” of history that the Annalistes have explored across much longer spans of time.\(^9\) A close examination of the discourse and decision making regarding the troop withdrawal issue in Korea reveals the ebb and flow of the influence of the early NSC-68 mindset as it competed with other values and imperatives, especially cost and entanglement, which could themselves be entwined with the deep cultural currents of fiscal responsibility and noninterventionism noted by Michael J. Hogan.\(^10\) This work builds upon previous explanations for the fixation on credibility and examines its influence on a particular persistent and representative foreign relations issue during a pivotal period of the Cold War.

**Historiography**

Although a variety of conflicting ideas circulated within the Cold War discourse, certain versions became “hegemonic discourses” because they exerted considerably more influence within the broader Cold War, and because they exhibited sufficient stability and persistence in their form.\(^11\) The NSC-68 mindset appeared to be validated by a string of events early in the

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Cold War including the 1948 Czech coup and Berlin blockade, the 1949 Soviet detonation of a nuclear weapon and the fall of China to Communism, and the invasion of South Korea in 1950. These events increased the apparent gravity of the threat and tilted the debate over how to contain the Soviet threat in favor of an extensive containment strategy expressed in NSC-68, in which Soviet aggression needed to be countered wherever it occurred rather than just at the strong points that George Kennan had advocated. Failure to prevent the fall of one state seemed to risk triggering the fall of others that could irreversibly tip the balance of power in the Soviets’ favor. A cascade of “dominoes” seemed ready to topple if the Soviet enemy was given more material (or in the case of subversion, psychological) advantage and momentum through the conquest of territory. The resulting emphasis on extensive containment and preventing the fall of dominoes contributed, in turn, to the American fixation on a reputation for credibility.

For more than twenty years, historians have commented on various aspects of a Cold War mindset or “national security ideology” that significantly influenced the decision making of U.S. leaders in ways that appear not to fit the realist ideal of a rational evaluation of interests. When Michael Hogan analyzed the hegemonic U.S. mindset of the early Cold War, he found that a “set of assumptions that emerged from the crises of World War II and the Cold War” combined to create a new, powerful “national security ideology” that interacted with and was contested by an older traditional conservatism that favored limited military, limited budgets, and limited involvement with the rest of the world.12 Similarly, John Lewis Gaddis observed that NSC-68 contained a distinct conceptualization of the Cold War and wielded “substantial” influence in the early Cold War.13 Although officials in the Truman administration shared some of the concerns of NSC-68’s contemporary critics, these concerns “failed to shake the administrations’ faith in the fundamental validity of NSC-68.”14 This fundamental faith was further enshrined in

12 Hogan, Cross of Iron, viii.
13 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 115.
14 Ibid., 121.
subsequent security documents and was mostly embraced by the ensuing Eisenhower administration.\textsuperscript{15}

Scholars have observed that a significant component of this important Cold War mindset or ideology was the United States’ “fixation” on its credibility to a degree not seen prior to the Cold War or in other friendly countries during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{16} William Stueck, Jr., John Lewis Gaddis, and Robert McMahon were some of the first historians to argue that American policymakers’ fixation on credibility was a defining characteristic of the early Cold War and one that remained underappreciated in the scholarly literature. This unprecedented fixation on U.S. credibility distorted the cost-benefit analyses of U.S. officials during the Cold War and contributed to the United States’ deepening involvement in the Vietnam War.\textsuperscript{17} In 1981, Stueck argued “that America’s quest for credibility deserves a major place in analyses of the early cold war.”\textsuperscript{18} Hogan later identified “national resolve” (a component of credibility) as a “central” component of the eight main new components of the Cold War national security ideology, and Gaddis observed that the logic of NSC-68 prompted officials to pursue “credibility for its own sake.”\textsuperscript{19} Robert McMahon and Robert Johnson have been particularly effective in shining light on the issue of credibility.

McMahon noted “the profound impact that [American] preoccupation with credibility [had] exerted on the overall direction of postwar American foreign policy” and argued that America’s “heightened concern for the psychological underpinnings of policy decisions—the fixation with

\textsuperscript{15} Gaddis, \textit{Strategies of Containment}, 128, 134-135. Eisenhower mainly shifted the strategy to his lower cost “New Look” that relied heavily on nuclear deterrence, but he did not appear to question most of NSC-68’s fundamental characterizations of the Cold War.


\textsuperscript{17} Hogan, \textit{Cross of Iron}, viii; Robert McMahon, \textit{The Limits of Empire: The United States and Southeast Asia since World War II} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 22.

\textsuperscript{18} Stueck, \textit{Road to Confrontation}, 7.

symbols, images, and appearances helps to make the [post-World War II] period so unique in the history of American diplomacy.” Like Hogan, McMahon found that widely held and “grossly exaggerated . . . strategic fears, especially those associated with the globally derived Cold War visions and concerns, heavily influenced U.S. actions up through the end of the Vietnam War.” He argued that these strategic fears “were quite real to a whole generation of policymakers” and that an “abiding concern” with credibility proved to be “paramount” in prompting American leaders to exert informal imperial or hegemonic influence over Southeast Asia. McMahon’s convincing study, however, ended with the Vietnam War and left the source of America’s Cold War fixation with credibility mostly unexplored, merely offering that “[t]he deeper reasons for the American fixation with its presumed vulnerability—at a time when its power was, by any objective criteria, at its peak—probably lie more within the realm of social psychology than within the realms of geopolitics or political economy.”

Robert Johnson pursued the mindset’s components of exaggerated fear and its more psychological aspects more deeply than McMahon and found exaggerated fear constructs operating throughout the Cold War and into the 1990s. Johnson partly blamed subconscious psychological factors and conscious attempts to rally domestic political support for the prevailing American Cold War

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21 McMahon, The Limits of Empire, ix. It is interesting to note that McMahon finds related viewpoints widely shared among U.S. foreign policy elites. For example: “nearly all top American strategists” in the late 1940s subscribed “to the logic [that] Japan’s economic health demanded that peace and stability prevail throughout Southeast Asia (p. 38); “Virtually all national security planners in the Truman administration were agreed that Indochina was the key to Southeast Asia” (p. 41); “nearly all senior U.S. policymakers” viewed Southeast Asia as “a region of vital importance to the United States” (p. 43); and “Like Kennedy, Johnson subscribed to a worldview that equated communist success in any corner of the globe with a significant diminution in U.S. credibility…Virtually all of Johnson’s principal national security advisers accepted those premises.” (p. 113).

22 Ibid., 219-220. I distill this argument from his series of statements in his conclusion. He rightly states that a “complex mosaic of strategic, economic, psychological, and political factors” drove U.S. action. However, the economic component faded in the 1950s and the psychological fixation on credibility cannot be easily extracted from the strategic considerations. As will be argued below, that fixation flows quasi-logically from the strategic assumptions about the Cold War. Furthermore, the questions of credibility abroad are entwined with credibility at home and domestic politics.

23 McMahon, The Limits of Empire, 22.
mindset’s tendency to exaggerate threats, to fear falling dominoes, and to emphasize credibility.24

Scholars generally agree that a dominant Cold War mindset emerged from the American characterization of the Soviet threat in the Truman Doctrine and NSC-68, which drew upon domino fears embedded in the rubble of World War II and amplified them. Chapter 2 builds upon and modestly refines this earlier scholarship to highlight more clearly how early Cold War assumptions interacted to amplify the perceived importance of a reputation for credibility. The hegemonic traditional Cold War mindset, however, was contested and did not always prevail. Hogan observed that the early Cold War mindset competed with other deeply engrained ideas inherited from earlier generations and that two main groups “struggle[d] to shape the nation’s political identity and postwar purpose.”25 In a related vein, Gaddis’ sweeping diachronic analysis of the strategy of containment over the full course of the Cold War discussed variations in strategy that oscillated between what he called asymmetric and more costly symmetric containment.26 Whether and how this significant mindset affected an individual’s policy choices depended on other contextual influences, but the mindset’s presence and influence is apparent even in those like President Dwight D. Eisenhower who pursued a more cost-effective asymmetric strategy.27 In both Hogan’s and Gaddis’ accounts, practical and ideological aversion to the high cost of the containment strategy that flowed from this Cold War mindset served as an important counterargument to the mindset.

24 Johnson, Improbable Dangers, 2, 7, 22-23, 45-46, 98, 143, 145.

25 Hogan, Cross of Iron, 1.

26 Asymmetrical containment required “yielding positions that could not be easily defended or expanding”/escalating the conflict to the where the U.S. had an advantage. (Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 324-343).

27 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 128, 135, 138, 144-145. Concerns about cost efficiency drove Eisenhower’s reliance on deterrence rather than symmetrical defense in a way similar to how cost drove Nixon’s “Doctrine” years later (Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 151). That cost (and other factors) sometimes trumped the concerns generated by the NSC-68 mindset’s assumptions about the Soviet enemy doesn’t diminish the force of their presence. In Eisenhower’s case, creating a ring of alliances under the umbrella of deterrence was fine, so long as deterrence held. If it failed, however, as it did during the Quemoy & Matsu dilemma, policymakers were right back in the messy mix of credibility questions and the implications expressed in NSC-68. (Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 166-68).
This dissertation suggests that, similar to what Michael Hogan analyzed at the start of the Cold War, a mindset that had solidified in the early Cold War coexisted and competed with other traditional ideas and imperatives that reemerged in the wake of the United States’ experience in Vietnam, especially fears of financial weakness and undesirable entanglements. Much as World War II and the Cold War disrupted received wisdom, the Vietnam War created a crisis of sufficient magnitude to raise doubts about the relatively new but powerful received wisdom of the early Cold War’s national security ideology. As circumstances changed, the relative influence of these competing influences ebbed and flowed. Thus, as U.S. policymakers faced economic challenges and increased concern about unnecessary entanglement in the 1970s, the value of demonstrating U.S. credibility relative to other concerns became a central if not always directly acknowledged element of debate.

For example, extending a deterrence commitment to allies via a physical presence of forward stationed U.S. troops was so costly to maintain that concerns about its sustainability came to the forefront at various times over the course of the Cold War. U.S. leaders usually assumed that forward deterrence was less costly than risking deterrence to a less credible looking posture, but such commitments also came with the additional potential cost of entanglement in a war that might far exceed the value of the interest that the United States sought to protect. Whether such cost-benefit calculations between competing concerns tipped in favor or against costly forward deployments depended on the strength of one’s acceptance of the early Cold War assumptions relative to emerging fears of economic weakness or undesirable entanglement. Thus, the arguments for troop reductions gained and lost traction as shifting circumstances directly challenged or reinforced the key assumptions of the NSC-68 mindset.

This ebb and flow of influence of the NSC-68 mindset is underexamined in the post-Vietnam period. Previous works have noted the presence and influence of a dominant Cold War mindset and its credibility fixation across a broad spectrum of time and issues during the
Cold War, but most of the analyses of the Cold War mindset and its various components focus on the period leading up to the Vietnam War. Many of those who extend their analysis beyond the Vietnam War imply that the “credibility imperative” faded as Americans learned lessons from the Vietnam War.  Craig and Logevall, for example, are even blunter than McMahon in their criticism of how the Cold War fixation on credibility contributed to the Vietnam War but they omit the issue of credibility and dominoes from their discussion of the presidencies of Ford through Reagan even though political scientists have noted that concern with credibility has been expressed in the official rhetoric justifying many of the United States’ post-Vietnam interventions.

Gaddis’ 2005 revision of *Strategies of Containment* extended his analysis through the end of the Cold War and there is little to critique in what he chooses to cover but room to add more resolution, especially to the Carter administration. Gaddis found that even though Nixon and Kissinger ushered “in the most sweeping changes in United States foreign policy since the idea of containment had first emerged two decades earlier,” they “differed little from their predecessors” in “their determination to honor prior commitments, in their fear of what would happen to American credibility if they failed.” In contrast, Gaddis showed President Carter to be less under the sway of the NSC-68 mindset and consciously seeking to abandon it. What appears to be missing, however, is the presence and drag that the NSC-68 mindset exerted on Carter’s ability to shift foreign policy into a new paradigm. One is left wondering to what degree Soviet actions during the Carter administration resonated with this early Cold War mindset. It

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also suggests that Reagan rose to prominence on double-digit inflation and Carter’s poor foreign policy while giving insufficient attention to the contribution from a resurgent early Cold War ideology.

Robert Johnson drew heavily on the analysis in Gaddis’ first edition of *Strategies of Containment* as he investigated the American tendency to exaggerate threats throughout the Cold War. Unlike many others, however, his insightful criticism of the components of the Cold War mindset that contributed to exaggerated fears revealed considerable emphasis on U.S. concerns about credibility and falling dominoes even in the post-Vietnam Cold War. When he examined the reactions of U.S. administrations to communist activity in Angola in 1975, Afghanistan in 1979, and Nicaragua and El Salvador in the early 1980s, he found an exaggerated credibility component to be one of the primary motivators in all three cases.\(^{32}\) Johnson identified important and recurring themes, but his vast time span of analysis from the advent of the Cold War through the first Gulf War left little room for a more refined and nuanced analysis that might reveal more of the ebb and flow of these influences. Nonetheless, he did better than Gaddis at noting the influence of what amounted to domestic strands of the early Cold War mindset in the discourse of administration critics.\(^{33}\)

This dissertation proposes that the long debate over reducing and withdrawing U.S. forces in South Korea affords an excellent opportunity to examine the ebb and flow of the influence of the NSC-68 mindset and its emphasis on credibility and reputation compared to other significant, enduring, and competing Cold War concerns. By examining just one relatively constant issue over the course of ten years, this study allows us to better understand the dynamics of how the credibility fixation operated within a specific “issue-system” and what competing factors contributed to its variable influence on U.S. foreign relations.

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\(^{32}\) Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*, 143-150.

\(^{33}\) See, for example, Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*, 167-171.
As U.S. presidents began to contemplate more troop withdrawals from South Korea in the latter half of the 1960s, the character of the Cold War was increasingly in flux. The hegemonic discourse of “bearing any cost” to contain communism was being contested by the reemergence of the persistent U.S. tradition of non-interventionism, catalyzed by growing dissatisfaction with the progress and costs of the Vietnam War.\footnote{As John Lewis Gaddis pointed out, various influential officials (including former President Hoover, Senator Robert Taft and Gen Douglas MacArthur) continued to argue against a broader conception of symmetric containment even while it was becoming more entrenched (Gaddis, \textit{Strategies of Containment}, 115-118).} Nonetheless, a substantial portion of Americans still believed that the United States must maintain an aggressive anti-communist containment strategy, partly because of the continued appeal of containment’s structural and cultural “logic,” and partly because a “great many powerful people in American society had” developed over the years “an unspoken (and often unconscious)” interest in perpetuating it.\footnote{Craig and Logevall, \textit{America’s Cold War}, 8.} Furthermore, the Korean War had been one of a handful of pivotal developments in the early Cold War that pushed the U.S. conception and discourse of the Cold War toward its pessimistic “NSC-68” conception of the Soviet threat and, therefore, made Korea an important locus of U.S. Cold War identity. Consequently, the ensuing U.S. troop presence on the Korean peninsula was closely entwined with the concepts of extensive, non-situational containment and the issue of credibility. One could not contemplate the withdrawal of U.S. troops from their containment role in South Korea without triggering all the containment arguments and assumptions with which they had become interlinked.

Despite the troop withdrawal issue’s potential to be a rich source of insight into post-Vietnam Cold War discourse and threat assessment, the debate about withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea has so far received little attention in the historiography. Numerous works examine the foreign policy of Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter and/or examine U.S. relations with the two Koreas but give little attention to the troop withdrawal debate and miss its potential as an emblematic issue. Scholarship on Nixon and Ford understandably emphasizes the
The conclusion of the Vietnam War, the opening of China, the response to the Arab-Israeli October War, and the Indo-Pakistan War. The troop withdrawal issue, however, often receives only brief mention under a broader analysis of the Nixon Doctrine. Analyses of Carter’s foreign policy, which generally only vary in the severity of their criticism, attribute Carter’s withdrawal policy to various combinations of economics, human rights, and concern about triggering another Vietnam. The better ones also characterize Carter’s difficulties as a struggle between his multilateral view of the late Cold War and the more conservative bilateral view, factors that speak directly to the issue of credibility operating within NSC-68 mindset. Works that focus on the United States’ relationship with the Korean peninsula devote more analysis to the strategic considerations of the Nixon Doctrine throughout the decade and some of the important aspects of Carter’s failure, but they do not give us a good sense of the dynamics of the internal politics of the issue or of the influence of the field commanders on the policy decisions throughout the decade.


Among these, two works stand out. Joo-Hong Nam’s America’s Commitment to South Korea: The First Decade of the Nixon Doctrine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) provides excellent theoretical and strategic analysis of the South Korean and U.S. positions in the 10 years following the Nixon Doctrine but it has a paucity of primary archival sources. In The Two Koreas: a Contemporary History (New York: Basic Books, 1998), Don Oberdorfer uses his personal experience as a Washington Post reporter covering East Asia in the 1970s to provide
The ensuing chapters of this dissertation keep the credibility issue of the NSC-68 mindset as the underlying theme of their analysis, but other major themes involved in the scholarly analysis of the Cold War naturally intersect on Korea, including extended deterrence and alliance theory, nuclear deterrence, Sino-Soviet dynamics, the influence of the Vietnam War, civil-military relations, development, race, and masculinity. Thus, in the process of analyzing the dynamics of the influence of the credibility fixation on the withdrawal debate, this work also generates insights regarding a number of related issues that are interwoven in this complex issue.

For example, this dissertation’s examination of the politics and discourse of Cold War strategy on both sides of the civil-military divide contributes incrementally to scholarly works on U.S. civil-military relations that are more often found in the field of political science than history, and that typically focus more on apparent breaches in civilian control of the military than on the military’s persistent influence on foreign relations. The limited historiography that does examine military influence on U.S. foreign relations during the Cold War tends to examine either end of the power spectrum—the high-level influence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on formal policy or the “bottom-up” influence of military personnel and their families on foreign society. The potential influence of overseas commanders “on the spot,” particularly outside of combat

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environments, has not been closely examined.\textsuperscript{41} By directing some focus on the commanders of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) and U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), this dissertation assesses the influence of combatant commanders on the particular foreign policy issue of troop withdrawal and situates that influence within the broader civil-military relationship and the competing discourse over credibility and commitments of that time.\textsuperscript{42} Finally, focus on the combatant commanders in Korea facilitates exploration of the unexamined potential avenue of influence that high-level South Korean officials may have been able to exploit through their frequent interactions with the U.S. military commanders.

A richer understanding of the influence of credibility thinking in the later Cold War also has consequence for the renewed debate among some political scientists regarding the value of maintaining a credible reputation for resolve. The balance of recent political science scholarship leans toward the conclusion that the United States has overvalued its reputation for credibility over the years and is therefore inclined to undertake expensive and risky operations primarily to maintain a reputation that was already adequate for most forms of deterrence.\textsuperscript{43} Although this dissertation does not engage directly in that political science debate, it does draw upon the latest literature to generate insight about possible historical consequences of NSC-68

\textsuperscript{41} Alan R. Millett, \textit{The American Political System and Civilian Control of the Military: A Historical Perspective} (Columbus: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 1979), 38. In his edited volume examining how the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 empowered contemporary U.S. combatant commanders to exert greater influence on U.S. foreign policy, Derek Reveron wrote: ”[t]he bulk of the literature on the formulation of U.S. foreign policy does not recognize the growing influence of [these] commanders…prior to this volume, no scholarly analysis of the extent to which the commanders actually influenced policy formation existed.” (Derek Reveron, ed, \textit{America’s Viceroys: The Military and U.S. Foreign Policy} (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 2.) Reveron does an admirable job filling the gap for the post-1986 period but few have closely examined the foreign affairs influence of combatant commanders serving outside active combat theaters prior to 1986 and no one has closely investigated the influence of the U.S. commanders in post-armistice Korea.


\textsuperscript{43} See for example: Mercer, \textit{Reputation and International Politics} and Press, \textit{Calculating Credibility}. This ongoing political science scholarship questions the long-standing assumption that a reputation for resolve is essential for credible deterrence. Those who doubt the usefulness of creating a reputation of resolve currently seem to be making a better case than those suggesting that a reputation for resolve may still be a worthwhile policy goal (e.g., Huth, “Reputations”).
mindset and provides the foundation and contextual analysis in this case that could be used to refine models derived from more cursory comparative studies of credible reputations. If the prevailing assessment among political scientists of the importance of reputation is upheld, then past assumptions about the reputational component of credibility may be among the most consequential insufficiently examined assumptions of the Cold War.

Finally, examining how persistent material, structural, and ideational factors perpetuated U.S. policymakers’ fixation on American credibility and reputation in the later Cold War reinforces our understanding of how threat and interest construction affect strategy and policy still today. The ideas mobilized in the arguments over whether to maintain a robust forward military presence or to retrench resonate with the present-day debates and civil-military tensions over threat construction and threat assessment for Iraq and Afghanistan, global terror networks, and provocative rival states.

**Method and Sources**

The 1970s controversy over U.S. troop withdrawals from Korea serves as an excellent case study for analyzing the influence of U.S. concerns about credibility and the NSC-68 mindset during the waning years of the Vietnam War and the remainder of the 1970s because references to capability and reputation suffuse the central elements of the debate. A careful diachronic reading of the discourse of key U.S. officials allows us to see how the debate was influenced by the three key NSC-68 assumptions and the emphasis on credibility and reputation that they compelled, and how other factors like cost and entanglement acted to curb the influence of the traditional mindset. By viewing the withdrawal issue as a debate that spanned multiple presidential administrations, this dissertation examines how highly persistent material and ideational factors acted upon and were shaped by U.S. civilian and military officials, and ultimately restrained efforts for troop withdrawals from Korea even though two presidents and numerous other policymakers drew upon potentially strong arguments that economic stagnation
and failure in the Vietnam War suggested that the United States should rethink the extent of its
global posture.

One notable strength of studying the influence the credibility fixation engendered by the
traditional mindset on just one specific issue over time is that it has greater potential to reveal
the diachronic ebb and flow of the influential factors on the issue than when doing comparative
studies across cases with rather different contexts. Many key components were relatively static
in this case of the troop withdrawal issue, which makes analysis of the complex issue more
tractable and helps highlight variations in other key elements of interest. Significantly, the
debate appears focused at the level of elite state policymakers and occurred only between a
few states with relatively constant leaders or dominant parties. Additionally, this militarily-
oriented debate occurred with far less of the complicating influences of urgency, dynamism, and
public opinion found in an active war. Furthermore, although military capabilities were
constantly changing on both sides of the DMZ and the Cold War, no state central to the issue
suddenly gained or lost a significant military capability (such as nuclear weapons), and the
perception of the worst case threat that the United States must deter remained stable even as
the probability of that threat manifesting itself was debated.

In the withdrawal debate, the issue of credibility and its associated assumptions about
the Soviet enemy and the Cold War structure appear to be among the most important of the
persistent influences and serve as the primary framework with which other persistent and
shorter-lived influences interacted. Thus, this issue encourages analysis of material/structural
factors as well as post-structurally sensitive readings of the Cold War discourse on credibility
and commitment to gain more insight into how the troop withdrawal debate both drew upon and

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44 The United States, South Korea, and North Korea are the primary players, with substantial secondary interest from
China, Japan, and to a lesser degree, the Soviet Union. Also, the leaders within the authoritarian states of South
Korea (Park Chung-hee), North Korea (Kim Il Sung), and the Soviet Union (Leonid Brezhnev) remained constant
throughout the period while the Liberal Democratic Party controlled the Japanese legislature and the Democrats
controlled both chambers of the U.S. Congress. Other states in East Asia were interested as well but appear to have
wielded substantially less influence individually.
helped constitute the Cold War discourse of the 1970s and entwined with American identity. To facilitate the examination of the interplay of the various material, structural, and ideational influences of various scales, this study divides the decade of interest into periods of approximately eighteen to thirty months that are roughly demarcated by apparent “inflection points” in the “flow” of the troop withdrawal issue.\footnote{Imagine a graph with time on the X axis and “systemic inclination towards withdrawal” on the Y axis. Inflection points occur when the system switched from positive to neutral (early to later Nixon), from neutral to negative (under Ford), negative to positive (early Carter), and positive to negative (mid-late Carter).} I evaluate the influence of credibility and other apparently important factors over time to track the ebb and flow of the various influences and to get a sense of their relative stability or instability within the issue-system. This diachronic analysis includes a fairly traditional comparative analysis of how three presidential administrations addressed the issue of troop withdrawals, and it seeks to identify and/or clarify key decisions, motivations, and their effect. For reasons discussed above, examining the issue across ten years yields insights missed by works focusing on just one administration.

This dissertation draws upon the official documents of the American foreign policy elite—the main locus of the issue—to ascertain how the debate over the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea fit within, drew upon, and contributed to the broader construction of credibility and other significant elements of the Cold War.\footnote{Popular interest became increasingly important to the debate, but it was initially indirect and deferential to the elite policymakers. This study also does not closely examine the potential influence of business interests, even though some American businesses did have an interest in the outcome. Nonetheless, factors other than business interests appear to be more prominent in the candid private and public discourse and debate among the foreign policy elites and among the general public.} It also extends its gaze to the literal front lines of the issue by examining the role that the top U.S. military commanders in Korea and the U.S. Pacific Command played in shaping the debate and promulgating certain concepts of credibility. These commanders—who had direct access to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, members of Congress, and top South Korea ministers—served as one of the primary nodes within and through which the political and military dimensions of the troop withdrawal discourse of U.S. and South Korean
officials encountered each other in a relatively undiluted form.\textsuperscript{47}

Although most elite-focused studies of U.S. foreign relations would not include military field commanders, some important aspects of the troop withdrawal debate suggest special attention be given to the role that senior U.S. military commanders in Korea played in perpetuating and promoting the opposition’s variant of the credibility discourse within the withdrawal debate.\textsuperscript{48} First, although both sides of the withdrawal debate were influenced by the credibility discourse, the contents of official documents suggest that far more senior military officers opposed withdrawal than favored it. The military and civilian officials who opposed withdrawal generally embraced a different formulation of credibility than the civilians who favored withdrawal, and this difference was exaggerated by the Vietnam War. Second, the debate was colored by the high tension along the border between the two Koreas still technically at war, and by the proximity to China and the Soviet Union. The perception of this threat and the military’s role in shaping that threat was an integral part of the debate and the credibility discourse. Third, the U.S. military leaders involved in the troop withdrawal decision were immersed in the Cold War hegemonic discourses. Their role as subject matter experts on military deterrence gave them avenues to reproduce, amplify, and disseminate those discourses outside of the military community. Finally, as I will discuss later, the commanders of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) had uncommonly strong military and diplomatic influence within a bilateral alliance that was heavily skewed in favor of the United States’ position, especially in military matters.

\textsuperscript{47} Although an international history that probed the archives of South Korea and Japan (and China and Russia, if available) would reveal a more complete picture, my interest in how Americans handled this issue justifies an American-centric approach to the archives. I nonetheless remain sensitive to evidence within the American records of foreign influence and perspectives.

\textsuperscript{48} To assess the military leaders’ positions and the potential influence of the USFK commanders on the issue, I examine the official histories of the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) and USFK, Gen. Richard G. Stilwell’s complete record of public and private communications from his time as Commander of USFK, as well as the less complete records of other USFK commanders for evidence of how the USFK and USPACOM commanders viewed the troop withdrawal issue and what actions they took to affect its implementation.
Organization

This dissertation is organized chronologically into seven chapters. Chapter 2 is a theoretical exploration of credibility, reputation, and the NSC-68 mindset. The next four chapters break the ten-year period under consideration into four main focal areas of the evolution of the issue. Chapter 3 (1969-1971) analyzes Nixon’s initial successful push to withdraw nearly 50 percent of the U.S. ground forces from Korea. Chapter 4 (1970-1972) begins with a discussion of the role of the U.S. Forces in Korea, the influence of their commander, and the civil-military issues manifested in the troop withdrawal debate. It then examines how U.S. civilian and military officials grappled with the preexisting Cold War mindset as they debated the merits of Nixon’s withdrawal. In Chapter 5 (1969-1975), I explore how the South Koreans resisted the withdrawals and argue that U.S. officials paid insufficient attention to the intense alliance security dilemma that South Korea was experiencing. Chapter 6 examines the precursor headwinds and tailwinds to candidate Carter’s efforts to reinvigorate the troop withdrawal debate, and his failure as president to overcome the resistance to his withdrawal plan that emanated from Congress, the military, and his own cabinet (1977-1979). Each chapter includes analysis of the perspectives and actions of the administration, foreign governments (South Korea, Japan, China, USSR), Congress, and the USFK commanders. These perspectives are analyzed for their interplay with the Cold War mindset and how various actors assessed the emphasis on credibility and reputation that the mindset tended to create. The seventh and final chapter presents my conclusions.

This research will not and cannot attempt to be the “final word” on the troop withdrawal issue because many personal papers of important administration officials within the collections remain classified and unavailable to researchers. Nonetheless, I contend that recent releases of significant source material allow us to fruitfully exploit the unique and focused lens of troop withdrawal from Korea to add important layers to our understanding of the politics, discourse,

49 Perspectives of these foreign governments will be limited to those reported in the American records.
and civil-military relations of the late Cold War. I hope this early foray into the available material
will illuminate fruitful paths and techniques for additional research.
CHAPTER 2: CREDIBILITY, REPUTATION, and the NSC-68 MINDSET

But there is also a more serious kind of “face,” the kind that in modern jargon is known as a country’s “image,” consisting of other countries’ beliefs . . . about how the country can be expected to behave. It relates not to a country’s “worth” or “status” or even “honor,” but to its reputation for action. If the question is raised whether this kind of “face” is worth fighting over, the answer is that this kind of face is one of the few things worth fighting over.

Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence, 1966

To understand the withdrawal issue and its reflection and mutual construction of the Cold War of the 1970s, one must have a deeper understanding of how the hegemonic beliefs about national credibility and the strategy of containment operated throughout much of the Cold War. Extant scholarship on the importance of credibility and reputations for resolve generally takes one of two forms.50 On the one hand, historians tend to note U.S. policymakers’ fixation on credibility prior to the Vietnam War and its influence on U.S. foreign policy. On the other, political scientists tend to analyze whether such a fixation was warranted given the difficulty in shaping and assessing one’s reputation for resolve. The answer as to why U.S. policymakers focused on a reputation for resolve, however, has received far less formal examination and remains mostly in the realm of speculation.51

This chapter builds upon and refines the widely accepted argument that the apparent lessons of World War II synergistically combined with the prevailing characterization of the early Cold War in such a way that led to an emphasis on credibility in general, and a reputation for resolve in particular. Furthermore, I argue that the key assumptions made in the classified strategy document, NSC-68, form the essence of a NSC-68 mindset that became widely

50 Tang, “Reputation,” 36.
51 For a recent example, see Press, Calculating Credibility, 158.
adopted and perpetuated well into the 1970s.\textsuperscript{52} Whether and how this significant mindset affected an individual’s policy choices depended on other contextual influences and competing discursive elements such as parsimony and noninterventionism. Nonetheless, the mindset’s presence and tug on government officials and the public appear to be clear.

This chapter first explores the theoretical interconnections between credible extended deterrence, non-situational commitments, and a reputation for resolve. It then shows how three key assumptions found in NSC-68 regarding the American characterizations of the Cold War international system and the Soviet enemy prompted the United States to spread its credibility thinly over a vast array of commitments in a way that put extra emphasis on a reputation for resolve and made resolve a pillar upon which much of the strategy of containment stood. This American characterization of the early Cold War forms the essence of the NSC-68 mindset analyzed in ensuing chapters. Finally, it highlights the potential problems the NSC-68 mindset posed by placing a high value on a reputation for resolve, problems that often went unnoticed by those who nonetheless used concern about credibility as a mostly valid argument against the troop withdrawals from South Korea.

**General Deterrence Theory, Credibility, Reputation, and Domino Fears**

Successfully deterring an attack on a country’s own or shared interests depends on the country’s credibility. As briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, a deterring country appears credible when it creates the perception in other countries that it possesses: 1) the capability to carry out its threatened action with reasonable efficacy; 2) sufficient interest to take the threatened action if provoked; and 3) the resolve or fixity of purpose to endure the hardship of carrying out the

\textsuperscript{52} Although the classified document itself may not have had a broad audience, the essence of its key strategic assumptions became deeply embedded in the predominant NSC-68 mindset. This dissertation does not examine how the ideas in NSC-68 became widely adopted or even that NSC-68 was their original or primary source. Nonetheless, it is emblematic of the NSC-68 mindset.
threat.\textsuperscript{53} Despite variations in terms used in the literature, credibility is always described as a function of capability and the willingness to use that capability. Some scholars aggregate the willingness to use the capability in one term such as “intention,” “resolve,” or “will.” Others find it useful to separate the willingness to use force into two (or more) components, typically a situational component of “motivation/interests” and a dispositional (or non-situational) component of “resolve,” defined as the inclination and/or ability of the person or society to tolerate and endure the costs of implementing the threat.\textsuperscript{54} This latter approach allows one to group the two situational components, capability and interest, and isolate the dispositional component, resolve, for additional analysis. In some respects, capability and interest are the “rational” terms in the calculation of credibility familiar to realists, while “resolve” accounts for deviations from a realist’s notion of rational action. Furthermore, the separation of resolve from interests is supported by how the actors in the primary documents spoke and wrote about credibility. They clearly viewed a component of credibility as consisting of a personality trait that was (mostly) independent of interests (i.e., the same interests would manifest different levels of resolve in different people).\textsuperscript{55} This attribution of resolve to a leader or a culture is usually treated as non-situational, that is, a nearly constant personal or cultural attribute that does not change much with changing circumstances.

In contrast, the capability and interest elements of the credibility equation are situational attributes that can vary in place and time. To foreign affairs realists, capability and interest are the most important elements of the credibility equation. Under ideal conditions, they assume rational actors will muster the resolve needed to defend their interests even if their general

\textsuperscript{53} The terms used to define credibility still vary within the literature. This unfortunately confuses discussions of deterrence and credibility. For example, RAND defines credibility as capability and intention whereas Huth defines credibility as capability and resolve (Austin Long, Deterrence, 11; Huth, “Reputations,” 74).

\textsuperscript{54} Mercer, Reputation, 15; Tang, “Cult of Reputation,” 37.

\textsuperscript{55} Although I use the term “interests,” it should not be limited solely to the realists’ narrow definition of material interests but can include things of value not only to the physical survival of a state but also the survival of the state’s valued identity. Thus, this broader concept of interests allows credible threats to be made even in the absence of realist interests.
disposition is timorous. Yet considerable margins of error can occur in calculating relative capability between two vying powers and in calculating the value of a given interest to both the defender and the potential aggressor. Thus, when flawed human leaders are faced with uncertain calculations about the dire choice of going to war, conventional wisdom holds that resolve may be an equally important element of credibility as the leaders struggle with doubts, worries, and fears. The internal disposition to be resolute is far more difficult to measure than the more tangible elements of capability and material interests. It is, therefore, potentially easier to bluff about one’s resolution. Consequently, past actions demonstrating resolve are usually perceived to be better indicators of present resolve than present posturing. In other words, how a state treated deterrence commitments in the past is assumed to create a reputation for resolve that helps predict how it will treat commitments in the future.

Importantly, the mere belief in the importance of reputation, whether accurate or not, encourages a non-situational view of commitments that contributes to “reputational domino fear”—one of the two main types of domino fears. Both the “reputational” and “material” variants of domino fears assume that a failure to defend one state interest increases the risk to other state interests, but for different reasons. A country may fail to keep a commitment due to changes in any one or a combination of the three credibility components (interest, capability, resolve), but reputational domino fears worry that others will most likely attribute the failure to keep a commitment to a change in resolve. Thus, according to reputational domino fear, a failure to keep a commitment to defend interests earns the deterrer a reputation for backing down that: 1) emboldens adversaries to make subsequent challenges; 2) increases the likelihood that allied and friendly countries that view themselves as particularly vulnerable might join the enemy’s “bandwagon” rather than be conquered outright; and/or 3) boosts the resolve

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56 See, for example: Press, Calculating Credibility, 1-6; Mercer, Reputation, 2-5.
and appeal of subversive elements within friendly countries.57

In contrast, material domino fear argues that any enemy gains can feed more gains by adding to the enemy’s material capability to conquer other nearby states (e.g., Nazi-style seizure of new industrial zones or oil facilities). Thus, material domino beliefs primarily express fear of giving a particular enemy more material resources to conduct subsequent attacks while reputational domino beliefs express fear of giving various adversaries more confidence to conduct subsequent attacks. Material domino fear assumes that interests are interdependent regardless of whether a commitment has been made to them. Reputational domino fear, however, assumes that commitments are interdependent because it fears that adversaries and allies will attribute a failure to keep a commitment to a change in resolve rather than a change in the assessment of the interest at stake. Additionally, material domino beliefs primarily fear the costs of subsequent conquest and shift in the balance of power whereas reputational domino beliefs can fear either the costs of subsequent conquest or the added cost and risk of being forced to escalate in defense of subsequent interests when deterrence has been weakened by reputation regardless of its effect on the balance of power.58

NSC-68’s Characterizations of the Cold War Exacerbated Domino Fears

Although material domino fears and reputational domino fears can be flawed in important ways, they are not completely inaccurate and have been present in the debates of national leaders since at least the time of Thucydides.59 Nonetheless, domino fears are most closely

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57 “Bandwagoning” and “balancing” are two theoretical responses to an aggressive enemy. Countries feeling particularly vulnerable may join the enemy’s “bandwagon” but the trend in the scholarship is that it is more common that threatened countries will unite to oppose or “balance” the aggressive country.

58 Jervis notes a distinction between material and “psychological” domino mechanisms. (Robert Jervis, “Domino Beliefs and Strategic Behavior” in Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland, eds. Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 31-33. It is a useful distinction because it distinguishes between the interdependence of interests and the interdependence of commitments, two closely related concepts that policymakers (and sometimes scholars) seem to conflate.

59 Thucydides wrote that Pericles argued that demonstrating resolve to fight over trivial concerns was important because it created a reputation: “Let none of you think that we should be going to war for a trifle if we refused to revoke the Megarian decree. For you this trifle is both the assurance and the proof of your determination. If you give
associated with the Cold War, probably because of the confluence of apparent lessons emerging from World War II and the unique circumstances of the Cold War. Indeed, Americans drew upon the apparent lessons of World War II to validate both material and reputational domino fears in the subsequent Cold War even before a predominant characterization of the Soviet enemy gained traction and amplified the perceived interdependence of commitments. First, much of the postwar world seemed fragile and unstable. U.S. policymakers feared that countries weakened by the war could easily fall to external aggressive powers, especially the Soviet Union and mainland China, or to internal subversive efforts of the communist movement. Dominos seemed ready to topple if the Soviet enemy was given more material (or in the case of subversion, psychological) advantage and momentum through the conquest of some territory. Second, the belief that the British appeasement of Hitler fed his inclination for conquest by projecting weakness. This “Munich analogy” was such a powerful and hegemonic variant of the reputational domino fear that even today the “appeaser” label is a slanderous allegation.

Third, U.S. civilian and military leaders became convinced that they needed to adopt a more internationalist, forward-postured policy to prevent future wars that, in effect, put more potentially interdependent “dominoes” under U.S. influence. U.S. leaders generally believed “the United States needed to use its power actively . . . to bring about the kind of world most conducive to the preservation of American security and to the protection of the nation’s domestic institutions and core values.” Therefore, it needed to be “far more directly engaged in

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60 The political scientist Douglas MacDonald provided a good analysis of how various events helped domino fears and the extensive containment strategy they inspired become the hegemonic view in the U.S. government. His account of the rise of domino beliefs in the early Cold War, however, ignored what I call reputational domino fears. Furthermore, he failed to present a pre-Cold War source of U.S. domino thinking other than the Munich analogy (Douglas J. MacDonald, “The Truman Administration and Global Responsibilities: The Birth of the Falling Domino Principle” in Jervis, Robert and Jack Snyder (ed.), Dominoes and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991)).
the affairs” of regions around the world “than ever before.” Although the antecedents for this internationalism can be found in Woodrow Wilson’s vision, the Cold War presented a threat and a structure that made internationalism a much greater imperative—and the accompanying fear of falling dominoes much keener—than one might expect to evolve out of Wilson’s legacy in the absence of the Cold War.

The American characterization of the Soviet threat in the Truman Doctrine and the pivotal U.S. strategy document, NSC-68, drew upon the domino fears embedded in the rubble of World War II and amplified them. In particular, NSC-68 contained three main and interrelated characterizations of the budding Cold War that amplified domino fears and all but compelled the authors and adherents of NSC-68 to strain all three constituent components of U.S. credibility by adopting an overextended deterrence posture and to emphasize the “psychological” interest of maintaining a reputation for resolve.

The first characterization perceived the nature of the Soviet Union as an aggressive power that would seek to topple vulnerable dominoes wherever it found them and whose expansionism was fueled not only by paranoid realist concerns but also by a “fanatic faith” that compelled them to attempt “to impose [their] absolute authority over the rest of the world.” This characterization is critical to triggering domino fears because no dominoes are at risk without an expansionist threat. The fact that Sovietologists George Kennan and Chip Bohlen both thought NSC-68 “overemphasized Soviet ambitions for expansion” suggests an important and

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61 McMahon, Limits of Empire, 218. Or as Hogan put it, to "expand “American power into every nook and cranny of the world.” (Hogan, Cross of Iron, 2).


63 The eventual acceptance of NSC-68’s extensive containment strategy over George F. Kennan’s more selective containment strategy was far from preordained and was resisted early on.

fundamental error, because the more aggressive and expansionist the enemy, the more
important propping up dominoes appears to be for both material and reputational factors. With the belief freshly seared in American brains that the appeasement of a similarly aggressive
Hitler had exacerbated the war, this one assumption powerfully invoked preexisting domino
fears that the other assumptions augmented. Additionally, Soviet expansionism seemed to be
greatly aided by the Soviets’ “preferred technique” of subversion “by infiltration and intimidation.”
This put all states in the “free world” at risk, not just proximal states that could be easily reached
by Soviet conventional forces, and this threat could not be countered by U.S. military force
alone. This characterization of the Soviet enemy, when combined with the perceived
instability of the postwar world, seemed to increase the number of dominoes at risk and the
likelihood that they could fall.

Second, the bipolar and perceived zero-sum nature of the Cold War amplified material
domino fears by exaggerating the perceived benefit of propping up interconnected interests. In
a zero-sum game, it is mathematically rational to expend more than the face value of an asset
to defend it because one retains it for oneself rather than ceding it to the enemy. The bipolar
construction of the Cold War also raised the value of defending any one asset by assuming all


http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf#zoom=100 (accessed
October 5, 2011), 3. Although policymakers were initially concerned about a “perimeter” (rather than strong point or
truly global) containment strategy (see MacDonald, The Falling Domino Principle, 119-120), the theoretical global
threat was clearly expressed early on in NSC-68 and seemed confirmed later in Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Central
America, and Angola. Michael Hogan found that “[c]onservative Republicans . . . were usually more concerned with
Communist subversion than with Soviet aggression.” (Hogan, Cross of Iron, 7).

67 The mathematics of this is a bit complicated but it can be illustrated in a simplified version in which power is
represented by a single variable—wealth. If each side has $1000, the power ratio is 1:1—neither side has an
advantage. If, however, the United States allowed the Soviets to take $100 without a fight, then the ratio becomes
$1100 to $900 or 1.22:1. Faced with an aggressive enemy, the United States should be willing to expend resources
to generate a 1.21:1 ratio or less because even though the ratio becomes less favorable to the United States, it is still
more favorable than doing nothing and ceding the asset (provided the expenditures result in success or at least
sufficient compensatory cost to the Soviets). Therefore, in this highly simplified scenario, the U.S. could justify
expending up to $174 to retain a $100 asset, because it would yield a ratio of $1000:$826 or 1:21. The cost a nation
should be willing to incur to defend any given asset (X) can be expressed as: Cdx = Pd – ((Pa^2 + PaX)/(Pd – X)),
where Cdx is the cost to defend asset X, Pd is the power of the defender, and Pa is the power of the aggressor.
the Western assets were potentially part of one interdependent domino chain; by paying to
defend one, you were potentially paying to help defend all. Furthermore, how much extra
should be expended depends strongly on the probability that each successive domino will fall;
the more one believes that dominoes are likely to fall, the more one should be willing to spend
to defend the first domino because the cost of defending or reversing the fall of subsequent
dominoes would likely be even greater.

Similarly, according to the logic of domino reasoning within a bipolar structure, anything
that appeared to tilt the bipolar struggle in the Soviet Union’s favor increased the perceived
value of preventing a preliminary domino from falling. Thus, a nation should be willing to expend
even more to defend a given asset if the ratio of the balance of power is already tilted against a
nation than if the ratio was even. An early example of this perceived tilt can be found in NCS-
68’s assumption that any territory lost to the communists would remain lost for the duration of
the Cold War, while in contrast free world territories remained constantly under the threat of
subversion or conquest. It argued that, unlike “freedom and democracy” which are “always in
the process of being attained . . . defeat at the hands of the totalitarian is total defeat.”

Finally, bipolarity seemed to increase the likelihood of a domino sequence of falls because
once dominoes started falling the United States could not expect to assemble a “firebreak” of
other great powers to balance the Soviet aggression, as had been the case under previous
multipolar arrangements. In a multi-polar system, regional dominos might fall to an aggressive
enemy (like East Asian territories fell to imperial Japan), but other great powers could be
expected to rally together eventually to halt additional advances by balancing the growing might
of the aggressive power. In contrast, a bipolar structure consisting of a democratic and
totalitarian power did not favor balancing—the world was already seemingly divided into two
static camps, and the ones already in the totalitarian camp were assumed not to be free to

68 The mathematics of this is even more complicated than the previous example and is not illustrated here.
69 NSC-68, 34.
switch sides to balance Soviet aggression. In the early Cold War, the rigid bipolar construction of the Cold War between the “free world” and a seemingly unified communist bloc seemed valid, but even when it was objectively clear that the rigid bipolarity was breaking down in the 1960s, American elites and non-elites were slow to update the strategies (which had become akin to ideologies) that had been based on the “bloc” assumption.

The third important NSC-68 characterization was that the United States would have difficulty deterring “piecemeal” conventional or subversive attacks by the Soviet Union because, in isolation, they would seem insufficiently important to motivate the national will to counter with force and risk escalating to nuclear war. Yet the interdependence clause of domino theories asserted that failing to counter such “salami tactics” (i.e., taking small, tolerable “slices” until one has the whole thing) could trigger and aid subsequent attacks. Consequently, the authors of NSC-68 feared that Soviet nuclear weapons could provide cover for a potential cascade of smaller-scale attacks because weighing the risk of escalating closer to nuclear war over such small, indirect, and/or unconventional threats might “immobilize” American decision makers until it was too late for them to offer effective assistance to the falling dominoes.⁷⁰ Thus, as was long recognized by deterrence theorists and their critics, nuclear weapons paradoxically increased U.S. military capability but simultaneously seemed to reduce the resolve to run the risk of using that U.S. military capability.⁷¹

NSC-68’s three main characterizations fit nearly perfectly into the worst case scenario imaginable in domino theory: an expansionist power triggered domino fears and enhanced them the more aggressive it was; the zero-sum, bipolar nature of the Cold War raised the risk of allowing any one domino to fall; and deterring attack on seemingly minor initial dominoes was hampered by the risk of escalating to nuclear war. Together the central NSC-68

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⁷⁰ NSC-68, 35.

⁷¹ Additionally, as more and more dominoes fell, the possibility of intentional or uncontrolled escalation to nuclear war would increase. Therefore, the credibility of deterrence took on even greater importance.
characterizations formed a dire picture and so exacerbated domino fears that the authors concluded that “any substantial further extension of the area under the domination of the Kremlin would raise the possibility that no coalition adequate to confront the Kremlin with greater strength could be assembled.” In other words, the United States ran serious risks if it allowed any preliminary domino to fall. Consequently, the NSC-68 authors argued that the potential inability of the United States to muster the resolve to respond to Soviet piecemeal aggression posed “the greatest risk of all”—“a descending spiral of too little and too late” that would leave the United States “with ever narrower and more desperate alternatives.”\(^2\) NSC-68’s three main and interrelated assumptions about the postwar international system and the Soviet enemy depicted a fragile balance of power that an aggressive Soviet Union was poised to tilt in its favor. As a result, the United States reluctantly adopted an extensive deterrence posture that strained its credibility and emphasized the “psychological” interest of maintaining a reputation for resolve.

**Domino Fears, the Cold War Mindset, and the Perceived Importance of Resolve**

As John Lewis Gaddis has concluded, NSC-68’s “implications were startling.” The domino fears it expressed enhanced the apparent interconnectedness of interests and presented U.S. policymakers with seemingly little choice but to reject a selective containment strategy and instead adopt an extensive and hegemonic “shepherding” containment strategy that required the United States both to defend the free world from attack and to convince free world nations to remain within the fold. Consequently, the logic of NSC-68 “vastly [increased] the number and variety of interests deemed relevant to national security, and [blurred] distinctions” between vital and peripheral interests.\(^3\) The perceived need to deter attack of far-flung minor interests (due to

\(^2\) NSC-68, 35, my emphasis.

\(^3\) Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 90, 96. Gaddis observed that although NSC-68 “paid obeisance” to traditional realist notions of the balance of power, “it found the simple presence of a Soviet threat sufficient cause to deem the interest threatened vital.”
material domino fears) and to stand firm if such minor interests were challenged (due to reputational domino fears) required the United States to exert hegemonic influence over so much of the non-communist world and spread its capability so thin that allies and adversaries alike were inclined to question all three components of the credibility of U.S. protective deterrence.\textsuperscript{74} It many ways, it was similar to what the British experienced in managing their empire, as a veteran official of the British empire observed regarding devoting troops to the Irish rebellion during WWI: “If you tell your empire in India, in Egypt and all over the world that you have not got the men, the money, the pluck, the inclination, and the backing to restore order in a country within twenty miles of your own shore, you may as well begin to abandon the attempt to make British rule prevail throughout the empire at all.”\textsuperscript{75} In essence, the process of spreading capability thin over far-flung interests created a credibility dilemma for the United States that was similar to ones faced by formal empires before it, and left resolve carrying more than its fair share of the deterrence burden.

All three perceptions of credibility are important, but under conditions of deterring attack on one’s own territory, capability is considered most important because it is generally assumed that one’s interest and resolve to defend one’s own territory is rarely doubted. The relationship between the three components can be suggested mathematically as: \( \text{credibility} \approx \text{capability} \ast (\text{interest} + (\text{resolve} / y)) \), such that resolve is usually some fraction of the importance of interest and that a substantial decline in capability will decrease credibility more than a proportional

\textsuperscript{74} I agree with Lairson that the Cold War is best viewed as a U.S.-led hegemonic structure rather than focusing on the bi-polarity of the conflict. His disagreement with Gaddis over this point, however, seems unnecessarily exaggerated. (Thomas D. Lairson, “Revising Postrevisionism: Credibility and Hegemony in the Early Cold War” in Rethinking the Cold War, ed. Allen Hunter (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1998), 63-67). It can be resolved by acknowledging, as do Volgy and Imwalle, that the Cold War structure exhibited simultaneously elements of hegemony and bi-polarity, with the bi-polarity being primarily along the axis of military power. (Thomas J. Volgy, and Lawrence E. Imwalle, “Hegemonic and Bipolar Perspectives on the New World Order,” American Journal of Political Science. 39:4 (November 1995): 819-34.)

\textsuperscript{75} Jervis and Snyder, Dominoes and Bandwagons, 27. Note that this official refers to all three components of credibility: capability (men and money), interest (inclination), and resolve (pluck and backing).
decline in either interest or revolve. The perception of capability is most important because without it, the threat is empty. The second part of my equation suggests that a high level of interest can overcome a tendency toward temerity. Resolve, however, needs to be exceptionally high to overcome a substantial deficiency in interest. Such a stance would be irrational by realist standards but still credible. This point will be discussed later in this chapter.

In contrast to deterring attack on one’s homeland, all three components of credibility are subjected to greater doubt when a power like the United States extends deterrence to allies beyond national borders. First, observers might question the state’s capability to project power abroad, especially if the hegemon appears to be overextended. Secondly, adversaries and allies who question the domino fears that prompted the (over)extended deterrence in the first place might question the strength of the interconnectedness (and thus the value) of interests that, in the absence of strong domino fears, would seem too minor to risk much in their defense. Finally, those who doubt the strength of domino fears may also doubt the resolve of the hegemon to bear hardship of war and to shed its citizens’ blood on behalf of foreigners in a distant land who, in the case of the United States, often seemed even more “exotic” than the racial and ethnic minorities who struggled for fair treatment within its own borders.

76 The “formula” for credibility is far from settled. Nonetheless, I think this is intuitively more accurate and fits the empirical evidence better than Tang’s: credibility = capability * interest * resolve (See Tang, “Cult of Reputation,” 36-38). This approximate definition of credibility, however, still might not be quite right. It appears that capability itself can also be a function of resolve and motivation. It clearly is a function of material and manpower resources that are devoted to the military and the skill in their use, but supplying that material and manpower is an opportunity cost that reflects resolve and motivation to bear that cost. As generating capability becomes more onerous, capability and resolve become ever more entwined. Thus, the importance of resolve may be even greater than indicated by this equation.

77 If commitments grow faster than capability, deterrence weakens as more burden falls on demonstrating interest and resolve. If observers think the protection of minor interests is a gamble to aggrandize more power rather than a perceived unpalatable necessity to avert a loss of power, then observers can question the deterrer’s cost-benefit motivation to maintain control over those incremental units of power. The only element that should not be affected by overextension is the internal disposition of resolve.

78 Schelling clearly notes the importance of the identity question (Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence. 2008 ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 56-57). Rather than seek to develop a common identity, he proposes structural solutions. Mary Dudziak showed that “[a]s presidents and secretaries of state from 1946 to the mid-1960s worried about the impact of race discrimination on U.S. prestige abroad, civil rights reform came to be seen as crucial to U.S. foreign relations” (Mary Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 6). Extensive literature on Cold War cultural diplomacy shows efforts to get foreigners to view Americans favorably (e.g., Akira Iriye, “Culture and International History,” in Explaining the
In the absence of domino fears, a hegemonic power normally would be expected to have the interest to extend deterrence only to territories that provided benefits clearly outweighing the costs of doing so. Yet, if a state finds itself stuck with an empire or hegemony that it feels bound to maintain by strong domino fears regardless of changing situations, then that state, by definition, views its commitments as non-situational and can be expected to put a strong emphasis on a reputation for resolve.\(^79\) Such appeared to be the case with adherents of the NSC-68 mindset.

American material domino fears were so exacerbated by the assumptions about the Cold War structure and the communist enemy that they created a cost-benefit calculation that made backing away from a challenge seem too costly to be contemplated under most circumstances. According to NSC-68, the United States faced the dire plight of either providing hegemonic order for a “shrinking world” on its own terms or letting the Kremlin “impose order among nations by means which would destroy [the United States’] free and democratic system.”\(^80\) Thus, exaggerated U.S. fears seemed to force a de facto non-situational view of commitments.\(^81\) The United States simply could not afford not to make and defend a vast array of commitments.

\(^79\) An empire or hegemon might be stuck protecting more than it should due to miscalculation, atrophied vested interests and structures, ideology, national identity, or similar factors. Hopf compiled references to concerns about credibility expressed by empires of various sizes including ancient Greeks, Machiavelli, the Hapsburgs, and 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century Germans and British (Ted Hopf, *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2-3).

\(^80\) NSC-68, 5.

\(^81\) Theoretically, material domino fears do not generate a non-situational view of commitments. Instead, belief in interdependence skews the cost-benefit calculation and increases the apparent value of maintaining commitments. If few scenarios exist under which the cost-benefit calculation justifies not keeping a commitment, material domino fears can create a de facto non-situational view of commitments. Prevailing deterrence theory argued that observer beliefs about U.S. motivation were important. Thus, the United States must defend the interests to which it had made explicit commitments and the territories to which it had implicit commitments or even those to which the enemy thought the United States should be committed or else it risked triggering a reputational domino effect (Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 52-53).
Under this construct, however, a policy of extended deterrence that promised to run serious risks in the defense of relatively minor interests would seem irrational by realist standards. Yet, because domino assumptions caused minor interests to become interconnected with more serious interests, domino beliefs helped extensive containment appear rational to many American policymakers because the collective benefit of preserving interconnected “dominoes” was far greater than the benefit of defending many of the individual minor “domino” countries if the interconnection was shown to be absent or much weaker. In essence, adherence to domino beliefs made the illogical become logical. The strength of the interest component of credibility was thus dependent on the strength of the Americans’ belief that protected dominoes were indeed interdependent. Furthermore, it was important that allies and adversaries perceived the American domino belief accurately despite the more common inclination for minor powers to be viewed as correspondingly minor interests. Thus, strong domino fears created a dilemma for the United States by forcing it to adopt a vast containment “empire of deterrence” while also requiring it to convince enemies and allies that its potentially irrational and incredibly strong domino fears made promised defense of seemingly minor interests rational and credible. The logic of NSC-68 thus prompted a “major departure” from viewing “the nature of effective power” as “industrial-military” to being “psychological” such that “intimidation, humiliation, or even loss of credibility” could change “the balance of power.”82 It was the job of the deterrence theorists to figure out how to convince enemies and allies alike that U.S. leaders believed in the domino theory strongly enough not only to make extensive threats and commitments but also to keep them.

Deterrence theorists accepted and in some cases contributed to the assumption that the nature of the Cold War forced the United States to extend protection to significant expanses of

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82 Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 89-90. Although Gaddis’s critique is generally accurate, it is probably more precise to say NSC-68 reflected the perceived fragility of the Cold War balance of power, such that psychological factors could potentially trigger a cascading loss of traditional elements of power.
overseas territory. They saw no choice but to minimize the credibility dilemma this overextension created. Unable to do much about the overseas capability component of U.S. credibility, deterrence theorists like Noble Prize winner Thomas Schelling worked on reducing doubts about U.S. interest and resolve. Schelling argued that the United States could reduce doubts about these components of its overseas deterrence by backing up its words with true “commitments” and by “surrendering and destroying options” to back down in a crisis. Thus, by leaving the United States no apparent option but to fight, it should not matter if the adversary thought it might otherwise lack a rational interest or the resolve to fight.

Schelling reasoned that the United States could adopt this ancient strategy of “burning the bridge behind you” most effectively by putting American lives on the line by stationing U.S. troops abroad to serve as a “trip wire” that would presumably force the United States to retaliate. Where stationing troops overseas was impractical or not agreeable to potential host nations, the next best things were formal treaties and resolutions that got “a nation’s honor, obligation, and diplomatic reputation committed to a response.” Thus, powerful rhetorical and verbal assurances that linked national honor to resolve were thought to help, such as the promise President John F. Kennedy made in his inaugural address “that we shall pay any price,

83 Although Schelling accepted the need for extensive overseas deterrence, he did not specify how much of the free world the United States must commit to protecting. (Schelling, Arms and Influence, 124) Nonetheless, his deterrence theory supported the idea that the U.S. must maintain and extensive containment/deterrence. Schelling argued that the U.S. must defend not only the interests to which it had made explicit commitments but it must also defend territories to which it had implicit commitments or even those the enemy thought the U.S. should be committed to it (Ibid., 52-53). Failure to do so would encourage the Soviets to be more aggressive in the future and thereby risk triggering domino effects or broader war.

84 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 36. As Schelling put it, he sought to increase the credibility of “the threats … that are not inherently so credible that they can be taken for granted.”

85 Ibid., 44.

86 A more risky tactic more often associated with nuclear deterrence was to deliberately increase the risk of “accidental” nuclear war by going up the “escalation ladder” or “to the brink” using strategies similar to those used in the vehicular test of nerves called “chicken.”

87 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 44-55. Schelling won the Nobel Prize in 2005 for his work on game theory and deterrence. As an ancient strategy, the “burning bridges” logic applied to non-nuclear scenarios as well. It worked in any situation in which the aggressor had to contemplate the serious losses in would likely incur by combating an opponent who had no alternative but to fight. Nuclear weapons just made the contemplated losses all the greater.
bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” Nonetheless, the question remained as to what evidence allies and adversaries had in the absence of tangible troops with a “burned bridge” behind them that the United States would stay true to these written and oral assurances. This was the essence of reputational domino fears. For many, the answer seemed to lie in establishing and maintaining a reputation for resolve and for treating commitments to allies as non-situational. As would be argued during the debates over troop withdrawal from Korea, the logic of the cascading Cold War assumptions recommended costly demonstrations of resolve to prevent potentially costlier conflicts in the future.

As already suggested, unconditional commitments made to minor interests would seem irrational to enemies and allies who embraced traditional realist thinking. But as deterrence theorists recognized, deterrence need not be rational to be effective. Trip wires, such as the U.S. troops stationed along the Korean DMZ, could make U.S. deterrence effective in two main ways whether others viewed them as rational or not. First, costly U.S. trip wire commitments provided tangible evidence that the United States actually believed the domino theory that drove its extensive commitments by communicating that sincere U.S. domino beliefs linked minor interests to more important interests. Trip wires thereby provided a logical motivation for the United States to defend interests the enemy might otherwise deem too trivial to be defended credibly. Second, even if the enemy still failed to recognize sincere U.S. belief in the domino theory and thus doubted U.S. interest-based motivation to protect a seemingly minor interest, the automatic consequences of trip wires were designed to make it appear the United States had little choice but to fight, and thereby anchored U.S. credibility on its apparent resolve, if

89 See, for example, Schelling, Arms and Influence, 36-37.
nothing else.\textsuperscript{90} Thus, even if the enemy thought U.S. defense of minor interests was irrational, U.S. deterrence could still hold if the enemy did not doubt U.S. \textit{resolve} to behave irrationally.

Once the United States anchored its extended deterrence on demonstrations of resolve, it would need to meet any failure of deterrence with military action lest other dominoes with questionable U.S. support became the next to be seriously contested in the future.\textsuperscript{91} Schelling himself employed this “past actions” assumption of domino reasoning when he argued that the United States could not “afford to let the Soviets or Communist Chinese learn by experience that they can grab large chunks of the earth and its population without a genuine risk of violent Western reaction.”\textsuperscript{92} Preserving one’s “reputation for action” was therefore “one of the few things worth fighting over.” He added, “we lost thirty thousand dead in Korea to save face for the United States and the United Nations, not to save South Korea for the South Koreans, and it was undoubtedly worth it.”\textsuperscript{93}

Significantly, NSC-68’s characterizations of the Cold War also made it important for the United States not only to deter attacks from adversaries with credible threats but also to guard against defection by making credible commitments.\textsuperscript{94} Thus, the U.S. inclination to view the Western and Free World states as “fragile and uncertain allies, with tendencies to appease . . . made U.S. leadership key to meeting aggression even in seemingly distant and unimportant

\textsuperscript{90} Recall from NSC-68 that although nuclear weapons provided an umbrella deterrent for major interests in Europe and Japan, they seemed to encourage piecemeal attacks on minor interests. Furthermore, “motivation” seemed to become less of an unknown/variable factor as the Cold War became constructed into an existential struggle between the “free” countries of the West and the communist bloc—U.S. leaders appeared to assume that the Soviets perceived that the United States had interest/motivation to defend most if not all free world territory. If this assumption had been accurate, it would have eliminated a significant logical flaw of domino theory.

\textsuperscript{91} Again, the “logic” was that deterrence failed because the enemy thought the United States had insufficient motivation and/or resolve. Fighting should reestablish the perception of U.S. motivation and/or resolve (the enemy and other observers would decide which factor they would credit more).

\textsuperscript{92} Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, 51. Schelling used this point to make the case for implicit commitments. When faced with actions that threaten to significantly shift the balance of power, “we may be virtually as committed as if we had a mutual assistance treaty.”

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 124. Schelling defined “face” as “merely the interdependence of a country’s commitments; it is a country’s reputation for action, the expectations other countries have about its behavior.”

\textsuperscript{94} See, for example, Craig and Logevall, \textit{America’s Cold War}, 111; Jervis, “Domino Beliefs,” 32-33.
places." NSC-68 argued, therefore, that the United States needed to “organize and enlist the
energies and resources of the free world in a positive program for peace which” would prevent
the subversive expansion of communism by “win[ning] and hold[ing] the necessary popular
support and cooperation in the United States and the rest of the free world.” Furthermore, in
May 1967, Secretary of State Dean Rusk argued that the “integrity of … [our] alliances is at the
heart of the maintenance of peace, and if it should be discovered that the pledge of the United
States is meaningless, the structure of peace would crumble and we would be well on our way
to a terrible catastrophe.” As will be examined in Chapter 5, astute allies could easily
encourage and exploit a belief that the subversive threat or the aggressiveness of Soviet
designs required the United States to be more attentive to their needs and to make firmer
commitments, which could push the United States toward a more non-situational view of all of
its commitments.

Indeed, the specific characterizations of the early Cold War created significant pressure to
embrace material and reputational domino fears that, in turn, prompted leaders to value the
reputation for resolve and to view commitments as non-situational even though commitments to
allies had a long tradition of being viewed by allies and enemies alike as situational. Weinstein
was careful to note that both “the situational concept of commitment” and the “non-situational
concept” typically “coexist uneasily but persistently” in most governments, but added that
“[n]evertheless,” governments “will often reveal a clear predisposition toward one of the two

95 Jennifer L. Milliken, “Intervention and Identity: Reconstructing the West in Korea” in Jutta Weldes et al., eds.,
Cultures of Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota
Press, 1999), 114.
96 NSC-68, 64.
97 Johnson, Improbable Dangers, 157.
98 George and Smoke observed that the U.S. impression of the Cold War encouraged U.S. officials “to homogenize
rather than differentiate[e] the commitments made to various countries” (Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke
concepts." George and Smoke criticized the non-situational and binary view of commitments that they found prevalent in the U.S. government and other deterrence theories in the 1960s. They observed that “[a]lmost all theoretical treatments of deterrence have presumed that a commitment by the United States to protect some smaller power is an “either-or” thing . . . But in fact, with the possible exception of the American commitment to NATO, no U.S. commitment is absolute. Rather, commitments explicitly or implicitly are given to protect a nation against some threats, under some circumstances, for some time.”

This view of commitments, however, was in the minority during much of the Cold War.

Cultural Factors Reinforced Cold War Conclusions about Resolve

Despite George and Smoke’s critique, when doubts arose during the Cold War regarding the importance of reputation and keeping commitments, long-standing American cultural values could be consciously or unconsciously mobilized to support the fixation on reputation and binding commitments. NSC-68 itself infused the early character of the Cold War with a cultural element. It argued that the Soviets sought to target the institutions “that touch[ed] most closely [U.S.] material and moral strength” and to use America’s “principles and scruples” against it. Furthermore, the Kremlin would seek every opportunity to insult, inflict “indignity,” and “cast dishonor on” the United States and its “system,” “motives,” or “methods.” Consequently, keeping one’s commitment not only likely resonated with the deep-seated moral component of American exceptionalism but also served as a moral shield against the Soviets, and thereby further encouraged citizens and policymakers to view commitments as binding and non-

99 Weinstein, “The Concept of a Commitment,” 42. Jervis observed that in America “State Department officials or area experts” tend to take a situational view while those “in the White House or outside foreign policy generalists” tend to take a non-situational view (Jervis, “Domino Beliefs,” 26).

100 George and Smoke, Deterrence, 80, my emphasis. See also 554-555.

101 NSC-68, 3-4.
situational. Hogan adds that the formation of American identity in opposition to an untrustworthy Soviet other led to a narrative that “American leaders kept their promises and honored their agreements.” Furthermore, identity and ideology might have made commitments seem non-situational as territories became linked to the national identity or as culturally embedded distaste for “commies” prompted citizens to vow not to cede an inch of free world territory regardless of cost or adverse changes in the situation. With U.S. politicians responding to the views of the populace, domestic pressure could raise these views to the policy level and/or improve the lot of the policymakers who embraced them.

Secondly, although the domino fears strained all three components of credibility and seemed to emanate from presumably rational threat assessments, they also interacted with less “rational” cultural values to amplify the emphasis on the third component of credibility: resolve. Indeed, when foreign policy practitioners discussed resolve, it served as a kind of “catch all” for the various “irrational” elements that affect the credibility equation such as personal beliefs and psychology, and cultural values and tendencies. Furthermore, when officials disagreed on deterrence matters, they often committed the fundamental attribution error by assuming that the other side’s position was caused by an illogical and negative personal attribute, such as being “dovish” or “hawkish.” Thus, for example, opponents to reducing the commitment to South Korea often attributed a personal or cultural irresolution to withdrawal supporters rather than consider that they might hold an alternative rational valuation of interests.

102 For the morality factor, see Weinstein, “The Concept of Commitment,” 47.
103 Hogan, Cross of Iron, 17.
104 Ibid., 47-48.
105 Weinstein, “The Concept of a Commitment,” 47-48. Weinstein noted, “[a] leadership dependent on popular support is likely to avoid admitting having made an error when it undertook the obligation. It commonly will respond to evidence of a commitment’s disutility by seeking to expand it and to devise new justifications for it, rather than by abandoning it.” He also cited bureaucratic inertia and/or vested interest a source of the non-situational view, but it would be more accurate to say that they do not inherently generate the claim that commitments are non-situational even though inertia can create the same effect and/or the bureaucracies could use existing non-situational arguments to protect their own parochial interests.
Such attributions of irresolution were clearly a negative aspersion because, in the existing cultural milieu, irresolution was unmanly. Consequently, strong cultural views about the relationship of masculinity and resolve reinforced the importance of appearing resolute because unmanly irresolution reflected poorly on the individual and seemed wholly unsuited to combating a communist enemy that “only” understood “strength.”\textsuperscript{106} Indeed, NSC-68 emphasized the importance of exhibiting strength and resolve to the Soviets who sought “to demonstrate to the free world that force and the will to use it are on the side of the Kremlin, and those who lack it are decadent and doomed.” It was therefore “clear” given the United States’ “present weakness,” that the “only deterrent” it could “present to the Kremlin” was evidence of its resolve to “make any of the critical points” it could not “hold the occasion for a global war of annihilation.”\textsuperscript{107}

The characteristics associated with resolve or fixity of purpose in the face of hardship all have strong masculine associations: strength (vs. weakness), courage (vs. cowardice), conviction (vs. vacillation), a willingness to fight (vs. pacifism), toughness and tolerance of pain and adversity (vs. being soft), risk tolerance (vs. temerity), etc. Given that the aggregate U.S. national resolve is difficult to disentangle from the personal resolve of the American president and his key administrators, it was arguably in the national interest to convince other countries that U.S. leaders were personally highly resolute.\textsuperscript{108} As President Lyndon Johnson explained in terms of the Vietnam War, if he “would be seen as a coward and [his] nation would be seen as an appeaser,” then he and his country “would both find it impossible to accomplish anything for anybody anywhere on the entire globe.”\textsuperscript{109} Additionally, given prevailing domestic views of

\textsuperscript{106} NSC-68, 4.

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{108} For example, theorists and American leaders believed they needed to demonstrate “their willingness … to unleash,” if necessary, the power of nuclear weapons despite the massive and indiscriminate destruction such an act would entail. As Schell critically, and only with mild exaggeration, observed, “According to the doctrine of credibility, the President himself was the universal link: he bound all parts of the world together, for wherever he involved himself he placed the credibility of the United States at stake.” Jonathan Schell, \textit{The Time of Illusion} (Vintage, 1976), 345, 384.

\textsuperscript{109} McMahon, \textit{Limits of Empire}, 115.
masculinity, it was also in the leader’s *personal* interest to demonstrate that his resolve reflected his masculinity.\footnote{See, for example, Jervis, “Domino Beliefs,” 37.} Even Robert McMahon, who tends toward a realist’s emphasis on *aussenpolitik*, argued in *The Limits of Empire* that “each of Truman’s successors worried, in their own distinctive fashion, about the permanent political scars likely to be left on any president found guilty of surrendering another piece of real estate to the communists.”\footnote{McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 219-220. McMahon, however, does not link this explicitly to cultural expectations of masculinity. He accurately puts the primary blame for exaggerated American emphasis on credibility on American perceptions of the Soviet threat rather than culturally rooted domestic pressure. See also, Johnson, *Improbable Dangers*, 143.}

Frederik Logeval and Robert Dean delved deeper into American culture than McMahon to argue that not only were Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson concerned with domestic opinion but that their concerns were rooted in their own and the public’s perceptions of their masculinity.\footnote{In contrast to Logevall, Dean found that many advisors within the Johnson administration, not just Johnson, infused their arguments for escalation with masculine notions of credibility.} In an argument that resonates with Kristin Hoganson’s claim that masculine ideals played a significant role in provoking the Spanish-American War, Dean states, “the Kennedy administration politically exploited widespread elite fears of creeping ‘luxury’ and ‘softness’ among American men, seen as debilitating weakness in the grim national struggle with global communism.” Drawing inferences from his evidence, Dean concludes that “on the rare occasion when arguments against further expenditure of blood and treasure were broached,” prevailing masculine reasoning placed those arguments “outside the realm of legitimate consideration.”\footnote{Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 198, 234-240, 202. See also Kristin Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).} Although Logevall and Dean overstate their case at various points in their books by not giving structural factors the emphasis they warrant,\footnote{For example, it is hard to agree with Logevall’s conclusion that the majority of the responsibility for the escalation of the Vietnam War lay with Johnson’s view of the war as test of his own manliness (Logevall, Fredrik Logeval, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 393).} they and other
scholars nonetheless make a strong case that cultural views of masculinity are too pervasive in policymaking to be ignored. Consequently, masculinity as a proxy for credible resolve deserves a place on the list of factors that influenced U.S. foreign relations during the Cold War even though it was but one of many factors within a complex system of ideas and structures that could either dampen or reinforce each other’s influence.

Finally, the conflation of cultural values with foreign policy prescriptions could prompt policymakers and deterrence theorists to simplify the complexities of deterrence theory for themselves and/or the public by making faulty analogies between interpersonal and international relationships. In the process, they oversimplified the complexity of the cost-benefit analysis into basic “common sense.” President Lyndon Johnson, for example, invoked a bullying analogy when he confessed to McGeorge Bundy that he did not “think [Vietnam] is worth fighting for” but “[o]f course, if you start running from the Communists, they may just chase you into your own kitchen.” As Shiping Tang has pointed out, even the premier theorists resorted to analogies from parenting, business, bullying, and the game of chicken.

115 Robert D. Dean, Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Frederick Logeval, Choosing War. In his article on credibility, McMahon’s explanation of credibility seems to miss its association with masculinity. He wrote: “An elusive concept that defies precise definition, credibility has typically connoted for American decision makers a blend of resolve, reliability, believability, and decisiveness; equally important, it has served as a code word for America’s image and reputation.” McMahon, “Credibility and World Power,” 455.

116 George and Smoke suggest that deterrence theorists needed to simplify to make their game-theory analysis tractable while they wrongly and ahistorically concluded that the seemingly simplified bi-polar structure of the Cold War appeared to justify their simplifications. (George and Smoke, Deterrence, 553-554). Mercer suggests the theory’s complexity distracted many theorists from questioning some of its most basic assumptions. Experts in game theory tended to just “assume that reputations form” and then focused their efforts on the complicated logic and mathematics of “determining how to manipulate a reputation to obtain the desired results.” (Mercer, Reputation, 29, my emphasis). Game theorists have identified specific conditions under which reputations should form and be important, but little has been done to verify that these conditions are met in practice or that officials evaluate the current crisis to see if it fits the theory.

117 As quoted in Dean, Imperial Brotherhood, 216.

118 For parenting and bullying analogies, the power relationship between the deterrer (the parent or the weak student) and the transgressor (the child or the bully) are rather different than the situation between the U.S and USSR during the Cold War, and the interpersonal experiences are often much lower stake situations than during the Cold War. Although Schelling gave a multi-page explanation of how deterrence is more complicated than the game of chicken despite some fundamental similarities, I suspect his nuance was forgotten while the simpler “game of chicken” analogy remained. (Schelling, Arms and Influence, 118-121.)
Thus, by “transferring their belief about a reputation [for resolve from interpersonal relations to international relations], politicians and deterrence theorists have largely treated building and defending a reputation [for resolve] as a problem to be solved, rather than as an assumption to be challenged.”

The sheer complexity of the interconnecting and cascading factors and assumptions likely enhanced the influence these simpler ideational factors had on the United States’ persistent fixation on credibility and resolve. The complexity could make it difficult for both theorists and the deterrence “laity” to identify the flaws in the assumptions about why commitments should be non-situational and interdependent, and about the derivative importance of a reputation for resolve. Perhaps more importantly, the maddening complexity of deterrence theory and its supporting assumptions encouraged non-experts to simplify it into an ideology that lost much of its nuance and applicability. When faced with such complexity, it would be easy for theorists, policymakers, and average citizens to adhere to a simplified Cold War mindset that emphasized, reinforced, and perpetuated components of the cascading logic that resonated with them—such as ideology, faulty analogies, and notions of masculinity discussed above—while failing to question and examine the complexity of the whole system of “logic.” It is unsurprising, then, that Hogan found that the theme of “national resolve [was] central” to what he calls “the national security ideology” of the early Cold War.

This mindset or ideology was not entirely wrong, but it was too simple. Preserving a reputation for resolve in support of non-situational commitments can be useful in limited circumstances, but the calculation of when those circumstances might be present is actually

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119 Tang, “Cult of Reputation,” 56-57. For more on American use of analogy and metaphorical thinking during the Cold War, see P. A. Chilton, Security Metaphors: Cold War Discourse from Containment to Common House (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 48. Chilton’s study asserts that “[m]etaphorical processes are one of the most important means by which human minds form concepts of, and reason about, their … environments. This is especially the case for conceptualization of abstract, unfamiliar, or complex domains [such as] international relations [and] strategic doctrines.”

120 Hogan, Cross of Iron, 123.
very complicated and relies on a great number of assumptions about the likelihood of subsequent domino falls and their consequence for the overall balance of power. The prevailing U.S. assumptions about the Cold War, however, increased both the perceived likelihood and the perceived consequences of subsequent falling dominoes. To NSC-68’s authors and adherents, the United States had no choice but to adopt a strategy that strained its credibility. As McMahon posited, “a complex mosaic of strategic, economic, psychological, and political factors, each related directly to the Cold War, propelled the United States, by the early 1950s, into a regional activism scarcely anyone would have conceived possible just a few years earlier.”121 In essence, once the United States grabbed the tiger’s tail of a non-situational view of most commitments both to justify an expansive policy of containment and to counter the doubts about credibility that the expansive deterrence generated in the first place, the United States could not afford to let go. Unfortunately, “such a commitment possesses a substantial life of its own, creating by its very existence the pressures which perpetuate it.”122 With such views so deeply embedded and mutually reinforced in the early Cold War, it should be unsurprising to see them exerting considerable influence in the later Cold War even as important characteristics of the Cold War began to change.

**Some Problems with Resolve**

While historians have noted U.S. policymakers’ fixation on credibility and its influence on U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War, political scientists tend to analyze whether such a fixation was warranted given the difficulty in shaping and assessing one’s reputation for resolve. As scholars have concluded, both types of domino fears are “neither wholly true nor wholly false,” but we have very little unambiguous evidence to confirm the conclusions of pessimistic

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121 McMahon, *Limits of Empire*, 218.

material domino fears or the more tenuous reputational domino fears. Furthermore, both domino fears tend to exaggerate the likelihood that dominoes will fall and thereby skew cost-benefit calculations.\textsuperscript{123} They invoke a pessimistic “slippery slope” logical fallacy that subsequent attacks will be made on more important interests and possibly even under more disadvantageous circumstances when in fact the likelihood of such outcomes is far from certain or even probable.\textsuperscript{124} For example, General Dwight D. Eisenhower claimed in late January 1947 that “in the long run the costs of our retreat from Korea would be far, far greater than any present or contemplated appropriations to maintain ourselves there.”\textsuperscript{125} Clearly, changing Eisenhower’s “would” to “could” affects his corresponding cost-benefit calculation. One could therefore validly ask why one should deliberately trigger the risk of escalation now over a minor interest primarily to reduce (by an unspecified amount) the probability (also of an unspecified magnitude) of triggering an escalation risk later? Answering that question involves complicated calculations that are conditional on the situation.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{123} For example, material domino fears have tended to assume unrealistically that the enemy would not encounter much difficulty in converting conquered territory into useful material gains quickly and efficiently or that the denial of those resources will be more costly to the defender than controlling the conquered territory will be to the aggressor (Jervis, “Domino Beliefs”, 31). Reputational domino fear has the added flaw of favoring the assumption that allies would abandon the less reliable United States and “bandwagon” with the Soviets even though evidence suggests that balancing and drawing more tightly together in the face of an aggressive enemy is actually the more common reaction. See for example: Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation in Southwest Asia: Balancing and Bandwagoning in Cold War Competition” in Dominos and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland, eds. Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 69.

\textsuperscript{124} Jervis, “Domino Beliefs,” 20-22. Jervis provides two pages of quotes from various officials around the world who used this logical fallacy to justify their actions.

\textsuperscript{125} Stueck, The Road to Confrontation, 75, my emphasis. Similarly, Nobel Laureate Thomas Schelling’s implicit invocation of a reputational domino fear in 1968 that “[i]f one side yields on a series of issues, when the matters at stake are not critical, it may be difficult to communicate to the other just when a vital issue has been reached” sounded remarkably similar to Pericles’s argument to keep the Megarian decree some 24 centuries earlier. (Schelling, Arms and Influence, 124; Robert Jervis and Jack Snyder, eds., Dominos and Bandwagons: Strategic Beliefs and Great Power Competition in the Eurasian Rimland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 29-30.) Pericles argued that seemingly trivial concerns were actually important because they were linked to bigger concerns: “Let none of you think that we should be going to war for a trifle if we refused to revoke the Megarian decree. For you this trifle is both the assurance and the proof of your determination. If you give in, you will immediately be confronted with some greater demand, since they will think that you only give way on this point through fear.” (Thucydides, as quoted in Tang, “Cult of Reputation,” 80, my emphasis).

\textsuperscript{126} Furthermore, such a stance cedes the initiative to the enemy and can prompt the deterrer to fight on unfavorable ground primarily based on the mostly illogical fear that subsequent attacks would be under even more unfavorable conditions. Also note that domino fears can reinforce each other. Part of the subsequent less favorable conditions can be the extra material gains made by the enemy after the first act of irresolution.
Reputational domino fear has even more uncertainties associated with it than material domino fear, yet reputations are often just assumed to be important. 127 Although it intuitively makes sense that a reputation for resolve could be important for successful deterrence, we have surprisingly little understanding about how reputations for resolve form and how much control a state has in shaping its own reputation. For instance, a broken commitment in the past should cast doubt on other commitments in different contexts only if one attributes the broken commitment to a failure of resolve (which could be reasonably transferred to other commitments by suggesting a durable internal disposition for irresolution) and not to the specific circumstances surrounding that commitment (which could not be reasonably transferred to other commitments). In essence, then, reputational domino fears assume that commitments, once made, are “non-situational”; they are binding and not subject to changing circumstances. 128

In other words, failure to keep seemingly non-situational commitments tarnishes the only non-situational component of credibility (resolve) rather than reflecting a recalculation of capability and/or interests in light of a changing situation. 129 This, however, is a tautological assumption. Placing a high value on resolve requires a non-situational view of commitments which, in turn, requires a non-situational explanation if a commitment is not kept because accepting a situational explanation for a broken commitment contradicts the core assumption of

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127 For example, Darryl Press observed “[t]here is an entire literature in international relations that simply assumes that reputation causes credibility, and then uses this assumption to build formal models of signaling and bargaining between countries.” Press, Calculating Credibility, 14.

128 A situational commitment is an agreement that acknowledges mutual interests exist between the parties and suggests coordinated action to better tend to those mutual interests. Its fulfillment, however, can depend “on how the partners evaluate their interests when the time for action arrives.” In contrast, a non-situational commitment is a binding pledge to action regardless of how the partners evaluate their interests at the time of crisis. (Weinstein, “The Concept of a Commitment.”41-43). Those who believe that commitments are (or should be) non-situational might argue that commitments should not be made in the first place unless the deterrer has sufficient abiding interest and capability to make good on the threat but that is simply unrealistic, as George and Smoke explain. (George and Smoke, Deterrence, 553-556).

129 Unlike capability and interests, which are mostly externally assessable factors that can be expected to change from situation to situation, resolve is assumed to be a relatively unchanging internal disposition. Psychologists might contest that resolve is solely non-situational. For example, one’s pain tolerance might vary depending on one’s present condition or on what is at stake. If they are correct, the additional situational nature of resolve would further undermine assumptions that make non-situational attributions.
the non-situational view, namely, that the apparent value of resolve requires a commitment to be kept regardless of changes in the situation. Thus, although reputation might indeed be significant when a present scenario is very similar to a past scenario, reputational domino fear encourages the unsubstantiated belief that reputation is important across many different situations.

Another significant problem with the non-situational view of commitments stemming from reputational domino fears is that reputations for resolve and credibility are formed by the observers (enemies, allies, and neutrals) and therefore depend on whether those observers consider commitments to be situational or non-situational. Thus, the reputation of the deterrer depends on the expectations of the observers, not on the deterrer’s own view of commitments as being non-situational. If reputational domino fears are correct and observers view the deterrer’s commitments as non-situational, backing down earns a deterrer a dispositional reputation for irresolution that can be applied to future situations. Alternatively, if the enemy and other observers attribute the deterrer’s decision to back down to a situational deficiency in capability and/or interests—factors that can vary from situation to situation—then the deterrer’s reputation for resolve might be mostly unaffected whether it fights or backs down,

130 Johnson notes this tautology as well: “The problem of assessing [credibility’s] significance is accentuated by a strong tendency toward self-fulfilling prophecies. If U.S. policymakers insist that U.S. credibility is at stake, and if they succeed in convincing others that it is a stake, credibility becomes important.” (Johnson, Improbable Dangers, 143).

131 Reputational domino theory treats the perception of resolve as a possession of the deterrer when it is in fact a perception the observers possess and which the deterrer can only influence but not control. (Mercer, Reputation, 27-29. Recall that “perception” is linked to all three components of credibility.) See also, Jervis, “Domino Beliefs,” 27.

132 Mercer, Reputation, 49-68. Friendly and hostile observers have the choice of attributing the deterrer’s actions to the situational components of credibility (capability and motivators) and/or to the dispositional (i.e., non-situational) component of credibility, resolve. Mercer used social psychology to build upon the importance of the observers’ desires. Mercer’s insight on attribution was an important step forward in the critique of domino theory, and more clearly built upon similar observations (see, for example, Patrick Morgan, Deterrence: a Conceptual Analysis (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977), 134).

133 Interestingly, fighting does not earn the deterrer a reputation for resolve but merely reflects its non-situational view of the commitment. As long as it has sufficient resolve, it has no rational choice but to fight.
particularly in subsequent situations that differ significantly from the current one.\textsuperscript{134} Thus, if we do not know to what the enemy and other observers attributed the deterrer’s behavior, then we also do not know if its reputation for resolve will be damaged by backing down or preserved by fighting because “[a] reputation cannot form for something that varies according to situation.”\textsuperscript{135}

An important corollary not well addressed in recent studies on reputation is that a deterrer with multiple overseas interests that could be challenged by a single enemy or bloc of enemies—such as the United States during the Cold War—is unlikely to earn an attribution for irresolution on the account of inaction if deterrence failed because observers need to determine why deterrence failed on one particular overseas interest rather than one of the deterrer’s other overseas interests. Given that the deterrer’s disposition (i.e., its character or personality trait) to be resolute should, by our very definition of resolve, be constant and not vary from location to location or from situation to situation, the failure of deterrence at one particular site rather than another must be due to the enemy’s arbitrary choice, its irrationality (neither of which is covered by deterrence theory), or a perceived deficiency in the deterrer’s capability and/or interests for that particular situation and location. Thus, observers can assume with a high degree of confidence that the enemy made a situational attribution and, therefore, the deterrer’s reputation for resolve should be mostly unaffected.

Nonetheless, one might argue that even if a country cannot determine if it will earn a reputation for irresolution or not, it still might make sense for that country to act resolute and even expend more than the immediate interest is worth as a hedge against the possibility that observers might give it an irresolute reputation. Such an action can be justified, however, only if

\textsuperscript{134} Deterrence theorist Patrick Morgan, like some other critics of domino thinking, raised this point in reference to nuclear deterrence—there’s no chance to form a reputation for using or not using nuclear weapons on the scale considered during the Cold War and smaller scale resolve cannot be assumed to be predictive of the resolve required to take actions that “could involve truly awful weapons and monstrous costs.” See Morgan, \textit{Deterrence}, 134.

\textsuperscript{135} Mercer, \textit{Reputation}, 15-16, original emphasis. As Huth put it, “what are the logical grounds for [deterrence theorists such as Thomas Schelling] weighing reputational inferences so heavily relative to other sources of information about the resolve or capabilities of the defender?” (Huth, “Reputation,” 84.) As discussed in the next section, the answer to Huth’s question lies in the assumptions of the Cold War. Furthermore, it is likely that theorists’ (like Schelling’s) analysis of deterrence theory probably cannot be applied without caveats outside the context of the Cold War. (George and Smoke, \textit{Deterrence}, 522.)
the deterring nation can make a reasonable estimate of the likelihood and potential cost of such an attribution. Unfortunately for the adherents of reputational domino theory, such a calculation cannot be made with any degree of confidence because to this day no one really knows: 1) how important a reputation for resolve is compared to the other situational components of credibility; 2) how much a country can influence the perception of its reputation for resolve; 3) how much a country’s reputation for resolve suffers even if a non-situational commitment is not kept; or 4) how long damage to perceptions of one’s resolve persists or if it changes with the change of governments either in the deterrer’s country or in those of the observers’. In other words, “we do not know whether people use the past to predict the future, or if they do, how they do it.”\textsuperscript{136} These unknown quantities are a third significant problem for reputational domino theory and have likely caused the United States to expend assets primarily to preserve a reputation that may not have been at stake and that was of an unknowable value.

A fourth problem with reputational domino theory is that observers cannot be confident that the observed irresolution predicts future irresolution as reputational domino theory insists even if the observers attributed the deterrer’s behavior to irresolution. Observers cannot be sure that an apparent failure of resolve might not bolster the deterrer’s resolve in the future as the deterrer vows to never let it happen again, or seeks to use the reputation apparently created in the previous conflict to deceive the opponent in the next conflict.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Given all the uncertainty within the assumptions about the value of creating and preserving a reputation of resolve, we can only conclude that reputations for resolve are important primarily because policymakers believe they are important.\textsuperscript{137} It is likely that skeptics and adherents of

\textsuperscript{136} Mercer, \textit{Reputation}, 41.

\textsuperscript{137} U.S. policymakers’ actions might have been driven by their own beliefs in non-situational commitments rather than the beliefs of foreign policymakers. (Mercer, \textit{Reputation}, 28; Tang, "Cult of Reputation,” 38-39). Even if a policymaker recognized that a reputation was granted by others, his predisposition to view most commitments as
the importance of reputation are both right to a certain degree but under different circumstances. On high stake matters, for example, the overwhelming importance of interests at stake will likely make even the most dispositionally timorous leaders summon the resolve to stand firm, thereby making their reputation an unreliable predictor. In contrast, on low stake matters, highly resolute leaders may also defy the predictions of realists by making the apparently irrational decision to stand firm even though a rational calculation of the risks exceeds the possible benefits. Thus, a reputation for resolve might matter some times and not others.

Such subtleties, however, were lost in the prevailing Cold War mindset. Adherents of the Cold War mindset made important assumptions about the nature of the Soviet enemy and the interconnectedness of U.S. interests in a bipolar conflict that are clearly expressed in NSC-68. These assumptions created a cascading and internally consistent system of logic that forced an overextended deterrence posture and, consequently, a fixation on U.S. credibility and reputation. As will be seen in the remaining chapters, this NSC-68 mindset exerted persistent influence on the troop withdrawal debate even though its influence ebbed and flowed over time as other conflicting situational and ideational factors interacted with it.

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non-situational might make him more inclined to suspect that other observers viewed commitments as non-situational. Fearing such a misattribution, then he would be inclined to use the cost-benefit assumptions that are nearly impossible to calculate confidently (as described earlier) to hedge against the damage such a misattribution could cause to the U.S. reputation for resolve.

138 Press, *Calculating Credibility*, 1. Press avoided the attribution dilemma raised by Mercer by examining the more general question of whether a deterrer’s past actions regarding credibility (regardless of whether attributed to resolve or situation) affected enemy’s future behavior in a military crisis. For high stake issues, he asserts: "[T]he conventional wisdom about credibility is wrong. A country’s credibility, at least during crises, is driven not by its past behavior but rather by power and interests. If a country makes threats that it has the power to carry out—and an interest in doing so—those threats will be believed even if the country has bluffed in the past. If it makes threats that it lacks the power to carry out—or has no interest in doing—its credibility will be viewed with great skepticism. When assessing credibility during crises, leaders focus on the “here and now,” not on their adversary’s past behavior. Tragically, those countries that have fought wars to build a reputation for resolve have wasted vast sums of money and, much worse, thousands of lives.”
CHAPTER 3: NIXON’S DECISION TO REDUCE U.S. TROOPS IN KOREA

_I think the time has come to reduce our Korean presence._

Nixon memo to Henry Kissinger, 24 November 1969

During his first sixteen years in national political office, Richard M. Nixon crafted a reputation as a staunch anti-communist and became one of many powerful Americans who helped shape and perpetuate the U.S. character of containment within the early Cold War. In the process, Nixon spent his early political career simultaneously operating within and (re)producing the discourse and threat perceptions of the early Cold War. Nixon entered national politics with a resounding defeat of an incumbent Democratic congressman in November 1946, just nine months after George F. Kennan’s “long telegram” characterized the Soviet threat and gave some initial shape and trajectory to the nascent Cold War. After serving a prominent role on the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), Nixon was elected to the U.S. Senate in November 1950, seven months after the pivotal release of NSC-68. Just two years later, Nixon began his eight years of service as President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s vice president. Despite his early political reputation as a conservative “cold warrior,” Nixon brought a progressive pragmatism to his pursuit of foreign relations that was often at odds with “the Procrustean ideological constraints” that characterized the Cold War for many of his contemporaries.139 Consequently, when Nixon tried to implement a more limited and flexible interpretation of Cold War commitments with South Korea and other Asian partners, the logic behind NSC-68’s vision of containment and its emphasis on credibility that Nixon himself had

earlier helped perpetuate repeatedly emerged within the discourse of Nixon’s national security advisor, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other foreign policy elites as they attempted to influence Nixon’s approach to deterrence on the Korean peninsula.

Early in his administration, Nixon and his advisors wrestled with the traditional U.S. Cold War mindset’s understandings of the ideas of commitments, credibility, and resolve as they struggled to select appropriate responses to North Korean provocations and to find a financially sustainable way to deter future provocations and conflicts. More specifically, their internal debates revealed important differences among Nixon’s top national security advisors as to whether responses to North Korean provocations and the withdrawal of troops from South Korea would encourage other countries to make situational or non-situational conclusions about U.S. resolve and commitments.

**Nixon’s Foreign Policy Team and Priorities**

As Richard M. Nixon made the transition from candidate to president after the November 1968 election, he assembled a team of senior advisors to address his foreign policy priorities. Nixon selected Henry A. Kissinger, a brilliant and ambitious Harvard professor of government who had come to prominence as a foreign policy and Cold War theorist, as his national security advisor and eventually permitted him to become the dominant member of his foreign policy team. Nixon wanted Kissinger to help him to consolidate control of foreign policy within the White House and to diminish the influence of what he considered to be a left-leaning and somewhat hidebound State Department, a role Kissinger was only too anxious to accept. Nixon’s selection of William P. Rogers, a lawyer and former attorney general with almost no foreign policy experience, as secretary of state reinforced Nixon’s plan for a weakened and


sidelined State Department. Although Nixon decided to retain President Johnson’s CIA
director, Richard Helms, he also intended “to exclude the CIA from the formulation of policy”
because it “was staffed by Ivy League liberals.”

Even though Nixon and Kissinger effectively “froze out the State Department from real
influence on the subjects they considered most vital,” their Defense team included a more
“powerful cabinet member than Nixon bargained on” in Secretary of Defense Melvin P. Laird.
Laird was a sixteen-year congressman who deftly wielded his influential connections in
Congress either to “help or outmaneuver other members of the administration, including the
president.” As with his CIA director, Nixon also sought continuity with his top military advisor
and asked President Johnson’s chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, to
stay on another year beyond the chairman’s normal four-year term. Wheeler’s health was
failing, however, and he began to cede practical responsibilities to his heir apparent and
“fanatical anticommunist,” Admiral Thomas Moorer, early in the administration.

Once Nixon had his senior foreign policy team in place, his “overriding initial priority”
became orchestrating an honorable end to the Vietnam War. The war had cost Lyndon
Johnson a second term and seemed capable of sinking both Nixon and the U.S. economy in the
ensuing years. The Soviet Union, which had just invaded Czechoslovakia in August of 1968
and which appeared to be nearing parity in nuclear capability, loomed as an important perennial
problem to be managed as well as a potential reluctant partner in ending the war in Vietnam.
The Middle East, still tense from the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, also drew attention from Nixon and
Kissinger. Asia, however, was one of the regions to which Nixon had given the most considered

142 Bundy, A Tangled Web, 53.
143 Kissinger, White House Years, 11.
144 Bundy, A Tangled Web, 53.
145 Kissinger, White House Years, 32-33.
146 Perry, Four Stars, 206-208.
147 Bundy, A Tangled Web, 57.
thought prior to entering the Oval Office, and he intended it to be a key strategic element in extricating the United States from Vietnam in the near term and in developing a new strategic global posture for the United States in the longer term.

In October 1967, *Foreign Affairs* magazine published an article by Nixon entitled “Asia after Viet Nam.” In it, Nixon drew upon two extensive trips he had made to East Asia as a private citizen in 1964 and 1967 to present a loose agenda for the region of most immediate concern to many Americans. Presaging the general concept of what he later called the Nixon Doctrine, Nixon wrote that “lesser powers in the immediate area” should work together as the first-responders to threats to Asian peace and stability. The United States would only get involved if “the buffer” of these smaller nations “prove[d] insufficient” and even then, only in a way that was “palatable” to the American people. In a similar vein, Nixon also suggested that Japan should draw upon its rapidly strengthening economy “to play a greater role both diplomatically and militarily in maintaining the balance in Asia.” Lastly, Nixon argued that the United States should “persuade” China to transform from what he perceived to be an untrustworthy, irrational revolutionary power full of “fantasies” to one that had “rational” national interests and that could thereby rejoin “the family of nations.”148 Until that time, he viewed China as a greater threat than opportunity.

Nixon barely mentioned South Korea in his article but implied that the rapid economic growth of South Korea and other East Asian countries should enable them, like Japan, to shoulder more of their own defense burden.149 As will be discussed later in this chapter, the article was one early indicator that Nixon was primed to restructure U.S. mutual security

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148 Richard M. Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46 (October 1967), 115, 120-122. Nixon argued that in the near-term containing Chinese “imperialist” ambitions would force them to “accept basic rules of international civility.” Once China was contained like the Soviet Union, “the dialogue with mainland China [could] begin.” For a cogent comparison of Nixon’s thoughts in this article to his subsequent Nixon Doctrine and China policy, see Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, 52-55. However, I agree with William Bundy that the article, at best, only vaguely foreshadowed Nixon’s subsequent policy toward China and gave no indication it would unfold at such a rapid pace (Bundy, *A Tangled Web*, 17-19).

arrangements in East Asia when he became president. South Korea became an important component of Nixon’s new vision for Asia but he first had to address Korean policies and problems he inherited from President Johnson that would both help and hinder Nixon’s efforts to reshape the U.S. role in South Korea.

Residual Korean Issues from the Johnson Years

Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson had left behind a legacy of quiet presidential doubts about U.S. involvement in Korea, and each had expressed concern about how much the United States spent to support South Korea. Already by 1963, Kennedy’s staff was pointing out that South Korea was the United States’ “most expensive military satellite” and thereby limited the resources that could be devoted to South Vietnam.\(^\text{150}\) Shortly after Kennedy’s assassination President Johnson’s national security advisor, McGeorge Bundy, concluded that South Korea could no longer be such “a high priority target as to tie up a large proportion of U.S. assets.”\(^\text{151}\) By May 1964, Johnson had ordered “a joint State-AID-Defense study” (NSAM 298) of the presumed financial benefits of relocating one U.S. Army division from South Korea to Hawaii as a strategic reserve.\(^\text{152}\)

By 1965, however, the burgeoning manpower requirements of expanding the Vietnam War made keeping troops in South Korea seem more cost effective, especially if their continued presence on the peninsula could be used to “buy” an equivalent number of South Korean troops to fight in Vietnam. Finding himself faced with SEATO countries unwilling to contribute troops to the escalating conflict, President Johnson reconsidered withdrawing the U.S. division from


Korea and, instead, asked South Korea’s President Park Chung Hee to supply a Korean combat division to serve in the Vietnam War, as Park had offered various times before. In return for “Korean aid to Viet Nam,” Johnson kept his promise to Park that he “would [keep] in Korea a military strength equivalent to that at present” and provided significant additional assets to modernize the Korean forces. Nonetheless, the following year Johnson warned Park that “future [U.S.] planners must look at effective strength and not numbers of men” in Korea. Although the Vietnam War temporarily took precedence over Johnson’s preference to reduce U.S. troops in South Korea, increased tensions on the Korean peninsula put troop reductions back on the table in 1968.

When Nixon took office, he inherited a South Korean partner that was particularly agitated after years of North Korean provocations and a series of bold attacks across the DMZ. From approximately 1965 through 1969, North Korea conducted a surge of attacks apparently aimed at destabilizing South Korea and driving a wedge between it and the United States.

153 Park’s offer of Korean forces reinforced his position of power. However, once they were in place, U.S. officials were prepared to make them hard to withdraw again. In a cabinet meeting, Cyrus Vance related that “the [South Korean] Prime Minister mentioned that the legislature might ask [for South Korean troops to be withdrawn from Vietnam]. I told him very bluntly that we would remove our troops from South Korea if that happened. The Prime Minister turned ashen. It really shook him.” “Notes of the President’s Meeting With Cyrus R. Vance” in U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, http://www.state.gov/www/about_state/history/vol_xxix/index.html, Doc. 180. See also “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State” in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 179.

154 Yi, Making of Tigers, 6.

155 For “effective strength”, see Telegram From the Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, Korea (Howze) to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor) in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 6. According to the Korea government, South Korea provided about 320,000 soldiers with a peak commitment of 50,000 soldiers in Vietnam at one time. Yi, Making of Tigers, 2, 6.

156 Such activity was anticipated by the U.S. in 1965. (“Special National Intelligence Estimate” in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 35.). In 1968, U.S. officials continued to assume these were the motivations of Kim Il Sung, and they warned President Park not to “play into the hands of the North Koreans.” (“Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea” in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 177; “Memorandum to Holders of Special National Intelligence Estimate Number 14.2–67” in Ibid, Doc. 184; “Memorandum Prepared by the Department of State,” in Ibid, Doc. 169). U.S. officials at the time did not have clear evidence of direct coordination between the North Vietnamese and the North Koreans. Some suspected it but the CIA argued that such direct coordination was unlikely. They believed Kim had independently calculated the potential benefits of pressing the South Koreans and Americans as the Vietnam War intensified. Additionally, as Bolger pointed out, the normalization of relations between Japan and South Korea in 1965 and the ensuing increase in diplomatic recognition likely gave greater urgency to North Korea’s efforts. (Daniel P. Bolger, Scenes from an Unfinished War: Low-
This period of intensified conflict included attacks along the DMZ and infiltration into South Korea that killed 1,234 U.S. and South Korean military personnel and Korean civilians, more than 35 times as many casualties as were experienced in the twelve previous years combined.\textsuperscript{157} This North Korean insurgency campaign reached its apex in late January of 1968 with a failed commando raid on the South Korean presidential residence, the Blue House, on January 20 and the seizure of an American reconnaissance ship, the \textit{Pueblo}, and all but one of its eighty-three crew members three days later.\textsuperscript{158}

The Blue House raid understandably outraged the South Koreans and the intended target, President Park, to such a degree that U.S. officials feared he would retaliate unilaterally.\textsuperscript{159} President Park thought retaliation was necessary to reestablish credible deterrence against additional North Korean attacks, and he pressed U.S. officials for a military response.\textsuperscript{160} The Americans, however, thought Park was “almost irrationally obsessed with [the] need to strike” and were loath to put the lives of the eighty-two captive \textit{Pueblo} crew members at risk or to


\textsuperscript{157} James P. Finley, \textit{The U.S. Military Experience in Korea, 1871-1982: in the vanguard of ROK-U.S. relations} (San Francisco: Command Historian’s Office, Secretary Joint Staff Hqrs., USFK/EUSA, 1983), 220. Although the North Koreans had increased incursions across the DMZ prior to 1966, the UNC Commander’s subsequent analysis of the fatal ambush of a U.S. patrol on November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1966 prompted Gen Bonesteel to conclude something “considerably different from actions in previous years” had begun. (Bolger, \textit{Scenes from an Unfinished War}). Attacks continued in 1970 and 1971, but at a much lesser rate than their peak in 1967 and 1968. (Finley, \textit{U.S. Military Experience in Korea}, 220).

\textsuperscript{158} The conflict reached it apex in 1968 in terms of overall casualties as well, not just in the boldness of these two attacks. (Finley, \textit{U.S. Military Experience in Korea}, 220) Eight-two of the eighty-three men survived the assault on the \textit{USS Pueblo}. One crewmember was killed and his body was returned along with the surviving crewmembers almost one year later, December 23, 1968. The \textit{USS Pueblo} remains in North Korea’s possession to this day.

\textsuperscript{159} Eight days later after the \textit{Pueblo} seizure, the North Vietnamese initiated the Tet Offensive, causing some U.S. officials to wonder if the North Koreans and North Vietnamese had coordinated their attacks. President Johnson asked Cyrus Vance if “one man [was] calling the dance.” (“Notes of the President's Meeting With Cyrus R. Vance” in \textit{FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea}, Doc. 180). Vance was not sure but thought “that some of the more serious North Korean incursions into the South may have been launched in retaliation for [secret] South Korean raids, in particular the November 1967 raid against a North Korean People’s Army Divisional Headquarters,” which succeeded in destroying the headquarters with no South Korean losses. (“Memorandum From Cyrus R. Vance to President Johnson” in \textit{FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea}, Doc. 181). Presently, there is no evidence that the North Korean and North Vietnamese attacks were coordinated.

\textsuperscript{160} President Park expressed his frustration with the lack of clear action by Washington in a draft letter he never signed. “[T]he North Korean commandos' intrusion into Seoul has given such a particular and serious impact upon my people that an alien would find it hard not to grasp it fully.” (“Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State," in \textit{FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea}, Doc. 173).
hazard another Asian conflict while embroiled in Vietnam. With a U.S. presidential election only nine months away and the war in Vietnam looking evermore uncertain, President Johnson thought his only acceptable option was to negotiate quietly with the North Koreans after mobilizing a significant show of force.

U.S. Ambassador to South Korea William J. Porter, however, also urged the administration to send a special envoy to the South Koreans to temper their calls for action, reaffirm the United States’ commitment to South Korea, and reverse President Park's inclination to withdraw some of his troops from Vietnam. Porter, having witnessed firsthand what the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) commander described as “the Mad Hatter's tea party atmosphere among high-level [South Koreans],” was especially concerned that the assassination attempt had pushed President Park perilously close to pursuing unilateral retaliation and he wanted “someone with ready access to our President . . . to carry home a clear personal account of the danger.”

161 Ambassador Porter telegrammed that ROK officials “seemed as much concerned about President Park’s state of mind as with Assembly and public opinion.” ("Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State," in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 166) That same day, COMUSFK (Gen. Charles H. Bonesteel, III) wrote that he had “been deeply disturbed over last several days at growing irrationality in certain areas [of the] ROKG, most especially in President Park himself. Inputs in last day have confirmed that Park is almost irrationally obsessed with need to strike now at North Koreans … I have tried for some days now to express in more formal language the Mad Hatter's tea party atmosphere among high-level ROKs here … it will be very important that Cy Vance come here prepared to answer in some way the questions of what the US is prepared to do, particularly re stopping NK infiltration threat.” ("Telegram From the Commander in Chief, United States Forces, Korea (Bonesteel) to the Commander in Chief, Pacific (Sharp)" in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 168; "Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State" in Ibid., 171).


163 Lerner, The Pueblo Incident, 126.

164 “Letter From the Ambassador to Korea (Porter) to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs (Bundy)” in FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea, Doc. 182. A “ranking American official” (possibly Ambassador Porter) told the New York Times that “if President Park had been killed, or even wounded [in the Blue House raid], nothing would have stopped the South Korean Army from marching north.” (William Beecher, “Rising War Peril is Seen in Korea,” New York Times, 16 August 1968). Ambassador Porter thought “Park's desire to go north is not much less acute than his adversary's intention, some day, to move south.” Indulging in a bit of gallows humor, he also jokingly wondered if Korea's popular Reverend Moon could help restrain the ROKG from going north. “The other day, Moon organized a mass wedding of members of his congregation” and “forbade them to engage in ‘love acts’ for 40 days! … If I could only determine whether Moon's edict was obeyed…we might find a government post where he could exercise his ability to restrain their desire to go north—a much easier task than the
President Johnson responded by sending special envoy Cyrus Vance to calm South Korean nerves and assure President Park that the United States would "remain in Korea in even stronger force than before" even after "the USS Pueblo and its crew [were] returned." Vance, however, shared Ambassador Porter's concerns about Park. Indeed, Vance was so troubled by the South Korean president's behavior during his visit that he recommended a review of U.S. policy toward South Korea that seriously evaluated the nature of the United States' ongoing commitment there. Upon returning from his mission to Seoul, Vance met with President Johnson and explained that although he had placated Park, there remained "a very strong danger of unilateral action by [Park] . . . if another serious [attack] occurs." Vance worried that Park was "volatile" and impaired his judgment with bouts of heavy drinking. Implying that the United States should not allow itself to be put in the position of allowing Park to draw the nation into another Korean war, Vance recommended that an interdepartmental group "undertake an independent assessment of our current policy toward the [Republic of Korea] . . . to identify what our political, economic, and military objectives in Korea should be over the next several years."
President Johnson agreed and asked the State Department to lead this reassessment of U.S. policy toward South Korea.\textsuperscript{169} By December of 1968, the interdepartmental group had preliminarily concluded that South Korea “should be encouraged to stand on her own two feet” economically and militarily. The group expressed concern that two U.S. army divisions were “effectively tie[d] down in Korea,” were expensive to maintain, and were positioned so as to give the United States “little choice as to whether and how to become involved on the ground in the event large-scale hostilities reoccur on the Peninsula.” The group concluded that the “critical problem to resolve [was] whether it is possible to substitute improved Korean combat forces in whole or in part for our forces now in Korea and still maintain a combined ROK-U.S. strength adequate to provide deterrence and, if necessary, deal with the likely military threats.”\textsuperscript{170}

In effect, the assessments made by Ambassador Porter and special envoy Vance of President Park’s reaction to the Blue House raid created an important shift in the focus of the national security bureaucracy’s concern regarding U.S. troops in South Korea. Whereas cost had driven the deliberations just a few years earlier, fear of an unwanted military conflict triggered by the South Koreans began to eclipse financial concerns as the primary motivation for troop withdrawal by 1969. Yet, as the interdepartmental panel indicated, the “critical problem” of deterrence and credibility remained as a point of resistance to any impulse to reduce the U.S military presence on the peninsula.

**Nixon’s Early Lesson in Deterrence in Korea: The EC-121 Downing**

Nixon and Kissinger were made aware of the Johnson administration’s preliminary study expressing serious concerns about continued U.S. military involvement in South Korea and they authorized their administration to continue the review of the U.S. role in South Korea. Nixon’s

\textsuperscript{169} “Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach) to President Johnson” in \textit{FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea}, Doc. 211.

\textsuperscript{170} “Memorandum From the Under Secretary of State (Katzenbach) to President Johnson” in \textit{FRUS, 1964-1968, Volume XXIX: Korea}, Doc. 211.
officials were only a few weeks away from the deadlines for producing draft reports about the U.S. role in South Korea and about contingency plans for conflicts on the peninsula when it was faced with its own serious North Korean provocation. Around 11:42 p.m. EST on 14 April 1969 – just three months after Nixon took the oath of office – two North Korean fighter planes shot down a U.S. Navy EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft while it was flying in international airspace over the Sea of Japan. All thirty-one American personnel aboard the aircraft were killed.

The new administration’s struggle to select a response revealed telling differences among Nixon’s top national security advisors regarding how much value to put on attempts to maintain the perception of U.S. resolve in the eyes of other nations and how they assessed risk. Only some fourteen months earlier, Nixon had strongly criticized President Lyndon Johnson's non-confrontational response to the USS Pueblo seizure, and he believed that this time a retaliatory strike against North Korea would help reestablish U.S. credibility—especially the perception of its resolve—both on and beyond the Korean peninsula. Nonetheless, his concerns about substantial but unlikely risks as well as the opposition of key cabinet advisors convinced a reluctant Nixon to select a non-retaliatory path similar to President Johnson's: authorized armed escorts for subsequent reconnaissance flights and a brief and transparent show of force by three U.S. aircraft carriers.

When advocates and opponents estimated the likelihood of achieving a net benefit from retaliation, they assessed the value and probability of reestablishing U.S. credibility against the cost and probability of military escalation of the crisis. The internal debate that led to Nixon’s

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171 It remains unclear if the EC-121 might have strayed into North Korean airspace some time prior to the shootdown. The North Koreans unsurprisingly claimed that the U.S. plane had violated its air space, had attempted to escape, and was then shot down approximately 80 miles at sea, but Melvin Laird remains vague about if such a violation occurred (Dale Van Atta, *With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 186.) Sec State Rogers told Dobrynin that “at no time” was the EC-121 “less than 40 miles from North Korea.” (J.R. Johnson, ed., *Commander in Chief Pacific Command History, 1969* (Camp H. M. Smith, Hawaii: HQ CINCPAC, 1970), 4:136.

172 J.R. Johnson, ed., *Commander in Chief Pacific Command History, 1969* (Camp Smith, Hawaii: HQ CINCPAC, 1970) 4:139. Only two of the bodies were ever recovered. The detailed account of the search and rescue activity makes for sobering reading, lightened only by the account that American sailors thanked the crew of the Soviet ship who helped recover debris by offering them "a USS TUCKER cigarette lighter and eight copies of *Playboy*."
reluctant decision provides insight into how Nixon and his advisors: 1) situated the tensions with North Korea within the broader Cold War; 2) made and countered unverifiable claims about the sources of U.S. credibility; and 3) differed in strategic vision and risk tolerance. All of these factors had bearing on Nixon’s decision to withdraw 50 percent of U.S. ground forces from South Korea less than one year later. As with the subsequent troop withdrawal issue, the ongoing Vietnam War overshadowed the decision process of both the retaliation “hawks” and “doves” within and surrounding the Nixon administration. The war amplified the reputational benefits perceived by some retaliation advocates but implicitly or explicitly amplified the risks perceived by most of Nixon’s core national security advisors, especially Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird.

Assessing the Potential Benefit of Retaliation. It is not surprising that top U.S. national security officials felt a basic urge to punish North Korea for its provocative, fatal attack on the U.S. EC-121, but they also recognized the substantial risks of doing so.173 Those who argued that retaliation would nonetheless yield a net gain emphasized the deterrent benefit of demonstrating resolve through military retaliation. They assumed that President Johnson’s decision not to retaliate after the North Koreans seized the USS Pueblo in January of the previous year (1968) had emboldened the North Koreans to attack the EC-121. Senior U.S. military leaders and South Korean president Park Chung-hee focused on U.S. credibility on the Korean peninsula and argued that the United States must react with more “positive action” this time to prevent similar North Korean attacks in the future. In contrast, Nixon and especially

173 For example, Secretary Laird opposed most forms of retaliation but, after an NSC meeting on April 16th, Laird told Kissinger “if there was some way to we could hit one of their aircraft or ships, I would do it in a minute” and “if we had a chance to knock a few [North Korean] planes down it would be terrific.” Unfortunately, it is unclear if Laird viewed such action as a deterrent, redress, or placation of the president. (Henry A. Kissinger Telecon with Melvin Laird, Apr. 16, 1969, Digital National Security Archive (Ann Arbor: Proquest Information and Learning Co).)

The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander-in-Chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC) generally agreed with President Park’s assessment “that this incident [would] be repeated again” unless the United States “[made the North Koreans] understand by a counterblow that they cannot count on continued patience and restraint as they pursue their aggressive policy.”\footnote{“Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, April 18, 1969, 0300Z” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 43. Other authors have claimed CJCS Wheeler did not support retaliatory strikes, but they appear to have misinterpreted the original source of their claim. In Four Stars, Mark Perry interpreted Seymour M. Hersh’s account of the EC-121 incident in The Price of Power and claimed that “Laird told Wheeler to swallow his opposition to the president” but to stall on implementing the strikes until the crisis could blow over. (Perry, Four Stars, 221) Van Atta reinterpreted Perry to write that “General Wheeler … was as reluctant as Laird to start a fight with North Korea” and played the “good cop” role of backing “the president’s desire for action” but stalled for time in implementing any actions to give Laird time to cool tempers. (Van Atta, With Honor, 186). However, Hersh’s original account makes no reference to General Wheeler’s personal views on retaliation, only mentioning that Wheeler “resented” Sec. Laird’s military aide, Col. Robert E. Pursley, for “being a dove on Vietnam.” (Seymour M. Hersh, The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House (New York: Summit Books, 1983), 71) Furthermore, the JCS document advocating retaliation was consistent with CINCPAC’s position (see note 41 below) and consistent with their call for retaliation during the USS Pueblo incident one year earlier despite the risk to the 82 hostages. (Lerner, The Pueblo Incident, 126) The alleged stalling appears to have been caused by bureaucratic inertia and the difficulties of assembling “the most enormous armada since the invasion of Normandy.” (Hersh, The Price of Power, 75).}

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) proposed that the United States should seek “redress” and “react to the extent required to prevent further incidents such as the Pueblo seizure, [other fatal attacks in the DMZ, and the EC-121] destruction.”\footnote{“Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, April 15, 1969” FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 16 (my emphasis). Referring to the ineffective military posturing after the USS Pueblo seizure, CINCPAC Admiral John S. McCain, Jr. also argued that the U.S. would give North Korea “justification” for viewing it as “paper tigers…and encourage rather than discourage further belligerencies” if U.S. forces operated “again in the Sea of Japan only as a show of force and without positive action.” (Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1969, 4:141).} CINCPAC, Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., asserted that the dramatic and increased North Korean provocations of 1968 occurred partly because the North Koreans perceived a “favorable balance of power” on the peninsula and believed “that the U.S. power position in Korea lacked credibility.” He added that the rapid
deployment of “Navy and Air units [after the Pueblo seizure] improved the credibility of U.S. resolve and probably [contributed to the subsequent] lull in North Korean provocative acts.”\textsuperscript{177}

The seemingly reasonable assumptions that an attack on North Korea and an increase in U.S. forces in South Korea would dissuade future North Korean aggression, however, did not acknowledge the CIA’s argument that these types of attacks might have been very difficult to deter in the first place because the North Koreans actually desired continued confrontation. CIA analysts thought Kim’s “long-term ambitions . . . require[d] a high level of tension with the U.S.” because he hoped that “periodic provocations” would “contribute to the disillusionment of the American public with overseas burdens and bring about a reduction and eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea.” Thus, a military response by the United States would be unlikely to achieve “stated U.S. objectives or [induce] Pyongyang to modify its long-term policies.”\textsuperscript{178}

In a variation of situational attribution discussed in Chapter 1, the CIA pointed out that the credibility required to deter a major assault by North Korea was different than the credibility needed to deter small-scale provocations. Although North Korea could not expect Soviet or Chinese support for initiating large scale hostilities, it might be able to invoke its mutual defense treaty if the United States retaliated too vigorously, and it probably was willing to absorb the cost of a less vigorous U.S. response in the hope of achieving longer-term gains. In effect, the North Koreans gambled that the United States could not muster enough resolve (and, possibly, capability) to retaliate to a small-scale provocation at a level that the North Koreans were not willing to tolerate. Thus, the North Koreans likely viewed the minor provocations as a “safe bet” and, as such, their attack was probably not reasonably deterrable under the existing circumstances.

\textsuperscript{177} Johnson, ed., \textit{CINCPAC History}, 1969, 4:249.

\textsuperscript{178} “Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, April 17, 1969” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 32-33. The CIA claimed a military retaliation would be unlikely to yield any “decisive or lasting effects” vis-à-vis North Korea in “[deterring] against future such hostilities.”
Given that the North Koreans were making a situationally dependent assessment of U.S. capability and public resolve that were both stretched thin by the Vietnam War, U.S. generals could only guess what “extent” of reaction or size of augmenting force might be required to secure deterrence in the future. Their ability to alter the North Korean situational assessment was limited given that substantial U.S. forces and resources remained inflexibly committed to the war in Vietnam. Unless the United States could convince the North Koreans through diplomacy or a retaliation that exceeded North Korean expectations that they were willing and able to accept setbacks in Vietnam to shift substantial forces to the north for a potential major encounter with the North Koreans, a U.S. counterattack would do little to alter North Korea’s decisions to attack in the future if similarly favorable circumstances arose. Yet, as will be shown, only Kissinger among senior U.S. leaders was truly comfortable with that option. Thus, the attack on the EC-121 did not necessarily create a false sense of diminished U.S. credibility as much as it confirmed actual U.S. credibility under the existing circumstances.

Nonetheless, although the CIA’s analysis about deterring North Korea was insightful, it did not address Nixon and Kissinger’s main concern about preserving U.S. credibility to deter actions beyond the Korean peninsula. Kissinger firmly believed the long-standing Cold War assumption that “displays of American impotence in one part of the world, such as Asia or Africa, would inevitably erode [U.S.] credibility in other parts of the world, such as the Middle East.” For Kissinger, a lapse in credibility in one location unacceptably increased the likelihood of cascading negative effects elsewhere by raising doubts about U.S. resolve.179 Both Nixon and Kissinger emphasized that although retaliation might deter future North Korean aggression, it was more important to retaliate to bolster the credibility of the U.S. military deterrent in the eyes of the North Vietnamese, the Soviets and Chinese, and leaders of other smaller countries that

179 Kissinger, White House Years, 129. See also, Dallek, Nixon and Kissinger, 105.
might seek to challenge the United States. The North Koreans had confirmed the existence of chinks in the United States’ global deterrence armor and the resulting appearance of U.S. vulnerability might result in other costly probes by other antagonists.

Consequently, Nixon initially felt that the “price” of diminished U.S. credibility was “too high to pay not to do anything.” Like his senior military commanders, Nixon thought that “every time [the] U.S. fails to react, it encourages some pipsqueak to do something.” The perception of gaps in the armor needed to be countered by firm action. Nixon therefore desired to avoid the seemingly irresolute handling of the USS 
Pueblo
 seizure, which he had “vociferously” criticized as a presidential candidate and which, according to intelligence reports, had already encouraged defiant attitudes in other countries. As Nixon considered retaliatory options, he repeatedly emphasized that he wanted an action with “symbolic meaning.” But unlike their military advisors, Nixon and Kissinger intended North Vietnam, not North Korea, to be the primary recipient of the symbolic message.

Nixon preferred to seize a North Korean vessel on the high seas but his national security team was unable to find one. Alternatively, he suggested that a blockade of a North Korean

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180 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 36.

181 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 15, 1969, 6:30 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 18-19. During this first day of the crisis (April 15th), Nixon “concluded that we won’t just sit here and do nothing.” He was “determined” that the U.S. was “going to do something ‘even if [he had] to overrule everybody in the State Department.’”

182 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 36. Nixon later wrote in his memoirs that the felt the United States “was being tested, and therefore force must be met with force.” (Richard M. Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 383).

183 For “vociferously”, see Kissinger, White House Years, 318. Kissinger told Nixon that members of the NSC staff (whom Nixon only half-jokingly labeled as “peaceniks”) reminded Kissinger of a recent intelligence report in which Egypt’s President Gammel Abdel Nasser expressed to Jordan’s King Hussein bin Talal something “to the effect, ‘After all, it isn’t so risky to defy the United States – look at North Korea and the PUEBLO.’” The staffers argued that “to let this one go again will be taken very seriously.” (Kissinger Telecon with Richard Nixon, Apr. 15, 1969, DNSA, 1-2, my emphasis). For “peaceniks”, see Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) Washington, April 15, 1969, 6:30 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 18.

184 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 15, 1969, 10 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 20. Nixon also said, “symbolism - that is what we are talking about.”
port could “signal” to North Vietnam what the United States might do to it. When Kissinger stated that they “should look dangerous,” Nixon suggested they get “caught” conducting the classified attacks called Operation LUNCH, the second in a series of the six secret “MENU” bombing campaigns of North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia. When Nixon added that the North Koreans “took [the USS Pueblo] so we get Cambodia,” he reverted to the persistent early Cold War logic that conflated North Korea, North Vietnam, and (implicitly) the Soviet Union into a unified communist “they,” which facilitated the questionable assumption that bombing North Vietnamese forces in Cambodia would help deter future Communist aggression by North Korea and other “red” powers.

Despite Nixon’s bluster and agreement with his national security advisor in principle, Kissinger recalled feeling that Nixon “had no stomach for retaliation.” Firmly convinced of the cascading benefits of reasserting U.S. resolve, Kissinger repeatedly tried to bolster Nixon’s own resolve to take military action despite the risks by stressing the importance of maintaining the resolve component of U.S. credibility. Kissinger characterized “the fundamental issue” as being “whether our failure to respond to the shootdown of an unarmed reconnaissance plane over international waters would encourage our enemies in Hanoi and embolden opponents elsewhere.” Kissinger emphasized that any action should fit this broader strategic purpose,

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185 Ibid., 20-21.

186 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 15, 1969, 6:30 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 19. Kissinger expressed this mindset when he referred to North Korea as the “toughest character” in the “Communist camp.” (“Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 35-36).

187 Kissinger, White House Years, 316.

188 Ibid., 318. This quote from his memoirs concisely conveys the sentiment Kissinger expressed in the primary documents. NSC staffer Richard L. Soeider shared a similar opinion, writing, “A strong response in Korea is almost certain to bring the North Vietnamese up short and heighten their concern about the risks of prolonging the Vietnam war.” (“Memorandum From Richard L. Sneider of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 18, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 38).
and believed retaliation could positively influence the Vietnam peace talks.\footnote{Kissinger Telcon with Melvin Laird, Apr. 16, 1969, DNSA. Kissinger implied confidentially to reporter Max Frankel, however, that it was difficult to select an option for response because the rest of the administration did not “know what [they were] trying to do and what [they were] trying to achieve.” (Kissinger Telcon with Max Frankel, Apr 16, 1969, DNSA.)} Nixon, however, concluded that choosing escorted reconnaissance flights entailed “no gains” and “no risk except perhaps down the road” while the gains from airstrikes were “great and [the] risks very great.” Responding to Nixon’s doubts, Kissinger conceded that “to do nothing” other than resume escorted reconnaissance flights would not be “a calamity,” but he directly challenged the president’s conclusion by arguing that the cost of diminished credibility incurred by only conducting escorted aerial reconnaissance would accumulate “over a period of time” and would be even “greater than” the “enormous” short-term risk of airstrikes.\footnote{Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 36.} Expressing his persistent reputational domino fears, Kissinger argued that if the United States did not reassert its resolve and respond this time, it “may be forced into an even bolder move a year from now” by events in Vietnam or elsewhere.\footnote{Ibid., 37.} When Nixon expressed concern that he could not “brush off the fact that [the North Koreans] say they will take us on,” Kissinger again sought to readjust Nixon’s risk calculation by emphasizing the “enormous” long-term credibility gain of “taking on [the] toughest character in [the] Communist camp and facing him down.”\footnote{Ibid., 37.}

**Assessing the Potential Costs of Retaliation.** Despite their disagreement over the potential benefits of military action, opponents and proponents of retaliation shared concern about the potentially significant military and political costs if the United States failed to deter escalation after its retaliation. Each side generally agreed that the United States could not “**handle . . . a major [North Korean] assault of any duration against South Korea**” without significant diversions of military resources from Southeast Asia, and expressed concern that...
U.S. public opinion and resolve could turn against them if a larger conflict erupted.  

Furthermore, the risk of escalation was exacerbated by the fact that any North Korean counter-response to U.S. retaliation would likely include attacks on South Korean assets, which might prompt the South Koreans to take unilateral retaliatory actions and confound U.S. efforts to control escalation. Nonetheless and despite of the agreement on the potential magnitude of the costs, opponents differed with proponents in how the risks of escalation and the negative effects on public opinion compared to the potential benefits.

Senior military advisors were some of the most cautious advocates of retaliation and were wary of the potential costs of escalation. Their presentations to Nixon and the NSC suggest that they thought the unquantifiable gains in deterrence from maintaining or enhancing U.S. credibility could still outweigh the risks if the likelihood of escalation could be kept very small by carefully choosing an appropriate retaliatory action and by employing the full range of military deterrents (including nuclear weapons). Admiral McCain, the Commander in Chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC) and the next step below the Secretary of Defense in the war fighting chain of command, clearly preferred a more “positive response” to the shootdown than

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194 Ambassador Porter reported that he made this argument to President Park, cabling: “[E]veryone knows that [the U.S.] could strike [the] North Koreans and that they do not have the power to strike back at United States. This made it inevitable that their counterblow would probably escalate matters considerably because it would be against [the] Republic of Korea, perhaps cities or major installations.” (“Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, April 18, 1969, 0300Z” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 43, my emphasis.). A CIA special national intelligence estimate issued just four months before the EC-121 shootdown supported this conclusion, arguing that although North Korea would not try “to provoke . . . a resumption of major hostilities … [war] might result from miscalculations - for example … North Korea may overplay its hand and lead the South Koreans to retaliate heavily.” (“Special National Intelligence Estimate, SNIE 14.2–69, Washington, January 30, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 2). It is interesting that the CIA apparently assumed the United States would not be provoked into a heavy retaliation. That assumption might be based on the presumption that U.S. officials would agree with the CIA assessment that heavy retaliation was not in the United States’ best interest.

195 Risk is usually characterized as a function of two components, the magnitude of the potential cost and the likelihood of incurring those costs. Thus, even though the potential cost might be very high, the overall risk might still be low if the likelihood of incurring that high cost is sufficiently small.
President Johnson’s response to the USS Pueblo seizure to avoid appearing like “a paper tiger.”¹⁹⁶ Using the responses to the Pueblo incident as a preliminary guide, the JCS suggested low risk options for an “initial response,” including a diplomatic demand for redress, more reconnaissance, and/or destroying North Korean aircraft that ventured out of North Korean airspace. They advised the president, however, that if he, too, wanted a more “positive response,” then air attacks on North Korean airfields would have an “excellent” chance of success. They implied that receiving “redress” and the ensuing deterrent effect was worth the expected loss of two to five strike aircraft and what they considered to be an acceptably small risk of escalating into a larger conflict.¹⁹⁷

Kissinger’s military advisor, Col. Alexander M. Haig, was much more explicit than the JCS about the importance of minimizing risk in a candid memo to Kissinger. He argued that the risk-to-reward calculation of retaliation would be favorable and worthwhile only if the United States minimized the risk of repeating the “inching escalation” of Vietnam by using all of its deterrents, including threat of nuclear attack.¹⁹⁸ Haig advised Kissinger that “a military retaliatory strike of some type [was] called for” but “must be based on [the President’s] ability and willingness to cope with the worst case response situation” of North Korean retaliatory “ground and/or air attacks across the DMZ.”¹⁹⁹ Using thinly veiled references to nuclear forces and emphasizing resolve, Haig argued that the United States needed “the capability to contain

¹⁹⁷ “Paper Prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington, April 15, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 16-17. At an NSC meeting on April 16th, General Earle Wheeler, Chairman of the JCS, reviewed military options and implied that in addition to fighter escorts for future reconnaissance flights, air strikes against North Korean air defenses by 24 to 250 aircraft (with projected losses of 2% to 8%, depending on the tactics selected) or, secondarily, ship to shore bombardment had the best chances of achieving the desired ends, though they might prompt a counterattack. However, a show of force, a blockade of North Korean ports, opportunistic destruction of a North Korean aircraft, artillery attacks on targets adjacent to the DMZ, and ground raids across the DMZ would either be an ineffective deterrent or generate too many undesirable consequences. (“Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, Washington, April 16, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 29-30).
¹⁹⁸ “Memorandum From the President’s Military Adviser (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 16, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 27.
¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 27. Haig felt the president’s willingness was “far more significant” to determine than was “the configuration of the size of [the] strike force.”
attacks with some reasonable assurance of success” and “the enemy must know that we have this capability and the intent to use it.” This required “a demonstrated willingness to provide whatever may be necessary from domestic and worldwide resources.” Consequently, “if the President [was] unwilling to trigger all of the signaling devices at his command to convey his/U.S. intent to go the limit if required,” Haig could not recommend “overt attack against the North Korean airfield.”

For Haig, the damage to the perception of U.S. resolve could only be repaired safely by a subsequent demonstration of very strong resolve. Haig’s “calculus of retaliation” required the United States to use every tool of deterrence including nuclear threats to minimize the chance of the United States being caught up in a cycle of escalation that could severely strain its ability to sustain combat in both Vietnam and Korea, or that might further damage its credibility if it had to back down after climbing a few rungs of the escalation ladder. If U.S. leaders could not muster the resolve to “go to the limit” then, at best, they might “consider [a] submarine ambush” as “a measure of punitive action” that would also provide “a great deal of domestic lard for scorched tempers.” Otherwise, Haig “fear[ed]” prophetically that the “only course of action would be a repeat [aerial reconnaissance] mission with fighter escort.”

Kissinger put more emphasis on the benefits and assessed less potential cost than his military advisor. He justified his persistent advocacy of retaliation with his firm belief that long-term credibility gains would outweigh the costs even if the conflict escalated to a brief war. He, therefore, was more willing than Col. Haig or the JCS to “contemplate chaos” and to use tactical

200 Memorandum From the President’s Military Adviser (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 16, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972., 27, my emphasis. It is unclear from Haig’s comments if he was only referring to tactical nuclear weapons or if he considered “signaling” with strategic nuclear forces as well, but Kissinger’s comments suggest it was probably only tactical nuclear weapons.

201 Memorandum From the President’s Military Adviser (Haig) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 16, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972., 27, my emphasis.
nuclear weapons if necessary. Kissinger told Nixon that airstrikes might “turn out not to be so risky” in “the long run” not only because a major conflict was unlikely if the United States used all its tools of deterrence but also because the United States would still come out ahead in the long-term cost-benefit analysis even if an intense but short conflict erupted in which the United States used tactical nuclear weapons to prevail against North Korea. Kissinger echoed Haig when he added, “we have to be ready to go very, very far in case it leads to ground action.” He acknowledged that “we can stop [escalating] if we are willing to look down” but to do so would be “a very tough one to bite early in [the] Administration.” If Nixon did not want to back down in the face of North Korean escalation, Kissinger thought they “might have to go to tactical nuclears [sic] and clean it up. All hell will break loose for two months, but at the end of the road there will be peace in Asia.”

Even though the North Koreans might have based their attack on a reasonable situational assessment of U.S. capability and motivation rather than an underestimation of U.S. resolve, the logic of reputational domino reasoning associated with the United States’ existing overextended deterrence strategy made a potentially disproportionate and costly response to this provocation still worthwhile to Kissinger. Kissinger’s reasoning might make sense if one believed other nations were actively seeking to challenge the influence of the United States at a number of locations around the world or that nervous allies might hedge their bets because, in this case, both the resolve and the capability components of U.S. credibility might be in doubt.

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203 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 35. Kissinger added that he “owe[d] it to [Nixon] to say that” even though he did not think it would “come to that.”

204 Ibid., 35. Kissinger wrote a book in 1956, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, about the possibility of acceptable limited nuclear war.
while the United States was heavily involved in Vietnam. Although Kissinger arrogantly underestimated the possibility of escalation not working out as planned, a short successful conflict on the peninsula would likely quell some foreign doubts about U.S. capability and resolve, particularly if the president authorized the use of tactical nuclear weapons. Unfortunately for Kissinger’s calculation, the possibility of situational attributions complicates the ability to estimate the gains in apparent resolve produced by retaliation as much as it complicates the ability to estimate the losses of apparent resolve from refraining from retaliation. In each case, one can only guess how much the action will affect one’s reputation in a way that will be transferred to other situations. Kissinger was willing to risk using tactical nuclear weapons to obtain gains that were more uncertain than he believed.

As with the potential military ramifications of escalation, proponents and opponents also recognized retaliation’s potential toll on public opinion but tended to weight it according to their personal emphasis on ausussen- or innenpolitik. Thus, for example, Nixon and Kissinger hoped that retaliation would reinvigorate the public’s tolerance of military action in support of strategic goals. Nixon thought the press was “eroding [the] self-confidence of this country”—a “problem . . . not answered” by choosing only to resume escorted reconnaissance. In a private conversation with Nixon, Kissinger played to this sentiment in his push for airstrikes, saying he would “favor” the “low risk” action of resuming reconnaissance flights with fighter escort “if there were no [Vietnam] war going on and if we had not slipped back so much in the last ten years.” Nixon followed Kissinger’s lead in transforming the Vietnam War from a factor that seriously complicated retaliation to one that justified it, adding: “because there is [Vietnam]

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205 Kissinger, White House Years, 316.

206 This is particularly true if one could reasonably expect observers to interpret the retaliation as a rational response that depended on the situation. A response that could be widely viewed as irrational or a “madman” reaction might yield more predictable reputational benefits.

207 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 35. Nixon’s concern with public opinion as an argument against strikes is less apparent in the documents than in his memoir. See Nixon, Memoirs, 384.
and because there is [a] general erosion of moral fiber of [the] country . . . a bold move is indicated.”

Although this concern about what was in effect a dimension of the nation’s collective masculinity weakly echoed Kristin Hoganson’s conclusions that national manhood itself was a U.S. national security concern in the late nineteenth century, the need to display personal masculinity and/or bolster national masculinity did not surface to the degree Robert Dean and Frederick Logevall noted in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ discourse on the Vietnam War. Certainly, the very fact that Nixon and a number of his national security advisors interpreted the EC-121 attack as a non-situational challenge to the nation’s resolve rather than a situational reflection of relative capability and interests caused their response to be inseparably infused with elements of masculinity. Challenges to national resolve felt like challenges to personal masculinity, particularly to those in a position to authorize or implement a demonstration of national resolve. Thus, for example, Nixon took umbrage that a “pipsqueak” country would dare provoke the United States, and Admiral McCain worried about the United States appearing to be a “paper tiger.” Similarly, Kissinger suggested that the administration should avoid talking tough “just to prove [its] manhood,” yet in retrospect chose to suggest that Nixon had “no stomach” for retaliation rather than being one of the “reasonable men” who simply “differ[ed]” in his assessment of the situation. Nonetheless, the fact that retaliation was weighed primarily in terms of risks due to stretched national capability and potential political costs of risking another unwanted military conflict suggests that, while masculinity was clearly a

208 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 35-36.

209 Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood, 4; Dean, Imperial Brotherhood, 198, 202, 234-240; Logevall, Choosing War, 393.

210 Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 36; Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1969, 4:141.

211 Kissinger Telcon with Max Frankel, Apr. 16, 1969, DSNA; Kissinger, White House Years, 321.
factor in the initial knee-jerk reaction to the attack, it was not a driving factor in the final
evaluation.

The modest presence and effect of masculinity arguments was likely facilitated by the
relatively reserved response of the American public to the incident. At Nixon’s request,
Secretary of Defense Laird conducted a personal poll of his former colleagues on Capitol Hill
and concluded that “almost everyone except for two [felt]” positive about how Nixon was
“handling himself and keeping his cool.”212 Similarly, an NSC staffer for the Far East, Richard L.
Sneider, found public “demands for” and “warnings against retaliation” to “have been equally
small.”213 As Sneider aptly concluded, “mobilizing sustained public support” was “[a]
fundamental issue on the Korean decision.”214 With so little public outcry for a muscular
response, Kissinger actually suggested that someone might need to make a speech “to keep
[the] pot boiling a bit so people do not think [the crisis] is all over.” In the meantime, he
recommended that the administration generate “some thin thread of trying [to achieve a
diplomatic resolution]” before it retaliated.215

Laird’s Opposition. Nixon and Kissinger indicated that Americans needed their “self-
confidence” strengthened but it was far from clear that Congress and the public would accept
the resolve therapy they proposed.216 The potential damage that retaliation might do to U.S.

212 Kissinger Telcon with Melvin Laird, Apr 17, 1969, DNSA.

213 “Memorandum From Richard L. Sneider of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for
National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 18, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 37. Sneider
“guess[ed]” that Americans “will not give sustained support for the Korean action because too many will conclude that
U.S. vital national interests were not engaged, as they were in the Cuban missile crisis, sufficiently to justify the risks
of renewed hostilities in Korea” (Ibid., 39).

214 Ibid., 37-39. Although Sneider agreed with Nixon and Kissinger that “[a] strong response in Korea is almost
certain to bring the North Vietnamese up short and heighten their concern about the risks of prolonging the Vietnam
war,” he also was concerned that “[t]he initial shock effect on Hanoi could well be lost if there is a serious erosion of
domestic support for the Korean action leading to renewed pressures against the Vietnam commitment.” He left it up
to Kissinger to evaluate this risk to U.S. credibility “against the risk of inaction.”

215 For “pot boiling,” see Kissinger Telcon with Bryce Harlow, Apr 17, 1969, DNSA; for “thin thread,” see Kissinger
Telcon with Richard Nixon, Apr. 17, 1969, DNSA.

216 “Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National
Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 17, 1969, 8 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 35.
innenpolitik loomed particularly large for the two most senior opponents to retaliation in Nixon’s cabinet, Secretary of State Rogers and the politically savvy secretary of defense, Melvin Laird. Laird in particular generated some of the most significant and effective opposition to Kissinger’s position. From his viewpoint, any credibility benefits resulting from retaliation were far more meager than proponents asserted and were surely not worth the potential cost. In fact, Laird’s chief complaint appears to have been that Nixon seemed willing to run significant strategic and domestic risks to repair U.S. credibility that Laird believed had been damaged only modestly and inadvertently by the tactical errors of U.S. and/or North Korean pilots. Although some critical documents still remain classified, Laird hints in his authorized biography that the EC-121 might have strayed into North Korean airspace prior to being shot down and that an analysis of the North Korean pilots’ radio traffic made him think they acted “impulsively” and without authorization from top North Korean officials.217

Despite his understandable objections to risking war over what he thought was an accident precipitated by poor U.S. military planning, Laird chose to engage the proponents’ credibility argument on its own terms.218 In a lengthy memo to Nixon, Laird couched his opposition to retaliation within the argument that U.S. credibility was not at stake, stating that he did not “believe that a failure to act militarily would be interpreted by the North Vietnamese

217 Laird agreed with the NSA assessment that the downing was caused by pilot error and was therefore not a deliberate provocation (Van Atta, With Honor, 187. See also, Hersh, The Price of Power, 69-70). However, it is plausible that the North Korean pilots were given instructions in advance to engage these regularly scheduled reconnaissance flights, and thus no additional authorization via radio traffic was required for a pre-planned attack. COMUSFK reported on April 11th, 1969 that “[d]uring recent … meetings, the North Koreans have been particularly vehement and vicious in warning UN forces about provocative acts.” COMUSFK “suggested that aircrews be especially alert and prepared to abort at the first indication of any North Korean reaction.” (Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1969, 4:133.) Furthermore, CIA analysts wrote that the attack “had all the earmarks of a deliberate attempt … to revive a high level of tension” and that the North Koreans “almost certainly planned this move in advance.” (FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 23, 32).

218 Van Atta offers a similar interpretation: “In reality, Laird saw little real value, but major substantial risks, in payback, but he wasn’t about to say so to the president who was itching for a way to look tough.” (Van Atta, With Honor, 186).
leadership as an act of [U.S.] vacillation or irresolution.” Rather, he thought a strike against 
North Korea might actually strengthen North Vietnam’s position at the bargaining table. 
Furthermore, although Laird initially told Kissinger that he “was not worried about public opinion” 
because the administration would get “a bad reaction either way,” Laird used concerns about 
the adverse effects of U.S. public opinion on U.S. credibility as the primary vector for expressing 
his opposition to retaliation. 

Projecting his own misgivings on the public, Laird asserted that the public could reasonably shift responsibility for the shootdown to the United States because it was “not clear” that the United States required such a large “volume of reconnaissance” or that it was really unable to provide “adequate armed escort” for such missions. Consequently, the public (and, implicitly, Laird) could “easily” argue that the administration “unnecessarily exposed ship and air crews to risks near North Korea,” and would be “compounding [its] error” by retaliating “for a situation which evolved from poor planning in the first place.”

Laird suggested the United States could maintain its credibility by selecting “alternatives . . . which would be palatable to the U.S. people” and which would still “demonstrate [U.S.] resolve.” At the same time, he felt any U.S. losses or escalation resulting

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220 Laird expressed concern that a strike could: 1) “give the [North Vietnamese and Vietcong] encouragement that we would have to withdraw, either sooner or in a less effective way, or divert major resources from the Southeast Asia effort” if retaliation escalated into “another major conflict;” 2) erode potential “public approval” for planned strikes in Cambodia and Laos; and 3) undermine what he considered to be the United States’ beneficial status at the Paris peace talks of seeming “forthcoming, reasoned, and willing to de-escalate.”

221 Kissinger Telcon with Laird, Apr. 16, 1969, DNSA; “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, April 18, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 40-41. Four of the six main points of Laird’s memo to Nixon were devoted exclusively to the issue of public opinion.

222 A subsequent Congressional inquiry revealed that these reconnaissance missions had been escorted after the Pueblo seizure. (U.S. Congress, Inquiry into the U.S.S. Pueblo and EC-121 Plane Incidents: Hearings before the Special Subcommittee on the U. S. S. Pueblo of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, Ninety-First Congress, First Session (March 4, 5, 6, 10, 14, 17, 19, 20, April 25, and 28, 1969) (Washington: GPO, 1969), 910.) Furthermore, most of the aircraft that had been deployed to Korea as augmentation after the Pueblo incident were still in Korea when the EC-121 was shot down. Laird’s comments suggest he was aware of this prior writing the memo.

223 “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, April 18, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 40, original emphasis.
from retaliation risked “eroding” public and congressional support that the administration needed in other military matters, including Vietnam, and could lead “to general public disenchantment across a broad range of affairs.” Given these potential effects of souring public opinion and the possible ill effects of retaliation on the Vietnam War, Laird concluded that although an airstrike was the best of the retaliatory options, the risks of a strike still “outweigh[ed] the potential benefits by a substantial margin.”

In fact, Laird’s comments to Kissinger a few weeks after the crisis that “at best” the United States would “have lost some additional aircraft and crew” and “at worst” it would have faced “major military action” suggested that Laird actually saw no value in attempting to reassert U.S. credibility in this instance. Instead, his congressional sensibilities for *innenpolitik* made him concerned that “later investigations by Congress or others would have revealed the questionable utility of specific parts of our aerial reconnaissance program,” which “would have put in doubt the wisdom, in turn, of retaliatory acts and subsequent events.”

Kissinger and Laird were at complete odds. As Kissinger communicated in a tart reply, the utility of the reconnaissance flights had little if any bearing on the decision to retaliate. To Kissinger, the central questions were: how badly had U.S. credibility been damaged, could retaliation repair that damage, and was it worth the risk? But to Laird, the damage to U.S. credibility in this case was so obviously trivial compared to the compounded potential costs of escalation and congressional condemnation that it hardly deserved mention. Nonetheless, Laird did not dispute the general importance of U.S. credibility. Rather, he implied that North Vietnam and other observers would attribute the lack of retaliation to situational constraints rather than to a


226 Henry A. Kissinger, Memo to Melvin P. Laird, May 19, 1969. DDRS. Kissinger wrote: “I could maintain with complete justification that retaliation might have precluded a repetition of similar violations by an outlaw nation. I would prefer to categorize the President’s decision not to retaliate as a manifestation of his patience and wisdom and not an outgrowth of logical reasoning on the justification or lack of justification for the flights themselves.”
lack of U.S. resolve. Therefore, retaliation would do little to strengthen the United States’ reputation for resolve yet would run the risk of putting a severe drain on U.S. capability and undermine the domestic component of U.S. resolve.

**Nixon’s Cost-Benefit Decision and Lessons Learned.** Laird and the secretary of state’s concerns about public opinion reinforced Nixon’s own doubts, and Kissinger’s grim assessment that the decision to retaliate could “make or break [the] President’s administration” and could lead to the use of tactical nuclear weapons appeared to weigh heavily on Nixon’s mind. 227 Nixon generally agreed with Kissinger’s unwavering points about long-term credibility gains on the phone that evening, but his subsequent decision to oppose striking North Korea belied his view that “no gains” at “no risk” in the near-term was more prudent (though distasteful) than seeking “great” long-term gains at “very great” near-term risk. 228 As the North Koreans apparently calculated correctly, Nixon had few good responses to their provocations. Token retaliation with a minimal chance of escalation might salve some domestic tempers (but they did not seem to be all that “scorched” in the first place) and it would do little to nothing to affect the foreign perception of U.S. resolve. More substantial retaliation could be offered if unlikely backchannel deals could be made with the Soviets and the Chinese to exert restraint on North Korea, but the United States would likely have to pay an exorbitant quid pro quo to convince them to help. Without guarantees from the greater communist powers, substantial retaliation needed to be backed up by unequivocal but unpalatable commitments either to drain conventional resources from Vietnam or to use nuclear threats. Otherwise, if Nixon bluffed on

227 Nixon admitted in his memoirs that he was concerned that, due to the Vietnam War, the United States “did not have the resources or public support for another war in another place.” However, the documents express more concern about bolstering the public’s moral fiber and self-confidence than is expressed in Nixon’s memoir. Nixon, Memoirs, 384-385.

228 Looking back on the incident in his memoirs, Kissinger wrote: “I never had the impression that Nixon had his heart in a retaliatory attack. He had procrastinated too much; he had not really pressed for it in personal conversation; he had not engaged in the relentless maneuvering by which he bypassed opposition when his mind was made up.” Kissinger, White House Years, 320.
either of those options and the North Koreans called him on it, the United States would lose far more credibility than it would if Nixon offered no retaliation to the provocation.

Although a policymaker’s gut feeling about the importance of retaliation in bolstering U.S. credibility could be a powerful motivator in the abstract, retaliation’s nebulous credibility benefits came up light in the scales when weighed against the more imaginable, tangible, and calculable costs of another war on the peninsula. Consequently, Nixon chose only to resume reconnaissance flights with fighter escort and to conduct “a second round of bombing of the North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia.” Nixon thought the addition of this so-called Operation LUNCH against targets in Cambodia (which he had suggested to Kissinger earlier in the crisis), “would avoid the risks of a direct retaliation” yet “still would be an effective way to impress the Communist leaders of both North Korea and North Vietnam with our resolve.”

Given that the United States had already conducted one round of similar bombings, it is hard to imagine that a second round compensated for any North Vietnamese perceptions of irresolution generated by the EC-121 incident or that bombing Cambodia in support of an on-going war did anything to change impressions of U.S. resolve some twenty-two hundred miles away in North Korea.

The EC-121 incident clearly frustrated Nixon and Kissinger. In the moment of crisis, the palpable fear of escalation trumped the uncertain benefits to U.S. credibility and prevented Nixon from projecting the collective resolve that he and Kissinger both desired. The crisis prompted Kissinger to streamline the mechanics of handling crises within the administration and also to struggle with the difficult balance of how to achieve future deterrence without incurring a

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230 Contrary to Richard Reeves assertion that bombing Cambodia “[made] little sense to anyone but [Nixon]”, it appears others expressed similar reasoning (Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), 70.) George Lincoln, Director, Office of Emergency Preparedness said not doing airstrikes would mean “they would have to take a very tough line in Vietnam ... That would mean the risk of Cambodia.” (“Record of a Telephone Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 18, 1969, 9:15 a.m.” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 45).
large risk of escalation.\textsuperscript{231} Reflecting on the incident, Kissinger realized that the administration’s first mistake was that it did not follow up on the JCS’s recommendation to make “diplomatic demands for appropriate redress.” The absence of a diplomatic option for redress forced the administration to choose between the politically difficult false dilemma of retaliating militarily to restore credibility or just posturing with little effect on credibility.\textsuperscript{232} If, however, a military option was necessary, Kissinger concluded that the administration needed to avoid appearing timid but also to avoid “signaling [a] prelude to major war.” Kissinger, who had learned that the “price you pay really isn’t much greater for a strike with twenty-five aircraft than with three,” concluded that a “quick, ferocious and decisive response to a major North Korean provocation” that was “clearly a ‘one shot’ operation” might hit the right balance of deterring future provocations while discouraging escalation.\textsuperscript{233}

Finally, Nixon and Kissinger learned that their secretaries of defense and state could not be relied upon to fall easily into line with the “Nix–inger” approach to foreign affairs or with their emphasis on credibility. Nixon “raged against [those] advisors” for opposing retaliation and it was not long before both Laird and Roger’s fell out of favor.\textsuperscript{234} Nixon and Kissinger found Laird’s decision to suspend temporarily U.S. reconnaissance flights around the globe especially vexing in this regard. Laird so desired to “lean over backward” to avoid another reconnaissance

\textsuperscript{231} Kissinger, \textit{White House Years}, 321. Kissinger created the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) as the result of the crisis. The WSAG was a small interdepartmental group within the NSC that Kissinger used as a more manageable core element for handling subsequent crises. See also, Asaf Siniver, \textit{Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: the Machinery of Crisis} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

\textsuperscript{232} “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, April 18, 1969” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 41. As Kissinger related, “we were demanding nothing of the North Koreans the acceptance of which could be considered compensation and the refusal of which would justify retaliation.” (Kissinger, \textit{White House Years}, 319-320).

\textsuperscript{233} “Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, July 2, 1969, 11:42 a.m.–12:28 p.m.” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 71-72; “Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting, Washington, September 17, 1969, 4:45–6:30 p.m.” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 108. During their meeting in August, Nixon told Park: “If North Korea provokes another provocative incident, we will react, are prepared to react and will take measures harsher than the enemy provocation. This message was given to the Soviet Ambassador in the U.S. and I believe it was conveyed to North Korea.” (“Memorandum of Conversation, San Francisco, California, August 21, 1969, 4:15–6:15 p.m.” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 96).

\textsuperscript{234} Kissinger, \textit{White House Years}, 320; Van Atta, \textit{With Honor}, 186, 256-57. Kissinger’s account is understandably sanitized when it comes to his own opinion of them.
plane downing that he suspended reconnaissance flights not only in Korea but also “near the Soviet Union, China, in the Mediterranean and over Cuba” for nearly three weeks until their safety and necessity could be reevaluated. Laird believed that poor reconnaissance procedures precipitated an unnecessary crisis in Korea and might do so elsewhere. This decision “angered” Nixon and Kissinger because, when viewed through the lens of reputational domino fears, it set “the precedent that a shootdown of a single plane could put an end to our global reconnaissance system” by encouraging similar attacks on other reconnaissance planes. Kissinger was right. Laird should have suspended such flights only in the Korean theater and ordered commanders to increase the safety margins of the flights outside the Korean theater until the review was completed. Allowing a specific incident under specific circumstances to dictate one’s actions in other areas and under different circumstances increases the likelihood that what should have been a situational attribution becomes a reputational attribution. Temporarily halting reconnaissance flights in the Korean theater until the military could assess the situation would look like situationally driven prudence, but halting reconnaissance of the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and in the Mediterranean would look like a general disposition toward risk aversion.

The EC-121 incident, troop withdrawal, and credibility. As Kissinger stated in his memoirs, the decision not to retaliate “was a close call . . . on which reasonable men could

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235 Kissinger Telcon with Melvin Laird, Apr. 21, 1969, DNSA; Kissinger, White House Years, 317, 320. In Laird’s defense, he may have interpreted Kissinger’s comment that “we couldn’t afford to lose another unprotected plane” more broadly than Kissinger intended. Reconnaissance flights resumed on 8 May 1969, nine days after Nixon directly order the resumption of reconnaissance flights. (Memorandum by the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 29, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 46).

236 Nixon, Memoirs, 385; Kissinger, White House Years, 321; “Memorandum by the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, April 29, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 46. Nixon and Kissinger’s complaints about delays in getting armed escorts for the Korean reconnaissance flights, however, likely do not reflect adequate appreciation for the difficulties of arranging such escorts when the escort aircraft and the associated ground control radar were already heavily tasked for the Vietnam War. Laird did not want any “noticeable degradation in Vietnam” reconnaissance until the President or [Kissinger] order[ed] it.” (Kissinger Telcon with Melvin Laird, Apr. 21, 1969, DNSA).
The high-level debate between such reasonable men, however, highlighted three issues with particular relevance to the subsequent debate over withdrawing U.S. ground forces from South Korea. First, these national security decision makers evaluated the benefits of retaliation primarily in terms of how ensuing changes in the perception of U.S. credibility would affect the Korean peninsula, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War in general. Proponents of retaliation worried that a failure to retaliate would be viewed by friendly and unfriendly states as an indicator of a U.S. trend toward irresolution rather than as reflecting constraints of the specific situation. In contrast, opponents worried that retaliation would undermine U.S. credibility through the loss of domestic public support and questioned the ability of retaliation to generate a worthwhile level of credibility with foreign audiences.

Second, the positions taken in the retaliation debate revealed a more fundamental division amongst Nixon’s national security advisors regarding the relative importance of *aussen* - versus *innenpolitik*, with Kissinger and the JCS emphasizing the effect on foreign audiences and Laird emphasizing the effect on domestic audiences in a pattern that was repeated over the issues of Vietnamization, troop withdrawal from South Korea, the end of the draft, and, ultimately, the openness of government in conducting its international affairs. Each of these players was similarly wary of the potential costs of escalation after retaliation and generally agreed that severe escalation was unlikely. Their net assessment of the advisability of retaliation, therefore, rested primarily on how they assessed the credibility benefit of having the national leadership appear resolute and how they assessed the potential credibility and political costs of sapping the apparent resolve of the Congress and its constituents.

Lastly, the Vietnam War overshadowed both sides of the debate. It greatly increased the perceived stakes on each side of the credibility argument and made the possibility of

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significant escalation in Korea unacceptable to all of Nixon’s key advisors except Kissinger.238 Had the Vietnam War made much less of a demand on U.S. material resources and had it not eroded the perceived public resolve to fight, Nixon’s impetus to retaliate would have encountered far less resistance. Alternatively, if the Vietnam War had been less taxing on U.S. capability and public resolve, the North Korean leader might have been far less confident about testing U.S. credibility in the first place.

Less than three months after the incident, Kissinger stated that “the main lesson” he and Nixon had “learned from the incident was that the trick in any action taken would be to preclude a counter blow.” 239 Kissinger failed to convince the president to strike because he failed to convince him that he could preclude such a counterblow. This demand for highly confident deterrence (which many officials presumed to rest upon a substantial U.S. military presence on the peninsula) created a persistent tension with the competing desire of other officials to withdraw U.S. forces so as to reduce the financial burden of military overextension and to minimize the chance that those forces would automatically entangle the United States in another Asian war and further alienate the domestic population. The difficulty of resolving the paradox between deterrence and disentanglement manifested itself in the push for and the opposition to the subsequent partial troop withdrawals less than a year later—a move that saved money but also weakened deterrence on the Korean peninsula while only partially reducing the risk of entanglement.240

238 During a press conference on April 18, 1969, Nixon candidly admitted that his response to the incident was tempered by concerns about “how responding in one area might affect a major interest of the United States in another area – an area like Vietnam, [which was] the top priority area for [the United States].” (“Transcript of the President’s New Conference on Foreign and Domestic Affairs,” New York Times, 19 April 1969.)


240 If the United States completely withdrew its forces, its ability to deter might drop substantially but it would not have to worry about responding to future provocations to maintain its credibility—it would be a South Korean problem. However, partial withdrawals still potentially exposed U.S. forces to provocative acts while reducing to some degree the overall deterrent effect. However, South Korean president Park might also have been less inclined to march north if he knew there were fewer U.S. troops on the peninsula to back him up. Furthermore, when the troop withdrawal decision was made, the United States sought to reduce the risk of automatic entanglement by
Partial Withdrawal from Korea within Nixon’s Grand Strategy

Nixon’s cautious response to the EC-121 incident kept the tragic attack from potentially turning into a far more serious international incident. The short-lived crisis, however, caused little delay in Nixon’s efforts to tackle some of his top agenda items, including extracting the United States from Vietnam and, more generally, reconfiguring the U.S. global military posture to fit with his vision for the Cold War. Within three months of the attack, Nixon met with President Thieu of South Vietnam to inform him that the United States would soon begin withdrawing twenty thousand U.S. troops as part of what Laird dubbed the “Vietnamization” of the war. On that same trip, Nixon also put other Asian leaders on notice when he discussed with reporters his intent to shift much more of the burden of deterrence and war fighting onto the United States’ Asian partners. This early expression of what later came to be known as the “Nixon Doctrine” was closely entwined with the United States’ experience in Vietnam. The U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea, however, was a significant component of Nixon’s strategic vision for the region, and it serves as a better example of the Nixon Doctrine and the practical questions it raised about deterrence and credibility than Vietnamization.

Nixon presented the preliminary concept of his “doctrine” on Guam on 25 July 1969 via “off the record” remarks to a group of newsmen who were reporting on his thirteen-day globe-girdling trip. Nixon had just observed the historic splashdown of the Apollo 11 capsule and was enroute to explain the coming changes to the U.S. military posture to the heads of state of the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and South Vietnam when he surprised reporters with a candid “background” discussion of a set of principles he planned to apply to the United States’ involvement in Asia.241

repositioning most U.S. forces farther away from the DMZ and thus reducing the likelihood they would be immediately involved in an act of North Korean provocation.

241 Nixon also included India, Pakistan, and Romania on his itinerary with the latter two serving as possible back door avenues to inquiring about talks with China. Kissinger was also surprised that Nixon had chosen to state these ideas openly at that time and without vetting it through the normal process. (Kissinger, White House Years, 223; Hoff, “A
Echoing the title of his 1967 *Foreign Affairs* article, Nixon told reporters that the United States must decide what “its role in Asia and in the Pacific” will be “after the end of the war in Vietnam.” In an unscripted meandering discussion, Nixon outlined the basic concept of what became known as the Nixon Doctrine and revealed what most commentators viewed as its three most significant aspects: 1) the United States would remain involved in Asia, keep its treaty commitments, and provide economic aid; 2) it would continue to extend its nuclear shield over countries threatened by “a major power involving nuclear weapons”; but 3) Asian countries would have to provide their own manpower to fight internal and non-nuclear external threats so the United States could “avoid that creeping involvement which eventually simply submerges you.”

Nixon’s reference to the “submerging” effect of the Vietnam War was obvious. When Nixon took office, the war was costing an average of $2.5 billion per month. It was a major drag on the U.S. economy and caused so much inflationary pressure that eventually the United States devalued the dollar in 1971. The war was also fracturing the domestic political scene. For example, a poll in October 1969 found that a record portion of Americans (58 percent) had become “disillusioned” with the war. Thus, Nixon’s doctrine implicitly admitted that the Vietnam War was a mistaken application of a containment policy that was too inflexible and too costly, and that the United States could not afford financially or politically to get dragged into another similar conflict over non-vital interests.

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242 Richard Nixon, "Informal Remarks in Guam with Newsmen," July 25, 1969. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2140. The Nixon “Doctrine” evolved over the next couple of years and was presented in a more refined form in successive annual reports to Congress entitled “US Foreign Policy for the 1970s” beginning in 1970. The doctrine was initially envisioned to apply to Asia, but as Nixon hinted in his comments in Guam, helping friendly countries fight but not doing the fighting for them was “a good general principle… which we would hope would be our policy generally throughout the world.”

243 Nam, 62.

As knowledgeable contemporaries and subsequent historians noted, the ideas proposed in the doctrine were not newly minted by the Nixon administration; the central concepts had been circulating among the foreign policy community for some years.\textsuperscript{245} Nonetheless, as NSC staffer Winton Lord aptly stated, the Nixon Doctrine “[implemented what past U.S. administrations] attempted only in part, paid lip service to, or postponed to a vague longer term” and, therefore, it was “indeed a significant new policy thrust.”\textsuperscript{246} Nixon’s new “doctrine” consolidated a pattern of U.S. actions to recast the U.S. containment policy in Asia that had been ongoing for months prior to the announcement. In fact, the fundamental ideas that coalesced into the Nixon Doctrine, including Nixon’s desire for a reduction of U.S. forces in Korea, were present the day he took office.

At the time of Nixon’s inauguration, the vast reserves of U.S. power were being depleted while the Soviet Union was closing the gap in military capability. The Vietnam War seemed to be confirming that the United States had become noticeably overextended. Nixon thought that injecting more “realism” into the how the United States dealt with its Communist opponents and that dealing with them based on mutual and conflicting interests rather than primarily based on conflicting ideology would change the structure of the Cold War sufficiently to allow the United States to trim its costly containment posture put in place early in the Cold War. Although the Vietnam War was a major distraction and impediment to implementing Nixon’s strategic vision for détente, his administration quickly proceeded with reviewing the United States’ global military posture of nuclear and conventional forces, encouraging Japan to contribute more to the


\textsuperscript{246} Winston Lord, Memorandum to Henry Kissinger, Jan 23, 1970, “Issues Raised by the Nixon Doctrine for Asia,” DNSA.
world order, addressing the unfavorable U.S. balance of payments, and evaluating options in actual and potential military hot spots of Vietnam, the Middle East, and Western Europe.\textsuperscript{247}

As his \textit{Foreign Affairs} article presaged in 1967, Asia was a critical component within Nixon’s grand strategy. Nixon sought to extract the United States from Vietnam on minimally acceptable terms that would seemingly preserve American “honor,” restructure U.S. relations with China, reduce the costs of containment in Asia, and reduce the likelihood of getting entangled in another war like Vietnam. These objectives needed to be considered within the broader strategic assessment of the balance of power between the Communist and “free” worlds, an effort Nixon initiated on 21 January 1969 with the issuance of National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) 3, “U.S. Military Posture and the Balance of Power.”\textsuperscript{248} Well before the NSSM 3 strategic review was completed in September 1969, however, Nixon began taking action on a variety of issues that presumed a reduced defense posture in Asia such as Vietnamization, exploring the possibility of improved relations with mainland China, and reductions in U.S. forces and advisors in the Philippines, Taiwan, and Thailand.

\textit{The Nixon Doctrine and South Korea}. Although the realities of the Vietnam War inspired the Nixon Doctrine, Nixon’s desire to remove U.S. troops from South Korea and modernize the South Korean forces was a better example of the doctrine’s intent than “Vietnamization” and was viewed by some officials as “one of the best examples of the Nixon Doctrine at work.”\textsuperscript{249} “Vietnamization” was the Nixon administration’s desperate attempt to extract the United States


\textsuperscript{248} By October 1969, an important component of this review was realized when Nixon approved shifting the United States from its “two and a half wars” official policy (which sought to maintain sufficient military forces to fight simultaneous wars against the Soviets in Europe and against the Chinese and others such as the North Koreans in Asia while supporting a lesser country facing an insurgency) to what turned into a “one and a half war” strategic posture.

from the war with some dignity intact. In contrast, the Nixon Doctrine sought foremost to make U.S. military involvement abroad more sustainable. To achieve this, Nixon felt the United States must avoid being drawn into non-vital conflicts in the first place by removing and repositioning U.S. forces in Asia and, secondly, by reducing the overall cost of the deterrent Cold War posture of containment. Nixon believed that in the extant budget environment, he must “[draw] down [U.S.] strength somewhat or else the Congress [would] refuse to support anything.”250 He even wanted “to look hard at [the U.S.] presence” in Europe.251

Consequently, “Koreanization” of the combined U.S.-Korean defense posture opposing North Korea served as a much better example of the Nixon Doctrine. Indeed, Secretary of State Rogers considered Koreanization – not Vietnamization – to be “the first step” of the Nixon Doctrine.252 Nixon explained that his planned troop withdrawals from Korea, and the broader Nixon Doctrine, were “in essence . . . not a way to get out of [the region] but a way to be able to stay in by means of a long range, viable posture.”253 The withdrawal plan sought to address the strong concerns about another Korean conflict being sparked by either the North or the South that Ambassador Porter expressed in 1968 and carried forward into the Nixon administration. It also recognized the rapid improvement in the South Korean and Japanese economies and sought to leverage those developments into a new deterrence posture that would yield savings in the long term. As will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter, the application of the Nixon Doctrine to South Korea also raised practical questions about how effectively the new posture would deter a clear and present external threat, and it illustrated outside the highly charged issue of the Vietnam War how skeptics mobilized NSC-68 concerns about the

253 Ibid., 147. See also Nixon, Memoirs, 395.
credibility of extended deterrence to oppose an “innovative” effort to restructure a significant aspect of the United States’ approach to the Cold War.\footnote{Hoff, “A Revisionist View,” 109.}

As with other early indications of the emerging Nixon Doctrine, it was evident within classified deliberations during the first months of the administration that troop withdrawals from South Korea would likely play an important part in implementing Nixon’s vision for U.S. involvement in Asia. The questions asked in NSSM 9’s “Review of the International Situation” show that the administration was already in late January 1969 assessing factors that would affect a U.S. troop withdrawal in South Korea, such as the political stability and economic strength of South Korea, its inclination to retaliate unilaterally to North Korean provocations, and South Korean willingness to accept an enhanced regional security role by Japan.\footnote{US Treasury Response to NSSM-9, 23 January 1969, DNSA.} In February, Kissinger’s NSSM 27 “directed the completion” of the Johnson administration’s broad “Planning-Programming-Budgeting study for Korea” that had been precipitated by Ambassador Porter’s and Cyrus Vance’s fears of U.S. entanglement in unilateral action by South Korea. In March, the administration addressed military contingency planning for Korea. NSSM 34 “Contingency Planning Study for Korea” requested that State, Defense, and the CIA develop courses of action for “limited or full scale attacks by North Korea” and for “unilateral South Korean responses to North Korean provocation.”\footnote{“National Security Study Memorandum 34, Washington, March 21, 1969” in in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 8-9.}

The EC-121 crisis in April delayed the draft NSSM 27 and 34 reports by about three months but did not prompt Nixon to revise his initial guidance for the groups studying the issues.\footnote{NSSM 53 was issued on April 26\textsuperscript{th} to speed up the evaluation of contingency options, but it was rescinded on May 1, 1969 to allow NSSM 34 to continue as planned.} The debate over how to respond to the incident, however, reflected a split within the administration regarding the United States’ future global military posture that was echoed in the tenor of the two NSSM reports. Those who emphasized credibility during the EC-121 incident
also tended to oppose troop withdrawals from South Korea while those who were more concerned with the risk of escalation and/or domestic opinion, including Nixon, were more comfortable with withdrawing troops. In particular, the draft reports subtly revealed the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s abiding interest in a substantial military presence in South Korea and the prevailing State Department inclination toward revising the U.S. military presence there.

The NSSM 27 study, the broader of the two reports, expressed Nixon’s inclination toward “chang[ing] the character of [U.S.] involvement” in Asia, including its military posture. U.S. policymakers wrote that domestic “neo-isolationist sentiment,” budgetary strains, and increased perceptions of insecurity on the Korean peninsula had brought the United States to “a turning point with respect to Korea” that “could alter fundamentally the U.S.–Korea relationship.” The report evaluated the two main options the administration was considering without officially advocating for either. Nixon could either reaffirm the existing U.S. commitment to South Korea by restoring the strength of the U.S. forces in South Korea that U.S. policymakers had hollowed-out to meet the growing demands of the Vietnam War, or it could reduce its commitment to South Korea and other Asian nations by expecting those nations to provide more of their own military defense.

In contrast, the NSSM 34 contingency study did not entertain any changes to the nearly sixty-four thousand U.S. military personnel in South Korea. Rather, the JCS presumably staked out their opposition to troop reductions by overtly assuming that “[t]he size and location of U.S. forces [in Korea would] remain essentially unchanged” even though the concurrently developed report for NSSM 27 clearly indicated that South Korean “accelerated self-reliance”

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was one of two major options under consideration.\textsuperscript{261} The NSSM 34 report reflected considerable DoD input and emphasized a traditional position of bolstering U.S. credibility in the region by responding more assertively to North Korean provocations with limited strikes against North Korean assets.\textsuperscript{262} In a classic expression of U.S. Cold War domino thinking, the authors of NSSM 34 also asserted that the U.S. commitment to South Korea created its own set of additional interests by “reflect[ing] on other U.S. commitments to allies and the UN” and by serving “as a successful example of our ability to protect and assist developing nations.”\textsuperscript{263}

Troubled by the negative implications for U.S. credibility caused by the United States’ cautious responses to the USS \textit{Pueblo} and EC-121 incidents, the interagency team stated that one of the three “immediate and short term” objectives for every contingency scenario in Korea was “[t]o maintain U.S. prestige and the credibility of U.S. commitments.”\textsuperscript{264} In other words, not only did the United States have an interest in physically protecting South Korea but it needed to do so in such a way that convinced other “free-world” countries that the United States remained a credible partner.\textsuperscript{265}

Despite his reputation as a “Cold Warrior,” Nixon chafed at this notion of commitments creating interests, stating in his “First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970's” that: “We are not involved in the world because we have commitments; we have commitments because we are involved. Our interests must shape our commitments,


\textsuperscript{262} For example, for “attacks on or seizure of a U.S. vessel or aircraft,” they recommended a “selective air or naval strike”, artillery/missile/mortar attacks, or ground or amphibious raids (\textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 58).


\textsuperscript{265} These interests had evolved little from those listed by the U.S. Army 20 years earlier in their argument for defending South Korea from the North’s invasion, which included creating “universal respect for” and “enhanc[ing] the prestige of” the United States, and “[making] a profoundly favorable impression on the Japanese.” Stueck, \textit{The Road to Confrontation}, 188.
rather than the other way around.” Instead of static displays of commitment via large fixed
garrisons of troops abroad, Nixon seemed to view American credibility as being best served by
preserving the nation’s freedom of action to use its military capability flexibly and by
demonstrating its resolve to do so. This may have been a more cost-effective approach but it
was also riskier in some ways because it put greater emphasis on clearly communicating the
interest, capability, and resolve to intervene rather than letting in-place forces convey that
message more unambiguously.

Although NSSMs 27 and 34 were classified, the United States openly gave foreign and
domestic observers the opportunity in mid-March to speculate about the possibility of the
retrenchment of U.S. forces in Korea when it undertook a military exercise designed to
demonstrate the very interest, “ability, and will” to intervene from afar that might be doubted
after retrenchment. Over the course of a few days in mid-March, a month before the EC-121
incident, twenty-five hundred soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division shattered the existing
record for the longest air assault exercise in U.S. history when they flew eighty-five hundred
miles from North Carolina to airdrop into South Korea in front of President Park and other senior
South Korean officials. U.S. officials under the Johnson administration had originally
scheduled this exercise, FOCUS RETINA, for October 1968, apparently in response to the
dramatic escalation in provocations by North Korea in 1967 and 1968 with the intent of sending
a message to Pyongyang that the United States was still ready and able to defend South Korea
despite its heavy commitments in Vietnam. Although that message was still inherent in the

266 Richard Nixon, “First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970’s,” February 18,
268 Philip Shabecoff, “Long-Distance Deployment of U.S. Troops for Airdrop in South Korea Stirs Seoul’s Fear of
269 The exercise was likely delayed because it might interfere with negotiations for return of the Pueblo crew.
Interestingly, the CIA concluded that the exercise may have encouraged the North Koreans to attack the EC-121 as a
defiant reaction to what they perceived as a provocation. (“Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National
rescheduled exercise, a “well informed American source” told a *New York Times* reporter that the exercise also was designed “in part to give the Nixon Administration additional choices in planning its defense policy in the Far East.”

By the time Nixon informally revealed the essential elements of his doctrine on Guam in July, he firmly intended to “draw down” U.S. ground forces from South Korea over the period of 1970 to 1975 and “supplement” air forces there to maintain “substantial” U.S. “air and naval support.” As he prepared to meet President Park less than a month later in San Francisco on 21-22 August 1969, essentially all that remained to be decided was how many troops and how soon. Given the recent “Sino-Soviet tension” over a fatal border dispute in March and “the South Vietnam problem,” Nixon wanted to “go easy,” but he was convinced that the United States could not “sit back through 1975 keeping all those [U.S.] forces over there [in South Korea].” He thought the United States needed “a plan which change[d] the situation” because its “interest require[d] it.”

During and after the meeting with Park, the administration pursued a public policy of ambiguity toward the South Koreans and the public regarding potential reductions while the Departments of State and Defense and other agencies continued to work on developing military...

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270 Philip Shabecoff, “Long-Distance Deployment of U.S. Troops for Airdrop in South Korea Stirs Seoul's Fear of Pullout,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1969. It is unclear if the deliberate leak was authorized or not and if it was a Department of State or Department of Defense source.

271 Alexander Haig, Draft Minutes of NSC Meeting, August 14, 1969, Western White House, DNSA, 5, 8. Nixon’s desired end state at this point in time is unclear. Two sets of notes from this meeting exist. The notes in the FRUS appear to be less precise and less verbatim than the Haig minutes in DNSA. The former paraphrase the president as saying “We always say ‘not now.’ But we must face fact we aren’t going to have 50,000 troops there 5 years from now, while we must maintain substantial presence, particularly air and navy,” which implicitly allows for a residual ground force of some size smaller than 50,000 thousand. The Haig notes, however, are more in-line with the overall Nixon Doctrine and mention that eventually they would “get the ground forces out.” In a subsequent NSC Review Group meeting, Kissinger “agreed that it was inconceivable that the President would decide to withdraw all US forces from Korea.” Nonetheless, the discussions indicate a clear trend toward having only a token “trip wire” ground force in Korea by approximately the end of the 1970’s ("Minutes of a National Security Council Review Group Meeting, Washington, February 6, 1970, 2:45–3:35 p.m." in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 128-129).

272 Alexander Haig, Draft Minutes of NSC Meeting, August 14, 1969, Western White House, DNSA, 7. This interest appeared to be a combination of both appeasing public and Congressional opinion that the U.S. was overextended ("Telegram From Secretary of State Rogers to the Department of State, Taipei, August 1, 1969, 1201Z" in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 80) as well as Nixon’s own view of the unsustainability of the U.S. military posture in Asia.
force posture options in South Korea for the president’s decision in March 1970. Those options eventually converged into one status quo position and four different mixes of reduced U.S. Army presence ranging from one division down to a “residual” of about fifteen thousand military personnel (including one army brigade), each accompanied by U.S.-funded improvements of sixteen to eighteen South Korean army divisions.273 The various meetings, reports, and memos that led to these options reveal that Nixon’s view of the fundamental considerations of commitments and credibility that were a core part of the withdrawal issue had a different cast to them during the period of non-crisis deliberation than similar questions of credibility addressed during the EC-121 crisis.

**Evaluating the Withdrawal Options.** The three most important considerations in the administration’s fundamental decision to withdraw were deterrence, cost, and entanglement.274 Deterrence was the most important of the three because its failure would pose substantial problems of both cost and entanglement. As the JCS and South Koreans emphasized and as Thomas Schelling discussed in his theoretical work, the presence of U.S. troops in Korea played an important role as a psychological deterrent.275 They served as a “trip wire” that guaranteed that an attack on South Korea would also be an attack on U.S. forces and would thereby cause U.S. combat power from around the globe to be directed against the aggressor. Even the JCS agreed that the value of this psychological deterrence far exceeded the physical deterrence of

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275 For just one example of South Korean emphasis on the psychological effect, see Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, April 1, 1969” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 9.
any raw combat capability that in-place U.S. ground forces would bring to the battlefield.\textsuperscript{276}

Consequently, Nixon’s military or civilian advisors generally agreed, as Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson stated, that “one [U.S.] division has the same value as two” U.S. divisions in deterring North Korea.\textsuperscript{277} The JCS conceded that even one U.S. brigade, about one third the size of a division, could probably provide an equivalent level of psychological deterrence as two full U.S. divisions.\textsuperscript{278} But Kissinger, ever cautious regarding deterrence, was less sure as to “what level of U.S. presence [was] necessary to insure that the North Koreans remain deterred.”\textsuperscript{279}

Nixon and his advisors also agreed that the South Korean divisions needed to be modernized to offset the loss of raw combat capability when U.S. ground forces were withdrawn. Both the Department of Defense and the Department of State, however, took a more cautious position than Nixon when it came to the sequencing of the withdrawal and the modernization of the South Korean divisions. The State Department and especially the Department of Defense suggested that withdrawal and modernization should be carefully orchestrated so that the South Korean forces were modernized prior to any substantial U.S. troop withdrawals.\textsuperscript{280} The State Department worried

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\begin{enumerate}
\item\textsuperscript{276} Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, San Clemente, California, August 14, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 94. Although this point was made more explicitly in JCS testimony to congress years later, it can be inferred from the JCS Chairman’s comment in August 1969 that the reason for keeping U.S. forces positioned near the DMZ was “99% psychological.”
\item\textsuperscript{277} Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, San Clemente, California, August 14, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 94.
\item\textsuperscript{278} “Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff Representative to the National Security Council Review Group (Unger) to the Chairman of the Review Group (Kissinger), Washington, February 17, 1970” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 133.
\item\textsuperscript{279} “Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, Washington, March 4, 1970” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 144. This is yet another example supporting Hoff’s characterization of Kissinger as one who “at best, only paid occasional lip service to the necessity of some risk-taking.” (Hoff, “A Revisionist View,” 109.)
\item\textsuperscript{280} Note: The use of the word “modernization” (or more frequently, developed or less developed) in this time period sometimes conveyed implicit meanings of racial or cultural superiority of the modern nations vis-à-vis those nations which were “modernizing”. In this case, however, the DoD really was just assessing the quality of the equipment, not any alleged inherent ability or inability of the Koreans to use it well. The DoD assessments repeatedly indicate that a modernized South Korean division would provide equivalent combat capability as a similarly equipped U.S. division. In contrast, one U.S. division or improved Korean division was considered to be worth about 1.35 unimproved
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about a hasty withdrawal’s effect on the upcoming South Korean election in 1971 while the JCS feared that “any significant or rapid reduction in the US presence could . . . be regarded (by both allies and enemies) as evidence that the United States had lost interest in meeting its defense commitments in Korea.” Such reductions “would be particularly serious” if they were “not fully offset by the completion of substantial improvements to ROK forces in advance of any US withdrawal.”

Even Secretary of Defense Laird, who testified before Congress in June 1969 that he “would like to see us move in the direction of ‘Koreanizing’ our activities in Korea just as rapidly as we can,” told the Korean ambassador to the United States that he believed modernization should occur before withdrawal.

Nixon, however, was tired of “temporizing with these issues” and felt “someone should have looked at it long before [him].” He viewed “the problem from the long range” and focused on the necessity of achieving a sustainable posture in Asia in terms of lowered cost and lowered risk of entanglement. As already stated, the Nixon Doctrine implicitly sought to enhance U.S. credibility in Asia by making U.S. military involvement in Asia more sustainable, in terms of risk and cost, over the long term. Nixon was, therefore, willing to accept some additional short-term risk in Korea and possible diminishment of short-term credibility to achieve a more sustainable posture in Korea fairly rapidly, and thereby force military modernization efforts to catch up with his decision. Thus, on 24 November 1969, Nixon wrote Kissinger: “I think it is time to cut the number of Americans [in Korea] in half and I want to see a plan which will implement this laid divisions. ("Minutes of a National Security Council Review Group Meeting, Washington, February 6, 1970, 2:45–3:35 p.m." in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 126).


before me before the end of the year.” Two weeks later, Nixon emphatically concluded that he “want[ed] a plan developed now to bring about the [South Korean] take over” of nearly the entire ground force mission. The United States would “provide a trip wire and air and sea support only.”

How much short-term risk Nixon assessed his decision would generate remains unclear. He certainly did not want to “weaken [U.S.] forces [in Korea] precipitously” or to give “the impression that [the United States was] withdrawing from [its] responsibilities.” Yet Nixon’s position on the sequence of a substantial troop withdrawal in advance of South Korean force modernization suggests that he believed the existing U.S. force in South Korea provided more deterrence than was required. In an August NSC meeting, Nixon conjectured that the U.S. air forces in Korea were so impressive that they alone might be all the additional U.S. deterrent required to keep the North Koreans from coming south en masse even if both U.S. Army divisions were withdrawn. In particular, Nixon wanted to “maintain the air and sea presence at whatever level [was] necessary for the kind of retaliatory strike” that his national security team had developed during the post-mortem analysis of the EC-121 crisis. Interestingly, no sources indicate that Nixon or his advisors discussed the fact that when Nixon wanted to retaliate after the EC-121 incident, he found in the heat of the crisis that the two U.S. Army divisions in Korea, the presence of more than 125 combat aircraft above the usual non-crisis contingent of 24 fighter-bombers, and “the most enormous armada since the invasion of

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284 “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, November 25, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 118, Nixon’s original emphasis. At this point in the planning, it was unclear what size trip wire force Nixon had in mind.


287 “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, November 25, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 117.
“Normandy” were not enough to make him sufficiently confident that he could deter North Korean escalation after retaliation.  

In effect, the troop withdrawal decision implicitly asserted that the remaining force in South Korea would be sufficient to: 1) deter a major North Korean military action, and 2) deter escalation if the United States responded militarily to another more minor provocation. Nixon, therefore, must have developed greater confidence by November 1969 that the United States was in a better position to deter both outright aggression and escalation. Indeed, the president noted that he could not reduce the U.S. presence in South Korea earlier due to heightened tensions following the EC-121 incident, Sino-Soviet tensions, and Vietnam. Nixon’s apparent increased confidence likely stemmed from developments in external regional security factors, Nixon’s personal perception of the threat, and perhaps increased confidence in his own ability to handle such threats.

Certainly, Nixon’s confidence in the long-term ability of a smaller U.S. force and improved South Korean forces to deter North Korea aggression was boosted by his anticipation of a complete withdrawal from Vietnam and the possibility of normalized relations with China. It was also likely enhanced by the fact that just two days before Nixon notified Kissinger that he was ready to withdraw half of the U.S. troops from Korea, Nixon jointly announced with Japanese Premier Eisaku Sato that a deal had been reached on the contentious reversion of Okinawa back to Japanese sovereignty sometime in 1972. Although Nixon did not mention Okinawa as a factor on his Korean withdrawal decision, getting that issue resolved on terms that maintained significant and flexible U.S. basing rights on the island undoubtedly made Nixon’s

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288 For 24 aircraft, see Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1969, 4:19. For total augmentation, see Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1969, 4:253. For “armada,” see Hersh, The Price of Power, 75. It is also unclear from the sources analyzed as to what if any additional air and naval presence above the previous baseline level would meet Nixon’s expectations or how that hypothetical number compared to the number on hand during the actual crisis.

289 Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, November 25, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 117; Alexander Haig, Draft Minutes of NSC Meeting, August 14, 1969, Western White House, DNSA.

290 Okinawa had been under official U.S. administration since the peace treaty of 1951.
decision easier by securing and expanding the United States’ ability to utilize its forces stationed on the safer bases in Japan and Okinawa for missions in Northeast Asia. Not only did the leaders’ joint communiqué indicate that the Japanese would officially permit U.S. forces stationed in Japan to be used beyond just the defense of Japan itself, but it also included the first overt acknowledgement by the Japanese government that “the security of the Republic of Korea was essential to Japan’s own security” and that Japan would “positively and promptly” authorize the use of U.S. forces stationed in Japan to defend South Korea.291

Nixon’s implicit confidence, however, that reducing the physical deterrent of U.S. troops in South Korea would not too adversely affect deterrence in the near-term was influenced by the CIA’s continued assurances that North Korea had no intention of launching a major invasion or of seeking to provoke a strong response from the South Koreans, and that such actions would not be supported by China or the Soviet Union. Additionally, Nixon likely developed more confidence in himself and his national security apparatus in the five months since the EC-121 incident.292 After all, Kissinger had conducted an extensive post-event analysis of the EC-121 crisis, restructured the administration’s process for handling such crises, and concluded that in the future a quick, “ferocious” but clearly limited strike against North Korea would create a fait accompli that would minimize the likelihood of escalation after retaliation.293 Essentially,


292 “Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, San Clemente, California, August 14, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 90; “Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, Washington, March 4, 1970” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 143. In fact, the rate of cross-border unconventional warfare incidents in 1969 was the lowest since 1964, which led the CIA to conclude that Kim was “shifting away from this tactic.” Kissinger concluded in his memoirs that during the EC-121 crisis they had “vastly overestimated North Korea’s readiness to engage in a tit-for-tat.” (Kissinger, White House Years, 318).

diplomatic maneuvers in the region combined with the experience the administration gained through the EC-121 incident and the subsequent seven months of governance to yield the equivalent perceived security of at least one U.S. Army division in Korea.

The second major consideration in Nixon’s decision to reduce U.S. ground forces in South Korea was the potential cost savings for a country that was increasingly worried about inflation and its balance of payments. Nixon’s civilian advisors estimated that if the United States “removed 20,000 troops [it] would realize savings [over five years] of $20 million if these troops were held on active duty” and the “savings would be $450 million if they were deactivated.”294 As will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters, senior U.S. military leaders disputed the purported cost savings. They argued that it was cheaper to keep a division stationed in South Korea than it was to station it back in the United States, and the thought of deactivating a division seemed so far beyond consideration as to be not worth discussing.295 The JCS also argued that the cost of modernizing eighteen South Korean divisions “would be prohibitively expensive to acquire and support,” on the order of $800 million.296

Indeed, the Military Assistance Program (MAP) funds that would be needed to modernize the South Korean divisions were the weak link in the plan. The effort would entail a costly, multiyear commitment of additional funds and would need to be approved annually by Congress. Secretary of Defense Laird communicated early on that “Koreanizing” the deterrence

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294 “Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, Washington, March 4, 1970” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 144. I make no claim that these figures were accurate. They are merely the ones that were presented for the president to make his cost-benefit calculation.

295 See, for example, Alexander Haig, Draft Minutes of NSC Meeting, August 14, 1969, Western White House, DNSA, 11.

posture in South Korea would involve a complete change in the emphasis of the existing MAP so that the quality of the Korean forces and equipment could be more quickly and extensively upgraded. Unfortunately, the Vietnam War had soured many congressmen’s opinions of MAP, and Laird was hard pressed to keep his former colleagues from cutting the MAP program let alone expanding it for South Korea. In his testimony before Congress regarding MAP, Laird deftly managed to support his Joint Chiefs of Staff while also supporting the president’s long-range vision. He chided those who criticized “our military leaders” for their efforts to keep military commitments “made by civilians in the executive branch of the Government” and “approved by the Senate in many cases.” Revealing the central element of his support for “Koreanization,” Laird indicated that the cumulative price of these commitments was “very high” and the Department of Defense’s budget was not large “enough to carry out all of the commitments that this country has all over the world.” Nixon’s efforts in Korea were a first step in trimming the cost of those commitments. As with the deterrence component of the argument, Nixon was willing to accept more risk than his advisors by offering Congress some upfront savings through partial withdrawal if it would help dispose it to committing more MAP funds to South Korea over the long term.

The final major consideration was the issue Ambassador Porter had been advocating ever since he experienced firsthand the stress and uncertainty of restraining President Park from

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297 “Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, San Clemente, California, August 14, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 93. Korea was already receiving about $150 million annually in MAP funds prior to any effort to fully modernize its divisions. Even if MAP funding for South Korea doubled to $300 million annually, it could take over five years to pay for all the upgrades the JCS thought were necessary.

298 In a February 1970 National Security Council Review Group Meeting, for example, James R. Schlesinger expressed that “going back to Senator Fulbright’s Committee for supplemental MAP funds would be extremely tough since the feeling on military assistance is running very high” (“Minutes of a National Security Council Review Group Meeting, Washington, February 6, 1970, 2:45–3:35 p.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 127).

299 House Committee on Appropriations, Military Assistance Program, 91st Congress, June 3, 1969, 643. MAP funds were not counted against the DoD budget but came from other budget lines.

300 Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard and Secretary of State Rogers both supported the position that they would have difficulty getting “Congressional support for ROK modernization without withdrawing sizeable U.S. forces” but still favored a more cautious sequencing than Nixon. (“Draft Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, Washington, March 4, 1970” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 146).
retaliating after the Blue House raid in 1968: repositioning U.S. forces away from the DMZ to give the United States more time and options besides automatic entanglement in a major South or North Korean provocation.\textsuperscript{301} Nixon, however, was less troubled by this aspect of the problem and offered no comment on the issue when it was raised at two separate National Security Council meetings.\textsuperscript{302} Nonetheless, his subsequent NSDM on the subject implicitly acknowledged the advantage of repositioning U.S. troops when it directed the Department of Defense to “develop a plan for . . . the disposition of remaining forces in such manner as to reduce the U.S. presence in the DMZ to the minimum consistent with [the United States’] continuing responsibility for the security of the UN area at Panmunjon.”\textsuperscript{303} Nixon’s unhurried approach to the risk of entanglement refines our understanding of the Nixon Doctrine as more concerned about getting entangled in difficult civil wars and/or employing U.S. ground forces in Asia than more broadly concerned with getting entangled in another war in Asia.

Once these three main factors were satisfactorily addressed, NSDM 48 confirmed on 20 March 1970 Nixon’s intention “to reduce the U.S. military presence in Korea by 20,000 personnel by the end of [May] 1971” and to seek $200 million per year in MAP funding for Korea.\textsuperscript{304} “Further withdrawals of substantial numbers of U.S. personnel beyond the 20,000 personnel decided upon” were not planned at that time but might “be considered when substantial [South Korean] forces return[ed] from Vietnam or compensating improvements in ROK forces [were] well underway.” With the decision made, all that remained was, as Nixon put


\textsuperscript{303} Ibid., 149. The desired advantage of moving U.S. troops off the DMZ was reiterated four months later in “Memorandum From John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, July 9, 1970” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 167.

\textsuperscript{304} The NSDM stated the end of fiscal year 1971, which would be the end of May 1971 because fiscal years started in June rather than September, as they do currently.

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it, “to get President Park to ask for [the reductions]” and to secure the U.S. military’s prompt cooperation. As will be explored in the next chapter, neither task would be easy.

Conclusion

When Richard Nixon assumed the presidency in 1969, the strains of the Vietnam War seemed to be revealing cracks in the United States’ credibility that could be ameliorated by a reduction in the U.S. forces stationed in South Korea. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations had already expressed concern that the U.S. military presence in South Korea was too costly and thereby strained the long-term capability of the United States to support financially all the commitments it sought to uphold. The deepening Vietnam War only worsened this strain on U.S. capability as it drained gold from U.S. coffers and further undermined U.S. credibility by contributing to the erosion of the resolve of Americans to fight in the various conflicts that the extensive containment strategy seemed to require. Thus, some key officials thought that the apparent increased likelihood of entanglement in Korea after the Blue House raid and the seizure of the USS *Pueblo* threatened to push the U.S. treasury and/or public support beyond the breaking point.

Yet the debate about the response to the EC-121 incident presaged how these same credibility components of capability and resolve could be used to oppose the reduction of U.S. forces in South Korea. Those, like Kissinger and the JCS, who embraced the extensive commitments of the early Cold War containment strategy feared that a failure to respond robustly would indicate to North Korea and others that the United States’ resolve was flagging and, therefore, “displays of American impotence in one part of the world, such as Asia or Africa would inevitably erode [U.S.] credibility in other parts of the world.”

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306 Kissinger, *White House Years*, 129.
was widespread among U.S. senior officials that the United States could not afford to risk escalation while so involved in Vietnam, retaliation proponents failed to consider that the North Koreans were probably making a situational assessment of U.S. capability more than a nonsituational assessment of U.S. resolve.

The material and social strains of the Vietnam War that caused retaliation opponents to urge caution and retaliation proponents to urge credibility-reaffirming action were symptoms of a flawed grand strategy that created dilemmas just like the one the Nixon administration encountered during the EC-121 crisis. The United States was overcommitted and under resourced to continue its inflexible containment strategy over the long term. Although other national security experts recognized this, Nixon was prepared and positioned to take steps to both reinforce and reify the growing realization that the communist threat was not monolithic and, with Kissinger’s full support, to view commitments in a more classical European sense as being flexible and situational. The Nixon Doctrine was a significant first step in recasting the perception of the threat and the responsibilities of the United States in the Cold War, and the partial withdrawal from South Korea was a significant component of that doctrine. As Nixon’s regional foreign policy initiative began to bear fruit and as he gained confidence in his presidency, he was prepared to accept some additional short-term risk in Korea in order to begin a robust forward momentum toward the long-term benefits of a “reconstructed” Cold War. Unfortunately, Nixon’s actions stirred resistance against withdrawal from Korea that also reinforced resistance against the grand strategy of détente.
CHAPTER 4: MILITARY RESISTANCE TO NIXON’S TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH KOREA: 1969-1971

We’ve been forced largely by the pressures of inflation plus a feeling that certain domestic programs ought to have a larger share of the budget, to make a defense choice largely based on cost. The fiscal tail is wagging the strategic dog.


As the previous chapter discussed, Nixon’s proposed troop withdrawal from South Korea was fundamentally a component of the Nixon Doctrine, the strategic decision to realign the U.S. posture abroad to be more fiscally sustainable and less prone to automatic entanglement in the long run. To help achieve the strategic sustainability and increased stability he sought, Nixon intended to follow the initial withdrawal with additional modernization of the South Korean forces to facilitate a complete withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces in five or more years.307 Nonetheless, the imminent mounting strains of the Vietnam War on the U.S. military, budget, and domestic mood prompted Nixon to accept additional risk to his deterrence posture in South Korea in the near-term to address mounting fiscal concerns, to placate the anti-military sentiment that Congress was expressing by cinching its purse strings, and to help satisfy the concerns Congressmen and administration officials who also feared future entanglement in Asia.308 Nixon’s senior military officers, however, thought those risks unwise and they disagreed fundamentally about the nature of the U.S. commitment to South Korea.


Although Nixon’s concerns were understandable, his decision to withdraw 20,000 U.S. ground forces from South Korea in less than fifteen months troubled a number of his significant senior military officers. As U.S. military and civilian officials debated the merits of the troop reduction, they grappled within a preexisting, complex system of interacting structural and ideational factors that had made credibility and reputation concerns such a powerful strand within U.S. foreign policy prior to the Vietnam War. The resistance of U.S. military officers like Admiral McCain to Nixon’s troop withdrawal reveals contested views of credible deterrence, entanglement, cost and commitment that ultimately rested on differing assessments of the U.S. interest in and the U.S. commitment to South Korea.

The tension between U.S. military officials and civilian authorities has been well studied within the field of civil-military relations. Such studies commonly examine the sources of the civil-military tension and the mechanisms of resistance. In the case of U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea, the tension appeared to stem in large part from differing perceptions of the imperatives of the Cold War of the 1970s. Much like during the EC-121 crisis, the Vietnam War amplified these disparate perceptions and affected the military’s assessment of Nixon’s troop withdrawal plan. For key military leaders, the war amplified the perceived need to demonstrate a U.S. reputation for resolve (emphasized by withdrawal opponents) while it simultaneously amplified the financial and entanglement arguments posed by withdrawal supporters. Furthermore, it fed the anti-military sentiment in Congress that the Nixon administration considered best to appease and that many senior military officers scorned. Finally, it reinforced the perception of overextension that Nixon sought to address with his “doctrine.”

Although the evidence suggests that senior military leaders used the full spectrum of typical resistance

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310 For “appease,” see Gaddis, Strategies of the Containment, 320-321.
techniques in the course of the ten-year debate—including skewing advice, “end runs” to Congress or the public, and foot dragging—senior military officers appeared to resist the *Nixon* withdrawal primarily through official channels by emphasizing and sometimes skewing perceived threats, raising doubts about U.S. credibility, and questioning spending priorities.\(^{311}\)

Although it is difficult to extract the debate about cost savings and overextension from other questions of credible deterrence and entanglement, analyzing the deterrence, entanglement, and cost arguments independently helps isolate civil-military disagreements over questions of deterrence and entanglement from the military officers’ skepticism about the motives and priorities of the politicians ordering the force reductions. The first section below explores how military leaders addressed questions of deterrence and entanglement, which were two sides of the same coin, and how key civilians reacted to their pessimism. The second section discusses how senior leaders viewed budgetary concerns relative to deterrence concerns, and how budgetary factors both supported and jeopardized Nixon’s long-range plans for the U.S. presence in South Korea. In both sections, the Commander in Chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC), Admiral John S. McCain, Jr. serves as an important locus of military resistance to Nixon’s troop reduction. As the combatant commander in charge of addressing U.S. national security throughout the Pacific theater, including Korea and Vietnam, Admiral McCain was the primary conduit of the theater’s security concerns to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and he was understandably sensitive to any actions that seemed to undermine his ability to meet U.S. security objectives in his region.

**Military Matters—Deterrence and Assessments of Capability**

The question of how changes in the numbers of tangible military deterrents such as aircraft and troops present on the Korean peninsula might affect the credibility of U.S.

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\(^{311}\) Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 68. Resistance to civilian initiatives by senior military officers typically takes the form of intentionally skewing military advice; “end runs” around civilian leaders by appealing to Congress or to the public via leaks and unauthorized public protest; and foot dragging. See also, Clotfelter, *The Military in American Politics*. 113
deterrence resided mostly within the realm of military strategy. The Commander of USFK, CINCPAC, and the JCS had a professional obligation to provide their candid assessment of Nixon’s plan and to implement it faithfully once the decision was finalized, which they did. Senior U.S. military officers such as these generated reasonable and important general arguments about the capability, interest, and resolve components of credibility which fit squarely within the NSC-68 mindset. Thus, their arguments tended to assume the importance of extensive containment and its attendant emphasis on maintaining sufficient capability and projecting sufficient resolve to deter an inherently expansionist communist enemy from attacking a wide array of apparent interests. In addition to these unexamined assumptions, their arguments also often contained questionable pessimism, reluctance to acknowledge potential changes in the Cold War dynamic and interests, and even some apparently deliberate exaggerations of the threat that detracted from a rational assessment of options.

Aircraft Redeployment, Deterrence, and Threat Assessments. Of the three components of credibility, capability is generally easier to assess than “interests” and certainly is clearer than the nebulous concept of resolve. Nonetheless, a close examination of military’s arguments about the importance of relative military capability in Korea suggest that their arguments were sometimes tinged with questionable pessimism and threat exaggeration that clouded a rational assessment of the impact that the proposed withdrawal would have on overall deterrence. Questions about combat aircraft sent to bolster U.S. air forces in South Korea after the seizure of the USS Pueblo in January 1968 served as a notable prelude to capability and deterrence assessments made subsequently by military leaders against ground force reductions in Korea.

President Johnson had responded to the *Pueblo* seizure by ordering a major contingency deployment of U.S. air and naval forces to Northeast Asia.\(^{313}\) By the end of 1968, the twenty-four U.S. Air Force combat aircraft normally stationed on two U.S. airbases in South Korea had grown to 151 aircraft, with their supporting equipment and thousands of supporting personnel crammed onto six airfields in South Korea under “austere” conditions.\(^{314}\) These supplemental aircraft escorted EC-121 missions for a while and were placed on “strip alert” to react quickly to provocations.\(^{315}\) For more than three years, CINCPAC Admiral McCain successfully employed credibility arguments to resist most efforts to redeploy these augmentation aircraft by senior Johnson and Nixon officials, who feared for the safety of the unsheltered aircraft and that the temporary arrangement could impute “increased permanency” the longer the aircraft remained in Korea.\(^{316}\)

Using language that foreshadowed future arguments against U.S. ground troop withdrawals, Admiral McCain argued through the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) that Secretary of Defense McNamara’s concern about risks posed to these exposed supplemental aircraft “must

\(^{313}\) Bolger, *Scenes from an Unfinished War*, 46. Johnson activated more than 14,700 U.S. Air Force and Navy guardsmen and reservists to fill in stateside for the active duty forces he deployed to Korea. According to Bolger, this was the first partial mobilization of reserve forces since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis.

\(^{314}\) For 24 aircraft, J. R. Johnson, ed., *Commander in Chief Pacific Command History, 1968* (Camp Smith, Hawaii: HQ CINCPAC, 1969), 1:19 (hereinafter, Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1968*). Osan had 6 F-105 and 6 F-4Cs, and Kunsan had 12 F-4s as of 1 May 1968. Both types of aircraft were capable of carrying nuclear bombs. A far greater number of aircraft were normally located on Japan and, per a secret agreement with Japan, could be used in a Korean conflict. For total augmentation, Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1968*, 4:253. The aircraft were dispersed at six airbases and were accompanied by numerous support personnel and equipment. For “austere,” see: U.S. Senate, Investigation of the preparedness program report under the authority of S. Res. 225, 90th Cong., 2d sess. on the combat readiness of United States and South Korean forces in South Korea. (Washington: GPO, 1968), 7.

\(^{315}\) U.S. Senate, Investigation of the preparedness program report under the authority of S. Res. 225, 90th Cong., 2d sess. on the combat readiness of United States and South Korean forces in South Korea. (Washington: GPO, 1968), 910. These escort mission were halted some time before the EC-121 downing.

\(^{316}\) About eight months after the initial augmentation and only five months after Admiral McCain began his tenure as CINCPAC, Secretary of Defense Clark Gifford proposed that one half of the extra aircraft be withdrawn due to his concern about a 1968 DoD study that estimated more than fifty percent of U.S. and South Korean aircraft could be destroyed by a North Korean surprise attack under the crowded and poorly protected conditions. The March 1968 DoD study estimated that 180 of 354 U.S. and ROK aircraft would likely be destroyed in a North Korean surprise attack because the aircraft were within easy range of North Korean airbases and were far too numerous to be placed in existing hardened aircraft shelters. McNamara made his proposal in September 1968. (Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1969*, 4:151; Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1968*, 4:253-254.).
be weighed against the added risks resulting from a reduced deterrent associated with any partial withdrawal of forces.” McCain explained that a partial withdrawal of the augmentation aircraft “could well be interpreted by [North Korea] as a weakening of U.S. resolve” and stoke South Korean fears “that the U.S. lacks resolve or capability to sustain forces in Korea.” He assumed partial withdrawal would therefore “only worsen the situation and could very possibly invite further provocation.” The JCS supported McCain’s position and the secretary of defense relented in October 1968.317

In countering a subsequent recommendation for the redeployment of the supplemental aircraft, McCain suggested that the North Koreans might have viewed recent U.S. negotiations to recover the Pueblo’s crew as a sign of “weakness of U.S. resolve” in the face of an enemy that was growing in strength.318 He argued that a “significant reduction” in the augmentation forces would likely exacerbate that perception of “weakness.” Furthermore, withdrawal would reduce U.S. credibility vis-à-vis the South Koreans and prompt them to “undertake unilateral responses.” Having touched upon nearly every hot button concern and without providing supporting evidence, McCain concluded that forces of the “general magnitude now deployed in Korea are required to meet the threat and to deter the enemy.”319 The following year McCain wrote that the extra jets were also needed to “be prepared for initial defense against a Chinese and North Korean attack” even though the Pacific Command’s (PACOM’s) own intelligence estimates continued to state that “there were no indications” that China would support a North Korean offensive.320

318 In January 1969, one of President Nixon’s deputy secretaries of defense proposed a 50 aircraft reduction in a memo sent just two days after the inauguration. Admiral McCain consulted with USFK and PACAF commanders prior to sending his response but the CINCPAC records don’t reveal their comments. (Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1969, 4:152)
Additionally, McCain’s analysis failed to acknowledge the CIA’s argument that limited provocative attacks might have been very difficult to deter in the first place because the North Koreans actually desired continued confrontation.\(^{321}\) For example, the presence of 124 extra U.S. combat aircraft in South Korea failed to deter the “further provocation” of a North Korean attack on an EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft four months after North Korea released the crew of the USS Pueblo.\(^{322}\) Absent from senior military analysis was the possibility noted in the previous chapter that, with U.S. military capability heavily engaged in the Vietnam War and with the public appetite for more conflict waning, the North Koreans might have correctly assessed that the United States could not muster enough resolve (and, possibly, capability) to retaliate to a small-scale provocation at a level that the North Koreans were not willing to tolerate.

All told, Admiral McCain succeeded in enlisting the sympathetic Joint Chiefs of Staff to convince civilian administration officials to keep combat aircraft in Korea at levels about six times higher than the pre-Pueblo baseline for more than three years after the seizure of the Pueblo and twenty months after the EC-121 downing.\(^{323}\) In the process of arguing to retain the augmentation aircraft, however, McCain appeared to skew military advice intentionally when he exaggerated the threat of a combined Chinese-Korean invasion. Although he was genuinely concerned about the potential consequences of redeploying the aircraft in the face of anomalous provocations by North Korea, his exaggeration of the threat to achieve his ends inappropriately privileged his perspective and cost-benefit analysis over those of his civilian

\(^{321}\) “Intelligence Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, April 17, 1969” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 32-33. CIA analysts thought Kim’s “long-term ambitions . . . require[d] a high level of tension with the U.S.” because he hoped that “periodic provocations” would “contribute to the disillusionment of the American public with overseas burdens and bring about a reduction and eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea.”

\(^{322}\) Whether the EC-121 attack was a deliberate provocation approved by higher North Korean authority was disputed at the time and remains unclear in sources consulted. Nonetheless, most U.S. authorities and military officers treated it at the time as a deliberate provocation.

\(^{323}\) In June 1969, 50 National Guard F-100 fighter aircraft were redeployed from South Korea but were replaced by 36 F-4 fighter/bombers, the most advanced in the Air Force inventory. The remaining 113 augmentation aircraft were not removed from Korea until sometime in 1971.
bosses. Furthermore, the fact that Admiral McCain successfully kept the Secretary of Defense’s redeployment desires at bay for so long using questionable credibility arguments and that he was willing to discount rational CIA assessments and even to exaggerate the threat suggests the credibility fixation of the early Cold War mindset still held sway over assessments and actions into the 1970s.

**Troop Withdrawal and Pessimistic Estimates.** Despite McCain’s apparently selective assessment of the North Korean threat, his emphasis on capability and his sensitivity to how changes in capability might affect other nations’ perceptions of U.S. resolve were theoretically valid. Furthermore, CINCPAC and the JCS had a number of valid arguments about how Nixon’s planned ground force reduction could undermine U.S. credibility in both Koreas with potentially serious consequences. The return of the augmentation aircraft and Nixon’s pending withdrawal of 20,000 ground forces from South Korea both involved questions of U.S. credibility that formed the foundation of the senior military officers’ objections to both measures. Their arguments, however, hinged on their assessment of the threat and the relative combat capability north and south of the DMZ, and those assessments also tended to be pessimistic. If their assessments were overly pessimistic, then withdrawal proponents might be right—the military might indeed be “fat” in South Korea and have room for reductions without incurring much additional risk. As was discussed above, Admiral McCain exaggerated the threat to retain augmentation aircraft for as long as he could. And he was not alone in viewing the threat pessimistically.

Two separate reports by NSC staff members suggest that senior military officers’ perception of the threat in Korea increased the further their office was from Korea. In the first example, civilian NSC staffer Laurence Lynn, Jr. sharply questioned the JCS’s 1969 nonconcurrence the NSSM 27 Korea Study’s “judgment . . . that 12–14 [South Korean] divisions could hold an attack by North Korea.” The JCS insisted that the existing arrangement of nineteen South Korean army divisions and two U.S. army divisions were required “for an
adequate defense of [South] Korea against North Korea.”

Lynn, however, argued that “historical experience, war game simulation, and force effectiveness comparisons” indicated that withdrawing a U.S. division without modernizing the existing South Korean divisions “involve[d] no military risks of any significance.” His detailed analysis raised a number of credible doubts about the JCS estimates.

A late February 1970 memo from Lynn to Kissinger indicates that civilian members of the interdepartmental group studying U.S. support to South Korea, as stipulated in NSSM 27, thought the military overestimated the threat in Korea and the forces required to deter and counter it. They found “considerable disagreement” between their estimates and the DoD’s “unrealistically conservative” ones. It appeared “obvious that [the existing South Korean] force of 18 unmodernized divisions [was] stronger than the [North Korean] force in almost all major weapon categories” and that “without modernization, the [South Korean] forces [were already] more effectively equipped than the North Koreans.” The study concluded that improvements to the South Korean forces were “desirable” but “not necessary to maintain adequate defenses against North Korea unless extensive Chinese support for the North Korean forces [was] expected or the Soviets (North Korea’s chief supplier) prove[d] willing to completely modernize the [North Korean] forces over the next five years.” Consequently, a South Korean force of just “12–14 unimproved divisions could probably hold an all-out North Korean attack.”

324 Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff Representative to the National Security Council Review Group (Unger) to the Chairman of the Review Group (Kissinger), Washington, February 17, 1970,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 132-133. If the “untimely” reduction of U.S. forces was unavoidable, then the JCS “consider[ed] that the minimum posture necessary to maintain existing deterrence and stability in Korea [was] 1-1/3 U.S. divisions and 18 improved [South Korean] divisions.”


326 Memorandum From Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, February 26, 1970,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 137-138.
In contrast, a U.S. Army war game calculated that “20-2/3 ROK divisions and 1-1/3 U.S. divisions” would be needed if 21 of the 25 North Korean divisions attacked with “complete surprise and [South Korean] forces were not in defensive positions.” Using CIA estimates, the Korea Study found the Army’s assumptions to be overly pessimistic on at least two counts. First, “because of the North Koreans’ need for a reserve against amphibious attack” and their dependence on China to support the full mobilization of all the North Korean divisions, a surprise North Korean attack would likely “consist of only 6–9 divisions.” Second, and more importantly, the South Korean forces were already “deployed in strong defensive positions along the [likely] invasion routes from North Korea” and “all 18 [South Korean] divisions [were already] deployed north of Seoul”\(^{327}\). Kissinger found Lynn’s memo persuasive. In a meeting with Ambassador Porter the following week, Kissinger confessed “the reasoning of the Joint Chiefs eluded him … He had looked through their figures, but could not determine what thought processes had been used to reach their conclusion.”\(^{328}\)

More than a year later, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had not budged from their pessimistic assessment, even though another NSC staffer received a far more optimistic opinion from the senior U.S. Army staff stationed in Korea that essentially confirmed Lynn’s previous analysis. Upon his return from an assessment trip to South Korea, NSC staffer John H. Holdridge reported that “at one stage in the briefings given by 8th Army, a briefer said flatly that the [South Korean] armed forces as they presently stand could ‘defeat’ a North Korean attack.” This assessment “rather surprised” the JCS representative accompanying the delegation, “General Knowles, who put forward the JCS view that the [South Korean] forces would only be capable of ‘holding’ a North Korean attack for a period long enough for the U.S. to come to the rescue.”

\(^{327}\) Memorandum From Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, February 26, 1970,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 135-136, original emphasis. The total North Korean force was 25 divisions, but the study assumed they couldn’t be fully mobilized and supported in a surprise attack without substantial assistance from China. The study deemed such assistance was unlikely to be offered for an initial attack.)

\(^{328}\) “Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, March 3, 1970,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 139. Kissinger’s hawkish military aide, Col Alexander Haig, was absent from the meeting.
According to Holdridge, the 8th Army representatives “were firm on the ability of the [South Koreans] to inflict a defeat.”

Air power was another area in which estimates by U.S. commanders in Korea were at odds with the JCS line. Threat assessments circulating in Washington repeatedly mentioned the superiority of the North Korean Air Force over the South Korean Air Force. Yet, when General Donald V. Bennett reflected on his time as Commander USFK from 1971 to 1972, he noted that North Korean Air Force planes outnumbered the South Korean Air Force “by a factor of 3 to 1,” but because their average “cockpit training time” was about one sixth of the South Korean pilots’ and their flying tactics so rigid and limiting, they were “absolutely” not three times as strong in effective strength. Bennett lamented, “but we don’t look at it like that.” Indeed, during the August 1969 NSC meeting in which President Nixon weighed the reduction option, and just two years prior to Bennett taking command of USFK, Nixon directly asked the JCS chairman, General Earle Wheeler, if South Korean pilots were better trained than their northern counterparts. Wheeler replied that North Korean pilots were “top notch” and no worse than the South Koreans.

Although it is not easy to verify which of the diverging assessments were most accurate, a pattern emerges that shows the capability assessments by CINCPAC and the JCS were

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331 The American Embassy in Korea transmitted a similar assessment to the Department of State in 1972, stating: “the North maintains an advantage in air power if the U.S. air forces available are not taken into account. This latter imbalance is not serious in the current situation and the present and projected deterrent power in total forces available to the ROK is sufficient for its needs.” (“Airgram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, A–432 Seoul, December 10, 1972,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 438).


333 “Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting, San Clemente, California, August 14, 1969,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 91; Draft Minutes of NSC Meeting, August 14, 1969, Western White House Subjects: Korea and China, DNSA, 4. As noted by two different sources taking notes during the meeting.
consistently more pessimistic than those of the on-the-spot commanders and skewed in a way that would favor the argument to maintain the status quo troop level in South Korea.

Furthermore, the discrepancies in the relative combat capability component of the threat assessments are important because they arguably carried more weight in debates about the effect of withdrawal on U.S. credibility than the far more nebulous estimates of how much certain actions affected various countries’ perceptions of U.S. resolve. Consequently, the outcome of the debate might be determined by whether a pessimistic or optimistic assessment of capabilities was widely accepted. More cynically, those finding themselves losing the argument in terms of interests or resolve might find themselves tempted to lean toward a pessimistic capability assessment to rebalance the scales in their favor. Therefore, given the gaps and discrepancies in their analysis, senior military leaders had little justification for claiming their estimates of the withdrawal’s effect on capability and perceived resolve were superior to their opponents when senior civilian leaders like Ambassador Porter perceived “fat” in the U.S. force levels in Korea. To civilians such as Laird, Kissinger, and Ambassador Porter who already seemed wary of the military, this inconsistency seemed to cause them to doubt the credibility of the U.S. military’s deterrent less than the credibility of some of its top generals.

Even in the absence of the discrepancies in the threat assessments, senior military officers would have had difficulty overcoming the initial push for troop reduction by civilians like Ambassador Porter. In addition to being a strong advocate for reduction and redisposition, Porter had more influence with his admirers in Washington than Admiral McCain, whom Porter thought “wanted to run everything himself, and … customarily took the JCS view.” Porter therefore “urged” Kissinger to give General Michaelis authority to arrange the initial withdrawal and modernization effort because he had “every confidence that Michaelis would be able to strip off the forces properly, and would also go further than the JCS would in this effort.”

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PACOM commander’s *in situ* Asian expertise and his direct line to the JCS were no match for Ambassador Porter’s more extensive expertise and his personal rapport with Nixon, who considered him such a “ballsy” and “impressive fellow” that he eventually entrusted him to head the delegation to the Paris Peace Talks from 1971 to 1973 and later selected him as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs.335

With the leader of the country team that Secretary of Defense Laird wrote was “probably the best . . . that we have any place in the world” pulling hard for the relocation of U.S. troops in Korea and “want[ing] to get the fat out of [the U.S.] commitment” to South Korea, the four-star officers of USFK, PACOM, and the JCS had little ability to use their regional and military expertise as additional leverage against the already strong headwinds coming from Congress and the White House.336 The military’s arguments hinged on leveraging their expertise in assessing the force strength required to deter the North Koreans. When key civilian officials doubted this military assessment, the military’s subsequent arguments to continue spending to maintain force levels that were already in doubt were undermined.

**Entanglement, Interests, Resolve, and Commitments**

As domestic opposition to the Vietnam War heightened, officials on both sides of the troop withdrawal debate agreed that the perception of U.S. resolve was being damaged, but they disagreed over how to adapt their deterrence posture in South Korea to compensate for that diminished U.S. resolve. In particular, senior military officers generally considered it to be dangerous to withdraw U.S. troops based on misguided concerns about potential entanglement

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in another Korean War and U.S. fiscal health. Thus, each side of the debate came up with different approaches to the South Korean commitment in the light of waning U.S. resolve.

To withdrawal opponents, removing U.S. troops undermined deterrence because deterrence theory held that forward deployed forces contributed not only to the capability component of credible extended deterrence, they also unambiguously communicated the resolve to use that military might. Thus, Nixon’s troop withdrawal was viewed as affecting both the capability and resolve components of the U.S. deterrence posture in South Korea. The resulting diminished perceived resolve could adversely affect both allies and adversaries.

Echoing Thomas Schelling’s theorizing about extended deterrence, Admiral McCain argued that because U.S. alliances in the Pacific region were “less broad, less committal as to specifics than NATO, [they were] a more difficult media through which to reflect [U.S.] intent.” Consequently “the integrity and nature of our [reputation for] resolve depend[ed] on how the U.S. military posture appear[ed] to the Asians – both allies and potential belligerents.” He assessed in August 1970 that force “reductions and policy adjustments [had] already raised serious doubts in the minds of [U.S.] Asian allies as to the extent of [U.S.] resolve.” That reputation for resolve was particularly fragile as the United States looked for a way out of the Vietnam War. Thus, McCain worried “as the Vietnam withdrawal continue[d], the additional reductions and redeployments proposed [by the JCS could] only serve to increase the magnitude” of the “doubts” of the United States’ Asian allies.337

Admiral McCain added that “a substantial presence in the Pacific” was essential to support “realistic contingency plans” and to alleviate allies’ doubts; “any readjustment of bases and forces should preserve a credible posture throughout the PACOM, visibly capable of meeting our commitments.”338 Like many of his military contemporaries, McCain was justifiably sensitive to other nations’ perceptions of U.S. resolve. U.S. resolve needed to be accompanied by the

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338 Ibid., 1:71-72, emphasis added.
dependable capability of U.S. forces stationed on U.S. bases abroad rather than relying on rights to re-enter bases that had been transferred to host nations. After all, “[t]he long term availability of ready base complexes to support PACOM contingencies must not be dependent upon the moods and whims of a host country.”

Admiral McCain had valid concerns about the perception of U.S. resolve in Asia. The debate over Nixon’s financial and military disentanglement motivations for his Korean withdrawal, however, reveal a fundamental disagreement in Nixon’s and his senior military officer’s approach to waning American resolve in the shadow of Vietnam. Nixon, who had developed a more multilateral and flexible vision of the Cold War dynamic, accepted the flagging resolve as fact and sought to adopt policies like the Nixon Doctrine to compensate for it. In contrast, many key military leaders derided irresolute dovish domestic sentiments and sought to ignore and resist their potential effects on U.S. military commitments abroad, which in their more traditional conception of the Cold War, were absolutely essential and non-negotiable. This tension regarding U.S. resolve and commitments can be seen in the discourse about the potential for conventional and nuclear military entanglement on the Korean peninsula and in the response to the financial strains caused by the United States’ approach to extended commitment at this point in the Cold War.

Nixon’s withdrawal plan was part of his larger effort to enhance the sustainment of U.S. extended deterrence by shifting more of the burden onto increasingly able allies, but it also sought to reduce the likelihood of automatic U.S. involvement in another Asian war if deterrence failed across the DMZ. Thus, the specific plan eventually approved by the Nixon administration involved the withdrawal of the 7th Infantry Division from South Korea and the repositioning of the 2nd Infantry Division from manning positions along 18 miles of the 151 mile DMZ to reserve positions north of Seoul, so “as to reduce the U.S. presence in the DMZ to the minimum

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consistent with [its] continuing responsibility for the security of the UN area at Panmunjon.”

The repositioning of the 2nd Infantry Division contributed nothing to achieving the Nixon Doctrine’s goals of cost savings and long-term sustainability of the U.S. force posture abroad, but officials in Washington thought it would reduce the threat of unsought entanglement and preserve options for the president by shifting decision points “on the involvement of American troops” from “commanders at the front” to a higher level.

From CINCPAC’s perspective, however, eliminating the automatic “trip wire” effect of having a substantial number of U.S. troops on the DMZ who were immediately subject to any North Korean offensive undermined his ability to deter aggression by either the North or the South. As Thomas Schelling argued, extended deterrence was more credible if the option to get involved was ostensibly removed by having a substantial interest that would be automatically entangled if the opponent attacked. In other words, for extended deterrence to be most credible in terms of resolve, one should eliminate presidential options rather than preserve them. Interestingly, Admiral McCain’s headquarters’ staff offered a corollary to the “trip wire” concept that argued that U.S. arguments for South Korean restraint in the face of military provocations were “made more credible and effective when U.S. forces [were] subject to the same infiltration attacks as the [South Korean] forces.” Furthermore, by leaving a U.S. division in place near the DMZ, the United States retained “a powerful restraining lever” on any South Korean eagerness to launch a counterattack because U.S. officials could threaten to leave a South Korean counterattack exposed by “withdrawing a U.S. division from its [normal] position astride the most rapid invasion route to Seoul.” The CINCPAC staff concluded the United States would continue to show the same restraint it had during the Blue House raid in 1968 and the EC-121 downing in 1969 in the face of future North Korean incursions and therefore the 2nd

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Infantry Division’s presence near the DMZ actually decreased the likelihood of escalation and entanglement from both directions. In the light of their logic, the CINCPAC staff viewed the repositioning directive primarily as an effort to “appease a sentiment” for “domestic political gain.”

The strategic calculus of this issue was more complicated than the CINCPAC staff acknowledged. First, the CINCPAC staff assumed the United States would exhibit restraint as it had in the past. Yet, the preceding chapter’s analysis of the administration’s reaction to the EC-121 downing indicated that such restraint nearly eluded Nixon that time and, furthermore, the incident convinced Nixon and Kissinger to be less restrained in the future. Second, the CINCPAC staff assumed that the threat to pull back the division from supporting a South Korean offensive would be viewed as credible by the South Koreans, which was far from certain. Thus, the repositioning argument was not demonstrably less rational from a conflict management perspective than the CINCPAC staff’s argument against it regardless of the fact that it also appeased a dovish domestic sentiment that so irked the staff.

In a response to the State Department’s query on the redisposition issue, Admiral McCain reiterated his staff’s arguments but emphasized that the timing in particular was wrong. He advised that the redisposition should be postponed until: the South Korean forces in Vietnam had returned home, recent North Korea aggressiveness had subsided, South Korean forces had been modernized, and South Korea exhibited political stability after its upcoming 1971 presidential election. Unfortunately for McCain, the reasonable elements of his argument were not sufficiently potent to overcome key civilian doubts about the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s pessimism and more than a year’s worth of effort by the State Department to minimize the

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entanglement risk that one of the United States’ most respected ambassadors still thought was very much present.344

A reduction of U.S. conventional forces in South Korea could also create a new dilemma by increasing the likelihood that U.S. military and civilian leaders would face the difficult choice of using tactical nuclear weapons to stall or defeat a North Korean offensive if deterrence failed. Indeed, when the Pentagon announced in September 1970 that it would be cutting three more Army divisions over the next nine months, the New York Times reminded its readers that President John F. Kennedy had increased the number of divisions to reduce the United States’ reliance on nuclear weapons for deterrence under President Eisenhower’s “New Look.”345 Cutting divisions again in the 1970s implied that reliance on the nuclear deterrent would once again increase.

In the eyes of military leaders, then, robust conventional capability served two functions. It reduced the likelihood that deterrence would fail in the first place and, if it did fail, it would reduce or at least delay the need to resort to tactical nuclear weapons.346 Admiral McCain expressed these very concerns to the JCS, writing that reductions in conventional military forces increased “the likelihood of nuclear war” by simultaneously encouraging “miscalculations” by the communists while “seriously reducing the range of options” available for non-nuclear responses “to contingencies in the Pacific area.”347 This concern was exacerbated in the Pacific theater by the emerging “Europe first” plurality, who advocated that if the Chinese were tempted to take advantage of a Soviet attack on Europe and the United States, the defense of Europe

344 See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
346 For example, General Donald V. Bennett, a retired USFK commander, did not “think [the United States could] afford the luxury of downgrading [its] ability to fight a conventional war [just] because [it had] an effective nuclear deterrent.” (Senior Officer Oral History Program, AY 1976, Volume I: General Donald V. Bennett, tape 5 (U.S. Army Military History Institute: Carlisle Barracks, 1976), 28.
would have priority over the defense of Asia. In such a scenario, government planners assumed “our nuclear threshold in the non-war [Asian] theater would be lowered” and therefore deter aggression in Asia by China.\textsuperscript{348}

Although CINCPAC thought it “unlikely that [the national command authority] would release [authorization of] nuclear weapons” in Korea, one can easily imagine how reluctant the Commander of USFK would be to find himself in the situation of recommending or authorizing the first use of nuclear weapons since the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.\textsuperscript{349}

Indeed, when candidly reflecting on his time as Commander of USFK from 1972-73, retired general Donald V. Bennett commented to Army War College students in 1976 that he was “concerned” about using tactical nuclear weapons in Korea to signal U.S. intent because he saw “no effective way of maintaining control in a nuclear environment.” He feared tactical nuclear weapons usage to signal intent would follow “a geometrical progression” or even be misperceived as “something bigger.”\textsuperscript{350} Thus, when it came to the possible use of nuclear weapons, senior military officers like Admiral McCain apparently preferred to rely on the Chinese and the North Koreans correctly estimating abundant tangible U.S. conventional military capability than to rely on them correctly estimating ethereal U.S. resolve to use its nuclear weapons.

The resolve arguments raised by withdrawal opponents like Admiral McCain expressed valid concerns about the perception of U.S. resolve in Asia but they also revealed an important

\textsuperscript{348} Talking points for Henry Kissinger in preparation for the National Security Council (NSC) meeting with regard to National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) no. 3 on U.S. military posture on the likelihood of: a Chinese attack on Korea, Vietnam, or Thailand; a simultaneous attack by the Warsaw Pact in Europe, White House, 10 Sep 1969, DDRS, Document Number: CK3100547245, 4.

\textsuperscript{349} Talking points for Henry Kissinger in preparation for the National Security Council (NSC) meeting with regard to National Security Study Memorandum (NSSM) no. 3 on U.S. military posture on the likelihood of: a Chinese attack on Korea, Vietnam, or Thailand; a simultaneous attack by the Warsaw Pact in Europe, White House, 10 Sep 1969, DDRS, Document Number: CK3100547245. When and if the commander of USFK would be delegated the authority to launch nuclear attacks by the national command authority is presumably still classified.

\textsuperscript{350} Senior Officer Oral History Program, AY 1976, Volume I: General Donald V. Bennett, tape 5 (U.S. Army Military History Institute: Carlisle Barracks, 1976), 23-25, 27. After having personally witnessed “the first air drop of a nuclear weapon in the United States” in 1951 from a hillside seven miles from ground zero, Gen. Bennett also “thought every governmental official in the world … should witness the detonation of a nuclear weapon.”
difference in how withdrawal opponents and proponents treated the U.S. interest in and commitment to South Korea in the context of diminished Congressional and public resolve. Senior military officers essentially sought to remove resolve from the deterrence equation by maintaining a robust, automatic “trip wire” force that presumably would force the United States to keep its commitment to South Korea despite public irresolution. In contrast, withdrawal proponents were less sanguine about the ability to muster U.S. resolve for a robust and sustained response once the “wire” was “tripped.” Their solution was to build in more flexibility into the U.S. response. Consequently, the withdrawal plan involved the removal of the 7th Infantry Division from South Korea and the repositioning of the 2nd Infantry Division from positions along 18 miles of the 151 mile DMZ to reserve positions north of Seoul. The repositioning of the 2nd Infantry Division contributed nothing to achieving the Nixon Doctrine’s goals of cost savings and long-term sustainability of the U.S. force posture abroad, but it did contribute to its other goal of reducing the threat of unsought entanglement by preserving options for the president.

A more flexible response, however, required a more flexible view of the U.S. commitment to South Korea and communicated a lack of unconditional resolve to defend South Korea with either conventional or nuclear forces. It also called into question the “interest” component of credibility by suggesting the United States was willing to accept more risk in South Korea because its interests there had diminished. Many senior military officers, however, generally rejected the idea that U.S. interests might have changed enough to permit an adjustment of the U.S. commitment to South Korea. They embraced a mostly unconditional view of Cold War commitments that presupposed the strong interest of keeping dominoes from


falling—and that clearly included the U.S. commitment to South Korea.\textsuperscript{353} In other words, senior military commanders in the Pacific and Korea believed the United States had committed to a robust defense of South Korea that it could not abjure.\textsuperscript{354} Thus, the only presidential options in Korea were to defeat North Korea if deterrence failed or to maintain such a robust deterrent that the first option never became necessary. According to deterrence theory, that deterrent would be made more credible by eliminating presidential options with a “trip wire” rather than preserving them.\textsuperscript{355} In light of these assumptions, the withdrawal plan appeared illogical and counterproductive unless it was absolutely required by dire financial constraints. In the presumed absence of those constraints, military leaders were unwilling to allow changes in resolution to drive changes in Cold War commitments abroad. Thus, key military leaders generally derided irresolute dovish domestic sentiments that led to weakened commitments and, for example, viewed the repositioning of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Division away from the DMZ as primarily an effort to “appease a sentiment” for “domestic political gain.”\textsuperscript{356}

Nixon, however, notably chafed at this notion of commitments creating interests, stating in his “First Annual Report to the Congress on United States Foreign Policy for the 1970's” that: “We are not involved in the world because we have commitments; we have commitments because we are involved. Our interests must shape our commitments, rather than the other way around.” That Nixon was willing to loosen his commitment to defend South Korea


\textsuperscript{354} See for example: Memo, Maj General James C. Smith to Lt General John Cushman, “The Law/MDT/Combined Command,” 13 February 1976, Box 3, John H. Cushman papers, USAMHI. Interestingly, a Cornell political scientist noted in 1968 that the United States was inclined at that time to view its commitments as unconditional far more than other western countries and far more than it had in the past. (Franklin B. Weinstein, “The Concept of a Commitment in International Relations.” \textit{The Journal of Conflict Resolution} 13, no. 1 (March 1969): 39-56.)

\textsuperscript{355} Admiral McCain’s headquarters’ staff also offered a corollary to the “trip wire” concept that a robust force in a trip wire posture reduced the risk of entanglement in both directions. They argued that U.S. arguments for South Korean restraint in the face of military provocations were “made more credible and effective when U.S. forces [were] subject to the same infiltration attacks as the [South Korean] forces.” Furthermore, by leaving a U.S. division in place near the DMZ, the United States retained “a powerful restraining lever” on any South Korean eagerness to launch a counterattack because U.S. officials could threaten to leave a South Korean counterattack exposed by “withdrawing a U.S. division from its [normal] position astride the most rapid invasion route to Seoul.”

indicated that official U.S. interests in South Korea were changing and many senior officials and especially U.S. officers were simply not prepared to accept that assessment. In fact, maintaining “U.S. prestige and the credibility of U.S. commitments” had become an interest itself in every contingency scenario covered in the NSSM 34 “Contingency Planning Study for Korea.”

The implications that troop reductions had on the likelihood of a nuclear defense of South Korea may have been the strongest argument levied by senior officers against the reductions, yet the highly classified topic was also the one that they were the most restricted to discuss. The limited declassified information currently available suggests the advisability of maintaining a healthy margin of safety in the conventional capability rapidly employable on the Korean peninsula. What constituted a healthy margin and where it should be located were clearly debatable. Thus, much debate remained about estimating how much actual additional risk a troop reduction would generate and how much risk-minimizing capability the United States could afford or was willing to afford given the worsening financial condition of the country.

Consequently, the troop withdrawal issue was about more than just raising the risk of deterrence failing on the Korean peninsula. Nixon’s willingness to modify the commitment to South Korea challenged the NSC-68 mindset’s foundational assumptions about the nature of U.S. interests during the Cold War that top military officers tended to embrace almost as a matter of faith. This fundamental disagreement in the view of the interest in and commitment to South Korea, although mostly implicit in the evidence presented so far, comes out more clearly when the troop withdrawal debate is situated within the broader and more contentious debate about the overextension of U.S. power and the resulting strain on the treasury.

**Money Matters: Debating the Cost of Commitments**

The troop withdrawal issue touched a much deeper nerve in key military leaders than the redeployment of augmentation aircraft or the relocation of U.S. troops in South Korea did because it was part of a broader and more contentious debate about the overextension of U.S.
power and the resulting strain on the treasury. The augmentation aircraft comprised a much narrower issue and were a temporary solution to stabilize an aberrant situation. To military leaders, their redeployment was contingent on evidence that the threat had receded to pre-
Pueblo levels.\textsuperscript{357} Similarly, the troop redisposition issue did not significantly undermine American strength abroad or its specific deterrent posture in Korea, and the most compelling military complaint was that it was too soon. Thus, the civil-military disagreements over these two issues were primarily about the \textit{timing} of the actions and were rooted in a disagreement over a \textit{regional} and \textit{near-term} assessment of the level of threat to U.S. national security. In contrast, the Nixon troop withdrawal was a significant and \textit{permanent} reduction of U.S. Army billets in South Korea that disturbed the long-standing status quo in the region. More importantly, it initiated one of the most substantial components of the Nixon Doctrine’s broader strategic reposturing that key military leaders such as Admiral McCain did not think was wise or fiscally necessary.

Congress thought otherwise. From 1950 through 1965, annual inflation rates remained below 2 percent with the exceptions of 1951, 1957, and 1958. By the time Nixon entered office in 1969, however, the inflation rate had been rising for three consecutive years and was nearing 5.5 percent by August 1969.\textsuperscript{358} The keepers of the national purse desired “to halt the erosion of the [U.S.] economy by inflation,” and military spending was an attractive target given its growth during the Vietnam War and the increasingly anti-military domestic sentiment. As Secretary of State Rogers understated to South Korean Foreign Minister Choi that same month, although the “U.S. Congress takes a very favorable attitude” toward South Korea, the public and Congress “[felt] that [the United States was] somewhat over-extended abroad to the detriment of domestic

\textsuperscript{357} They approximated this by monitoring the rate of detected incursions by North Korean infiltrators. Already by 1969, the number of North Korean incursions had dropped markedly and continued to drop during the period of augmentation. Had it not, one could reasonably expect Admiral McCain to have offered continued resistance to the redeployment of the additional aircraft.

\textsuperscript{358} US Inflation Calculator, http://www.usinflationcalculator.com/inflation/historical-inflation-rates/. Rates of inflation are calculated using the Current Consumer Price Index published monthly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Estimated rates of inflation for the years 1965-1968 were 1.6\%, 2.9\%, 3.1\%, and 4.2\%.
needs. Sensing the mood in Congress, the Nixon administration preemptively cut Johnson’s fiscal year (FY) 1970 defense budget of $81 billion by $1.1 billion soon after the inauguration, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird subsequently announced an overall goal of cutting $3 billion and 100,000 military personnel by the start of the fiscal year 1971 (i.e., 1 July 1970). By December 1969, the House Appropriations Committee cut the DoD’s FY 1971 request of $75.2 billion by an additional $5.3 billion, 10 percent below the defense budget proposed by the Johnson administration in January 1969.

Although some of that year’s savings would come from reducing about 100,000 troops fighting in Vietnam, military commanders complained that Congress cut the budget “down so sharply” that they were “forced to make a fairly simple trade off [of] men for equipment” and were taking “a greater risk in meeting [U.S.] commitments around the world.” The Appropriations Committee’s cut to the defense budget was designed to help curb inflation but ongoing inflation and untouchable programs made the cuts more severe than they appeared to the casual observer. When combined with an inflation rate nearing 6 percent, the proposed 10 percent cut reduced the DoD’s effective purchasing power in FY 1971 by about 15 percent compared to FY 1970. Additionally, given that more than $28 billion of high priority programs in the defense budget were “fenced off” from cuts, other programs would face a cut of at least 22 percent and would need to begin operating on that restricted budget within about six

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359 “Telegram From Secretary of State Rogers to the Department of State, Taipei, August 1, 1969, 1201Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 80.


363 Calculation: \((X \times 0.9)/(X \times 1.06) = 0.85X\).
months. In response, senior U.S. military leaders argued strongly that “arbitrary” budget cuts and force reductions were being made to support the “Great Society” domestic spending programs initiated by Nixon’s predecessor, and this forced the United States to shoulder an unacceptable level of risk throughout the world.

**Strategic Readjustment and Cost.** Important senior military leaders objected to Nixon’s vision of a new status quo for the United States in general and in Korea specifically, where Nixon’s “doctrine” was prompting a cut in U.S. ground forces of nearly 50 percent in just one year. Although such a dramatic shift in the status quo would seem risky to military officers steeped in the realist mindset of maintaining the military “balance of power” even if they accepted its financial necessity, the discourse suggests military officers found it especially galling to accept budget-induced risks that emanated from politicians seemingly catering to domestic anti-war sentiment and popular domestic spending programs instead of “rationally” prioritizing what the officers considered to be vital national security needs.

The military’s dispute over spending priorities incorporated three intertwined strands of discourse. The first was the reasonable realist premise that national survival and the defense of vital national interests should be the nation’s top federal spending priority. Secondly, the defense budget as a percent of gross domestic product (GDP) indicated there was room to expand defense spending without unacceptably diminishing economic growth or quality of life. The third strand undergird and bound the other two together by emphasizing that the direness of the U.S. security situation made cost considerations a luxury that the United States could not

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364 Relative to Johnson’s original request for $81B. 22% calculation: ($69.9B -- $28B)/((($81B-$28B)*1.06). For “fenced” programs, see “Military Cutbacks,” *New York Times*, 27 August 1969.

365 See for example, Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1970*, 1:69. The reference to Johnson’s Great Society programs is only implicit in the comments found so far.

366 My interpretation here is supported by the official PACOM historians, who contemporaneously observed that Admiral McCain “believed that reductions should be based on missions still assigned rather than on the desire … to meet an arbitrary cutback without regard for the impact such cuts had … on our defense posture overall.” (Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1970*, 1:69). Presumably reflecting the prevailing mindset within PACOM, they also noted: “For the first time national security and domestic priorities were considered together and two strategies were rejected because they would have thwarted vital domestic programs.” (Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1970*, 1:96).
afford to allow to impede its strategic calculus. Thus, fiscal considerations were a secondary element of the strategies to counter dire national security threats rather than being a fundamental component of them, at least as long as non-defense spending had some “fat” in it and the standard of living was not noticeably diminished.

This third strand also connected directly to the issue of commitments because it tapped into the very same NSC-68 mindset that had emerged some time after the issuance of NSC-68, survived the parsimony of President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “New Look,” and grew during the remainder of the Cold War. As Cold War scholar John Lewis Gaddis observed, this current of discourse emanated from NSC-68 and implied that “considerations of priority and economy might be appropriate in normal times, but in the face of a threat such as that posed by the Soviet Union, preoccupations of this sort had to go by the board.” In other words, this mindset combined the understandable assertion that spending on vital national interests should have priority over “non-vital” domestic spending with the pessimism that the nation’s survival was particularly precarious in the world of falling dominoes and bandwagoning allies described in NSC-68—the very same thinking that drove many U.S. national security leaders to assert the need for unconditional commitments to allies.

Thus, for example, CINCPAC Admiral McCain argued in October 1970 to the JCS that military budget reductions “placed the Pacific Command near the margin of acceptable risk with regard to U.S. power, influence, and prestige in the Far East.” In his view, the “budget restraints” raised “specific dangers” of “allies and non-aligned nations hedging their security prospects by accommodating to one or both of the major communist powers.” Disagreeing with Secretary of Defense Laird, Admiral McCain expressed doubt about the gravitational pull of the United States and the rest of the “free world” on Japan and worried that “Japan might be

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367 For a diachronic assessment of the ebb and flow of this current, see Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 57, 90-93, 354-355.

368 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 93.
encouraged to pursue foreign, economic, or military policies highly inimical to U.S. interests,” including the acquisition of nuclear weapons.  

In a memo to Kissinger about Korea, the JCS representative to the National Security Council Review Group asserted a similar concern that partial withdrawal would damage the U.S. reputation for resolve in the eyes of allies and enemies alike. Lieutenant General Ferdinand T. Unger asserted that because “U.S. forces in Korea [were] a symbol of the U.S. commitments to the defense of the Republic of Korea, and in fact to all of Northeast Asia, [a]ny significant or rapid reduction in the U.S. presence could cause anxiety to the Koreans and be regarded (by both allies and enemies) as evidence that the United States had lost interest in meeting its defense commitments in Korea.” The position expressed in Unger’s memo, while certainly valid, also resonated with a more unsophisticated and stale analogy raised by other sympathetic officials that a partial withdrawal of troops from South Korea in the 1970s would produce a similar result as the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula in the 1940s—war. The upshot of these arguments was that the cost of deterrence, though high, was far cheaper than the cost of failed deterrence. This again was a valid point, but only if one assumed the United States would fight robustly if deterrence in Korea failed—and Nixon, despite the views of his senior officers, was not prepared to make that assumption.

369 Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1970, 1:99. For Japanese nuclear weapons, see: NSSM 12, Policy Toward Japan, Part 1, Political Psychological and Security Aspects of the Relationship, June 1971, DNSA, 54-55. Laird disagreed with concerns about Japan seeking nuclear weapons due to the proposed US force reduction in Korea. In a letter to Secretary of State Rogers, he wrote: “As long as her confidence in the U.S. strategic deterrent remains strong, reductions in U.S. force deployments to the area should not be a cause of alarm in Japan…[Japan's intentions] to develop nuclear weapons…depends primarily on Japanese confidence in our strategic deterrent and our commitment to defend Japan against nuclear aggression.” (Memo from Melvin Laird to Richard Nixon, 14 October 1970, DNSA, 3).

370 Memorandum From the Joint Chiefs of Staff Representative to the National Security Council Review Group (Unger) to the Chairman of the Review Group (Kissinger), Washington, February 17, 1970, in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 52. Gen Unger added, “This would be particularly serious if U.S. reductions were not fully offset by the completion of substantial improvements to ROK forces in advance of any US withdrawal.”

371 For example, recently retired Brig. Gen. George A. Lincoln, director of the Office of Emergency Preparedness, commented during the August 1969 NSC meeting about U.S. forces in Korea that: “In 1946 and 1947 I dealt with this problem [of withdrawing troops from Korea to save money]. I argued that we should not take them out of Korea [but they] did take them out and North Korea attacked.” (Draft Minutes of NSC Meeting, August 14, 1969, Western White House, Subjects: Korea and China, DNSA, 11)
One can observe the three-stranded discourse that prioritized strategic commitments over cost in Admiral McCain’s reaction in late 1969 to NSSM 27’s reevaluation of how the United States would meet its commitment to South Korea. He stated, “U.S. goals, defense commitments to [South Korea], and the threat of communist aggression in Northeast Asia must be the primary determinants of overall U.S. policy toward Korea,” not budget constraints. Questions of cost were “valid only to assist in the selection of program alternatives which [were actually] determined to fulfill those objectives of fundamental U.S. policy goals.”372 In other words, neither the goals themselves nor the minimum methods needed to achieve them were subject to questions of cost.

Viewed in isolation, Admiral McCain’s statement appears surprisingly non-strategic in that it divorced ends from means. To McCain, however, these cost considerations were mostly a false problem created by the unfavorable “domestic U.S. political climate in terms of both foreign aid and U.S. troop commitments in Asia.” He could not support cutting a seemingly sustainable military budget so severely that it jeopardized the achievement of “current [strategic objectives and requirements that were] based on military judgment” just to score political points domestically.373 Much as the United States could not let the security provided by its extended deterrence posture overseas be jeopardized by “the moods and whims of a host country,” McCain’s comments imply that he thought the security provided by a robust defense budget also should not be jeopardized by the moods and whims of his fellow civilian countrymen.374

Three months later and just days after Nixon’s strategic reassessment (NSSM 3) was reported to the press, the discourse took a similar form as an anonymous senior U.S. military official commented to the New York Times that Nixon’s new one-and-half war global military posture was “a defense choice largely based on cost” that was “forced largely by the pressure of

374 Ibid., 4:163.
inflation plus a *feeling* that certain domestic programs ought to have a larger share of the budget.” In essence, “the fiscal tail [was] wagging the strategic dog.” The main dilemma for this official was that, despite a prevailing view among “many top people” that the United States had “become overextended,” nobody seemed “ready to really bite the bullet on reducing commitments, on deciding for instance that we can get by with fewer troops in Germany or Korea.”³⁷⁵ His statement implied that such choices based on feelings failed to come to grips with commitments linked to rational threat assessments that still argued against the one-and-a-half war posture.³⁷⁶ It also assumed the current force levels were the right ones and could not be reduced without reducing commitments. Although both implications had merits that were worth evaluating, neither was an obvious or unquestionable truth.

It is not hard to sympathize with senior military leaders like Admiral McCain. After all, credible deterrence *was* important and rested heavily on resolute commitments to allies. The arguments against reductions offered by senior military leaders had cogent and persuasive elements. These were intelligent men who expressed genuine concern about the effect that budget and troop reductions would have on the deterrence posture and security of the country they swore to protect.³⁷⁷ Yet their positions seemed sluggish to evolve and exhibited a dearth of self-reflection. Although their concerns raised good questions, their positions depended on their unquestioned assumptions being correct. In an uncommon reference to such unquestioned assumptions General Ralph E. Haines, Jr., the four-star commander of US Army Pacific (USARPAC), “urged” General Michaelis as he prepared to take command of USFK to “identify

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³⁷⁵ William Beecher, “President to Cut Military Budget for Next 5 Years: Seeks $4-To-$6-Billion Slash,” *New York Times*, 19 October 1969. Emphasis added. Contrary to the view expressed by this official, U.S. officials were already six months into the process of evaluating various such commitments, including troop reductions in South Korea.
³⁷⁶ For example, in a March 1970 memo from CINCPAC to the JCS regarding Nixon’s new Joint Strategic Operation Plan, Admiral McCain expressed concern about “the risk in accepting the supposition that simultaneous major aggression in Europe and Asia are highly unlikely.” (Johnson, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1970*, 1:104).
³⁷⁷ More parochial interests such as preserving the strength and prestige of the Army vis-à-vis the other services and even retaining general officer authorizations (and therefore more promotion opportunities) that would be lost if a division and its brigades were deactivated certainly may have been private factors as well, but these concerns understandably did not appear in official correspondence or meeting minutes.
potential savings” and to “[remain] skeptical of long sacred preserves.” Furthermore, none of these generals offered the difficult calculation of the expected risks, costs, and benefits of maintaining the status quo or going forward with reductions.

Although military leaders may have been too reluctant to accept changes to those commitments, they were absolutely right to point out the potential consequences of abruptly changing commitments without taking adequate compensatory measures. Thus, one can debate if the measures were adequate and one can frown upon the tactic of using questionably pessimistic and sometimes perhaps deliberately exaggerated threat assessments to achieve the practical aim of retaining whatever additional military capability they could in the region while also still understanding senior officers’ perceived obligation to do so. Indeed, a similar sense of obligation still resonates today, as evidenced in one senior general’s reminder to Air War College class of 2015 that they had “a moral obligation to communicate risk.”

From Admiral McCain’s perspective, erosion of resolve was exacerbated by the severe erosion of capability in his region that was directly linked to spending restrictions. Afterall, he witnessed that the presence of more than one hundred additional U.S. combat aircraft failed to deter North Korea’s provocative attack on the U.S. EC-121 in April 1969. Yet the force strength throughout his Pacific area of responsibility, including Korea, continued to fall below the strength originally authorized to meet perceived U.S. needs in the region. For example, a DoD inspection of PACOM in November 1970 found that “approximately 48 percent of 1,021 non-Southeast Asia PACOM units or ships submitting Force Status and Identity (FORSTAT) reports were in either a marginally-ready or non-ready category (with about 29 percent not ready)”

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379 Author’s personal notes of U.S. Air War College presentation, 2014. Air War College non-attribution policy prohibits further detail.
primarily due to “personnel and equipment deficiencies.” Furthermore, at the time of the DoD inspection, Nixon’s troop withdrawal was already well on its way to reducing military personnel in Korea by more than 10,700 for calendar year 1970 while two South Korean divisions were still off fighting in Vietnam. Finally, Admiral McCain noted that “the appropriation for the Fiscal Year 1970 Military Assistance Program was the lowest in the history of the program, a scant $350 million [when prior to 1967 the appropriation averaged some $2 billion annually!” What McCain was experiencing in PACOM was the beginning of “the most substantial reductions in American military capabilities relative to those of the Soviet Union in the entire postwar.” His unease was understandable given that he claimed “the Soviet military threat [was] greater than it [had] ever been.”

Unfortunately for Admiral McCain and like-minded officers, the military’s mix of valid and pessimistic concerns were not sufficiently persuasive or important to overcome Nixon’s strategic vision for a sustainable global military presence, Ambassador Porter’s fear of entanglement, and Congress’ fear of inflation and overextension. Six months after NSDM 48 secretly initiated the withdrawal of one division from South Korea and with the military’s viable options for resistance exhausted, a military spokesperson announced in September 1970 that the Army would cut a total of three divisions from its ranks by the end of June 1971—the one from South Korea and two from Vietnam. Ironically, the financial issues that helped spur this initial reduction in

381 Ibid., 4:3. The total Nixon withdrawal by June 1971 was approximately 20,000 troops.
382 Ibid., 4:283.
383 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 318.
384 Johnson, ed., CINCPAC History, 1970, 1:1. As the CINCPAC historians summarized it: “Throughout the rest of this [1970 CINCPAC] history is a record of activities dominated by force reductions or withdrawals, base closures, and fiscal constraints [which] appeared in sharp contrast to the strengthening … demonstrated by the Communist countries of the PACOM in 1970.” One should note, however, that these same historians cited a CINCPAC intelligence point paper stating that “The Soviet Union has been significantly building its Far East military capabilities and its forces in Asia ‘eventually may be stronger than those deployed in Eastern Europe’” without mentioning the seven-month long Sino-Soviet border clash in 1969. (Ibid., 63)
South Korea also held up the decision to pursue the additional reductions Nixon originally desired.

**Insufficient Foreign Military Assistance Postponed Additional Withdrawals.** The first withdrawal was envisioned as the first step of a gradual overall force withdrawal from South Korea that would eventually leave only a token U.S. ground force and a robust Air Force presence on the peninsula. When and how significant the next reduction would be was still open to debate, though the Departments of State and Defense agreed the next reduction should occur some time after the start of fiscal year 1973 (i.e., July 1972). In the same month that the DoD publicly announced the intended withdrawal from Korea, Secretary of State Rogers sent a memo to Nixon and Laird arguing that he “[felt] the stresses and strains surrounding [the withdrawal of 20,000 US troops that] fiscal year” were too great to countenance another “substantial withdrawal for at least the next year or two.”

In general, Secretary of Defense Laird sought a more aggressive drawdown in Korea and the Pacific region than Rogers, Kissinger, or his military subordinates. Shortly after the completion of the first withdrawal, Laird advocated to Nixon that as the South Korean “modernization program show[ed] results, the U.S. should plan to reduce its ground forces by at least 14,000 additional men” beginning in FY 73. Laird sought to have just one division stationed in Hawaii for the entire Pacific region. Kissinger warned Rogers that this plan was “a very bad thing for us … a very bad picture of the United States” in terms of deterrence.

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387 “Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, 22 September 1970,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 184. Word spread through the executive branch that “In October 1970, Nixon directed that there would be no further U.S. withdrawals from Korea beyond the 20,000 spaces already approved,” which seemed to be a reiteration of the wording used in the March 1970 NDSM 48 announcing the original withdrawal decision. (See, for example: “Paper Prepared in the Department of State, undated,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 246; William Beecher, “U.S. Will Hold Up Korean Pullouts: Wants to Avoid Impression of Hasty Retreat in Asia,” *New York Times*, 3 Jan 1971.) Unfortunately, no document has yet been found clearly indicating that Nixon made a decision subsequent to NSMD 48. Nonetheless, that was the impression in parts of the Departments of State and Defense that should have been well informed.

Although it might have been acceptable over a period of four years, it was “ridiculous” to seek in just one year.\footnote{Telcon Rogers/Kissinger, 13 Aug 1971, 9:40 am, DNSA.} The Commander of USFK also sought to postpone subsequent withdrawals until the modernization program began “to show results” and until the political repercussions of the first withdrawal had “settled” down.\footnote{“Report by John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff, Washington, April 16, 1971,” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 230-231.}

Nixon and Kissinger appeared to adopt a “wait and see” attitude to future withdrawals and even reminded administration officials in June of 1971 that “[n]o decisions have been made on U.S. redeployments from Korea beyond the 20,000 space reduction to be completed by June 30, 1971.”\footnote{NSDM 113, June 1971, in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 248.} In addition to the myriad of issues outside of Korea vying for their attention, including Kissinger’s groundbreaking secret negotiations with the People’s Republic of China, two Korean issues in particular warranted postponing a decision on subsequent withdrawals. First, Nixon could use the U.S. troops remaining in Korea as leverage to encourage South Korea to keep its two divisions in Vietnam, as he strongly desired (discussed in more detail in the next chapter). Second, and more fundamentally, Nixon could not legitimately authorize more withdrawals until Congress approved MAP levels at somewhere near the level Nixon had promised. Even strong advocates for additional withdrawal such as Laird recognized that deterrence stability and favorable relations with South Korea depended on the South Korean forces receiving upgrades to their equipment and capabilities to help offset the loss of the U.S. division. It was an issue everyone in the executive branch could support. Unfortunately, they had to get the money from the legislative branch, and Congress had soured on foreign military assistance.

Nixon’s original directive envisioned $200 million per year in Military Assistance Program (MAP) funding for South Korea for five years. Although Laird’s intervention with his former congressional colleagues secured the desired funding for FY70, the FY70 foreign aid bill was
the “lowest ever voted for the aid program” and Pacific Command received its lowest ever allocation of MAP funds—$350 million compared to an average of about $2 billion prior to 1967.\footnote{“House Approves $1.6-Billion Aid, The Least Ever: Measure Amended to Include Military,” \textit{New York Times}, 10 December 1969; Johnson, ed., \textit{CINCPAC History, 1970}, 1:283.} Things got worse for the Korean MAP program in subsequent years with FY71 yielding only $155 million of the $239 million Nixon had requested, FY72 $149 million of $215 million, and FY73 only $94 million of $264 million.\footnote{Cha, \textit{Alignment,} 286, note 63.} As will be explored in subsequent chapters, the dearth of MAP funding for South Korea was part of a set of mutually reinforcing events that prevented Nixon from implementing any more reductions of forces in Korea. Without the offsetting military capability that MAP funds were intended to buy, the capability of the dwindling military deterrent on the peninsula could adversely adjust North Korean calculations. In the absence of the political will to provide the promised funds, the commitment and resolve of the Americans could be questioned by both Koreas.

\textbf{Conclusion}

As was shown in chapter 3, Nixon and his civilian supporters were concerned about maintaining the long-term credibility of the United States by developing a sustainable foreign posture that adequately met deterrence needs while also placating domestic desires. In contrast, military opponents to the force reduction rejected the assertion that “fat” existed in the military budget that could be redirected to domestic programs without dangerously undermining U.S. deterrence and credibility. Because Nixon was willing to modify the commitment to South Korea to better align with his perception of U.S. interests, resources and resolve, the troop withdrawal issue involved more than just raising the risk of deterrence failing on the Korean peninsula. Rather, it challenged the NSC-68 mindset’s foundational assumptions about the nature of U.S. interests during the Cold War that top military officers tended to embrace almost as a matter of faith.
Clearly, if Nixon was going to reinterpret the U.S. commitment to South Korea, the preferred path would have been to ensure that South Korea’s military had been strengthened enough prior to the U.S. withdrawal to compensate for the diminishment in U.S. capability and implicit resolve. Both sides agreed this was the best solution if circumstances allowed even though they disagreed that it was the required solution. Military officers’ disagreement with Nixon’s willingness to accept additional risk by withdrawing before compensatory measures were in place, however, reveal fundamental differences in the assumptions underlying each side’s risk assessment even though both sides thought they were addressing credibility concerns.

On the one hand, Nixon and his civilian supporters were concerned about maintaining the long-term credibility of the United States by developing a sustainable foreign posture that adequately met deterrence needs while also placating domestic desires. If they thought an outdated and overly rigid conception of the Cold War had led to unsustainable overextension and unnecessary significant internal dissention, then it is understandable that they were willing to adjust commitments to better align with updated perceptions of interest and resolve while still hedging their bets. On the other hand, if one assumed the commitment to defend South Korea was necessarily unconditional due to the nature of the Cold War, then it was completely illogical to take a chance on having an insufficient deterrence capability in place while simultaneously undermining that remaining deterrent by signaling diminished resolve (especially if it appeared not to be absolutely necessary financially). Military opponents to the force reduction rejected the assertion that “fat” existed in the military budget and that those funds could be redirected to domestic programs without dangerously undermining U.S. deterrence and credibility. They noted inflation’s erosive effects on their purchasing power but, although they could fathom the merits of Nixon’s long-term vision, their main response was “not now” and “not so fast.” Many of their arguments about deterrence, entanglement, and cost were theoretically sound but also intertwined stale and hidebound elements of a persistent NSC-68 mindset, and these
arguments were supported by padded estimates and plainly pessimistic studies. In the end, however, Nixon’s view of the commitment to South Korea as being conditional and renegotiable prevailed over the military’s more traditional view of the commitment as being necessarily unconditional.

It should not be surprising that the U.S. military’s resistance to the first withdrawal ultimately failed. They had no powerful advocates within the administration, and Congress was not inclined favorably. Yet as the U.S. military’s resistance was transitioning to resignation by June 1970, the South Koreans’ resistance to the reduction was only just beginning. As will be seen in the next chapter, President Park’s reaction would validate at least some of the credibility concerns voiced by senior U.S. military officers.
CHAPTER 5: U.S. CREDIBILITY AND THE SOUTH KOREAN RESPONSE TO TROOP WITHDRAWAL

Reductions and policy adjustments have already raised serious doubts in the minds of our Asian allies as to the extent of our resolve. As the Vietnam withdrawal continues, the additional reductions and redeployments proposed [by the JCS] can only serve to increase the magnitude of these doubts.

Admiral John S. McCain, Jr., 5 September 1970

Formal avenues of resistance to Nixon’s withdrawal plan closed for the U.S. military and other U.S. foreign policy elites after Nixon issued NSDM 48 in March 1970, though some room for maneuver still existed in how the plan would be implemented. In contrast, when President Park was informed of the decision later that same month, South Korean resistance to U.S. force reductions shifted into high gear—from judicious, proactive countermeasures against an eventual reduction of unknown size to full-blown crisis management of a large reduction occurring much sooner than Park expected. Both the preemptive and “crisis management” phases of South Korean resistance closely followed the pattern of the “alliance security dilemma” described by Glenn Snyder. As discussed in chapter 3, the relative increase in overt and covert aggression by the North Koreans in 1970 and 1969 seemed to raise the likelihood that the United States could get entangled in a renewed conflict on the Korean peninsula while the Nixon Doctrine, U.S. budgetary strains, and the increasingly vocal U.S. domestic opposition to the Vietnam War clearly indicated diminishing tolerance within the United States for the risk of
being entangled.\textsuperscript{394} Thus, in Snyder’s terms, South Korea’s leaders exhibited fears of a weakening commitment from and possible “abandonment” by the United States while U.S. officials exhibited fears of “entrapment” and of being overextended beyond the level that U.S. interests would dictate.\textsuperscript{395}

A natural corollary of Snyder’s alliance security dilemma concept predicts that American attempts to reduce their fear of entrapment would increase South Korean fears of abandonment, but theory also predicts that South Korea would be inclined to exaggerate its fears of abandonment and that the United States should not have fretted much about such concerns. According to Stephen Walt’s alliance theory, allies during the Cold War had “an obvious interest in voicing their doubts [about U.S. credibility] so as to persuade the United States to do more on their behalf,” but in an international dynamic in which balancing is most prevalent “their doubts should not be taken too seriously.”\textsuperscript{396} Furthermore, the patron state should be on alert for “free-riding” by the client if the client thinks the situation nearly guarantees the patron’s support.\textsuperscript{397} In addition to this balancing act between their own entanglement concerns and their ally’s abandonment concerns, U.S. officials needed to remain cognizant that how they handled the reduction in South Korea might affect the perception of U.S. resolve in other friendly states in the region that had already been set on edge by the less specific Nixon Doctrine.

\textsuperscript{394} Glenn H. Snyder, “Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut,” \textit{Journal of International Affairs} 44 (March 1990): 118-120. South Korean dependence on the United States (a third factor in influencing abandonment fears) can be assumed to remain relatively constant during this time or even slightly diminishing as the South Koreans gradually developed greater military capacity. The bi-polarity of the Cold War diminished with Nixon’s détente with China in 1972 but was ostensibly and relatively stable from 1968-1971.

\textsuperscript{395} Snyder, “Alliance Theory,” 113. According to Snyder, the “cost of abandonment … varies with a state’s dependence on the alliance” and the “cost of entrapment varies with the extent of shared interests with the ally” and “is highest when the parties have different … interests at stake vis-à-vis the same opponent.” See also: Glenn H. Snyder, “The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics,” \textit{World Politics} 36 (July 1984): 461-96.


\textsuperscript{397} Note, however, that Goldstein warns that “the structural constraints of the international system and the nuclear military technology of the late twentieth century weaken confidence in expectations drawn strictly from the logic of collective action.” (Avery Goldstein, “Discounting the Free Ride: Alliances and Security in the Postwar World,” \textit{International Organization} 49 (Winter, 1995), 44.)
Contrary to Walt’s generalization, South Korean fears of abandonment appear to have been more genuine and consequential than the prevailing view in the Nixon administration had anticipated. The evidence from primary sources and Victor Cha’s analysis of the Japanese-Korean relationship during this time strongly suggest that the South Koreans had a significant and genuine concern about the resolve component of U.S. credibility.\textsuperscript{398} U.S. officials were aware of competing concerns and tried to find the right balance between them. On the one hand, they worried that the South Koreans were exaggerating their fears to get additional concessions and assurances from the United States. On the other hand, they knew the withdrawal would genuinely unsettle the South Koreans. They miscalculated, however, that the United States’ strong bargaining position within the asymmetric alliance could be combined with reasonably generous financial compensation to convince the South Koreans both to cooperate with the withdrawal and not to take significant counteractions contrary to U.S. interests. They were mostly right on the first count and mostly wrong on the second.

After the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine, U.S. officials tried to reassure shaken Asian allies with their words while they simultaneously reified the uncertainty generated by the Nixon Doctrine with their deeds. This was especially true with South Korea. U.S. officials acknowledged that the troop reductions would be difficult for President Park to accept and could spill over to create a domino effect of their own that raised “serious doubts in the minds of [U.S.] Asian allies as to the extent of [U.S.] resolve,” yet they still proceeded more briskly and brusquely with the reduction than was warranted and relied on financial compensation to minimize the damage.\textsuperscript{399} In essence, Nixon indelicately ripped the U.S. Seventh Infantry Division from South Korea and then attempted to staunch the bleeding of the U.S. reputation for

\textsuperscript{398} Victor D. Cha, \textit{Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle} (California: Stanford University Press, 1999).

resolve with a generous wad of dollar bills that he could not guarantee would arrive on schedule
or in the promised quantity.

This chapter adds to the still under-examined topic of the degree to which U.S. foreign
relations were influenced by allied, rather than enemy, perceptions of U.S. resolve and
credibility. It asserts that Snyder’s concept of the alliance security dilemma illustrates the
basic dynamic within the U.S.–South Korean alliance at this time. It estimates how genuine the
Korean fears of abandonment were and assesses how genuine those fears appeared to U.S.
policymakers. It also examines South Korean efforts to receive assurances and qualitatively
evaluates the degree to which U.S. policymakers were sensitive and vulnerable to expressed
South Korean concerns about the United States’ reputation for credibility, whether genuine or
not. It concludes that U.S. officials’ insufficient sensitivity and attentiveness to genuine South
Korean concerns encouraged President Park to take a variety of compensatory steps that
created unnecessarily troubling but manageable adverse consequences for the United States.

**South Korean Fear of Abandonment & U.S. Reaction to It**

The South Koreans were well aware that they were vulnerable to the whims of U.S.
domestic views about the commitment to their country. Unsurprisingly, within months of
President Nixon taking office, South Korean officials began seeking “assurances” and additional
positive statements about the new administration’s continuing resolve to keep its commitment to

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400 For example, Press admits that how countries assess the credibility of their allies (let alone simply aligned states)

401 These preliminary estimates can be refined by scholars with fluency in Korean. Nonetheless, Victor Cha’s
examination of South Korean and Japanese behavior during this timeframe is a convincing additional indicator of
South Korean official sentiments.

402 Such a question, though relevant to assessing the validity of realignment domino concerns of U.S. officials, far
exceeds the scope of this monograph, and may be a fruitful realm of future research.
South Korea. Yet month after month, the Nixon administration’s actions and statements eroded South Korean confidence in U.S. resolve.

**Early South Korean concerns about U.S. resolve.** The U.S. troops stationed in South Korea were one of the clearest indicators of U.S. resolve. Yet as South Korean Prime Minister Chung Il Kwon conveyed to President Nixon and Secretary of State Rogers, the massive Focus Retina airlift exercise in March 1969 raised South Korean concerns early in Nixon’s first term that the Americans were contemplating a withdrawal of some U.S. troops from South Korea. As Ambassador Porter cabled back to Washington, South Korean officials who observed over twenty-five hundred U.S. airborne troops parachuting into the open fields of South Korea after a record-setting airlift of over eighty-five hundred miles from North Carolina were not concerned about the ability of a U.S. airlift to reach South Korea in time to counter a North Korean attack but whether the airlift “[would come to them] at all.” Similarly, a high-ranking South Korean official told the *New York Times* that the exercise was “dangerous . . . if it [was] intended as an excuse to reduce” U.S. forces in South Korea. Thus, the exercise added to “South Korea[n] doubts about the strength of the United States’ will to continue military commitments in Asia” rather than mollify them. Consequently, Prime Minister Chung Il Kwon argued in separate meetings with President Nixon and to Secretary of State Rogers that the United States should maintain two divisions in Korea even after the Vietnam War ended to ensure adequate military capability and to create a “psychological” effect that encouraged the South Koreans and discouraged the North Koreans. As South Korean officials later “emphatically” expressed to

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Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, they understandably preferred the United States to express its resolve through "positively postured" U.S. forces in Korea than with "rhetoric." 407

Recent U.S. reactions to North Korean provocations also worried the South Koreans. The restrained response of the Johnson administration to the seizure of the USS Pueblo and the subsequent twelve months of negotiations with the North Koreans had already made South Korean officials wary of the United States' willingness to take risks to stand up to North Korean provocations. As one South Korean official put it, "if the most powerful country in the world would do nothing to retrieve its ships or the men in service of their own nation, what would it do on behalf of Koreans?" 408 The Nixon administration's subsequent cautious reaction to the EC-121 downing in April 1969 only exacerbated South Korean concerns raised by the USS Pueblo incident. Then, halfway through Nixon's first year, the United States' suggestive actions were reinforced by troubling statements. In June 1969, Secretary of Defense Laird testified to a congressional subcommittee that he "would like to see us move in the direction of 'Koreanizing' our activities in Korea just as rapidly as we can. . . . We hope that we can withdraw or reduce—I would say reduce—our forces just as soon as possible." 409 The following month, Nixon’s announcement of the strategic retrenchment that became known as the Nixon Doctrine added significantly to Asian states' worries about the strength of the U.S. commitment to the region.

The additive doubts raised by these various successive U.S. actions encouraged the South Koreans to cajole the United States to boost South Korea’s military self-reliance. Rather than only push for the retention of U.S. troops in their country, senior South Korean officials asked the United States to modernize South Korean land and air forces as well as to increase U.S. air


power in South Korea. These requests were followed in November 1969 by a three-day “goodwill exchange visit” to South Korea by twenty-one U.S. congressmen at the invitation of the South Korean National Assembly Speaker Rhee Hyo Sang, and a three-week visit to the United States by the chairman of the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Faced with mounting evidence that U.S. commitments in Asia were becoming more conditional, President Park secured a meeting with President Nixon in San Francisco in August 1969 to seek personal assurances from his American counterpart. During the meeting, Park pushed for more military aid and for clarification that the U.S. commitment to South Korea had not changed, reminding Nixon that Kim Il Song had not yet invaded South Korea “because of the U.S. commitments . . . and the presence of American troops in [South Korea].” He added, however, that Kim would “provoke a war if he believe[d] that the American commitment was going to change or ha[d] changed.” Park implied obliquely that the United States’ “various commitments all over the world” made its commitment to South Korea less reliable. Following the lead of Nixon’s public remarks that emphasized self-reliance, Park twice requested that the United States help South Korea “strengthen the equipment and combat capability” of its armed forces so that they could “singlehandedly resist [a] North Korean invasion.”

South Korea’s ambassador later told trusted U.S. officials that President Park departed the meeting “confident” that there would be no significant change in the status quo in the near future, even though Park’s officials had been working for more than a year to influence and delay what seemed to be an inevitable troop reduction at some unknown point in the future. Park’s


411 U.S. Eighth Army, “Eighth United States Army Chronology, 1 July – 31 December 1969,” (HQ U.S. Eighth Army: Staff Historian’s Office), 16-17. The South Korean chairman’s visit was at the invitation of his U.S. counterpart, Gen. Earle G. Wheeler. This may have been an attempt by Gen. Wheeler to influence the shape of the impending NSDM 48 decision.


misperception was somewhat understandable because Nixon provided Park greater reassurance than the State Department intended. Early in their private conversation, Nixon stuck to the talking points Secretary of State Rogers had provided him, and ambiguously assured Park that the United States would “fulfill its treaty obligations” and would “not retreat from the Pacific area” or “reduce [its] commitments” while also warning him that the United States and South Korea must “think over . . . what would be the best way to keep [those] commitments.”

As the conversation progressed, however, Nixon deviated from Rogers’ proposed circumspect statement that the United States had “no plan at the present time to reduce or withdraw U.S. forces from Korea” but would keep the option “under continuous review.” Instead, Nixon flatly stated that he “rejected the idea of decreasing the number of our men staying in [South Korea]” and the he would “make this view clear to the public to warn Kim Il-Song.” Yet, as discussed in chapter 2, Nixon had already decided just days before meeting Park that he would withdraw some U.S. ground forces from South Korea, though he was not yet sure how many or how soon. Not perceiving Nixon’s true intentions, Park told the American president he was “encouraged to hear [his] remarks on the Korean problem.”

Although some of Nixon’s initial deliberate ambiguity might have been lost in translation, the scripted joint statement at the end of meeting should have alerted President Park that Nixon’s position was more ambiguous than his private conversation conveyed. Indeed, the title of a New York Times report on the meeting pronounced that “Nixon-Park Talks End on Mild Note: U.S. Commitment to Korean Security is Played Down.” The Times reporter noted that the joint statement at the conclusion of the meeting “was notable for what it did not say, especially when compared with the strong statement issued by President Lyndon B. Johnson and President Park

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after their meeting in Honolulu in April, 1968 [which said] that “President Johnson reaffirms the readiness and determination of the United States to render prompt and effective assistance to repel armed attacks’ against South Korea.” In contrast, the joint statement from Nixon’s meeting with Park stated more vaguely that the South Korean and American forces “stationed in Korea must remain strong and alert” and “reaffirmed” both parties’ “determination . . . to meet armed attack against the Republic of Korea in accordance with the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of Korea and the United States.” Thus, in less than two years, the U.S. presidency’s affirmed planned response to aggression against South Korea shifted from “prompt and effective” repulsion to simply meeting its treaty obligation, which in the words of the 1953 treaty was merely “to act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional processes.”

Despite the seemingly clear signal emanating from his meeting with Nixon, Park’s ministers could not persuade him that recent U.S. actions and statements indicated that the U.S. commitment was less ironclad than Park perceived. Consequently, Park reacted with “profound shock” when Ambassador Porter discretely informed him in late March 1970—just seven months after Park’s seemingly reassuring meeting with Nixon— that his U.S. counterpart had recently decided to withdraw one of the two U.S. divisions from South Korea. Given that the state’s credibility is inevitably linked in some degree to the credibility of the head of state, a

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416 Richard Halloran, “Nixon-Park Talks End on Mild Note: U.S. Commitment to Korean Security is Played Down,” New York Times, 23 Aug 1969, emphasis added. The statement also “did not mention the 16-power declaration made at the time of the Korean truce in 1953 . . . The South Koreans consider the declaration the major commitment to their security.”


418 “Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea; October 1, 1953” http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp.


420 Ibid., 148, 151. The meeting at which Nixon made his decision occurred on 4 March 1970 and NSDM 48, which directed the withdrawal and consultations with Park, was issued on 20 March 1970. Ambassador Porter sent his telegram describing his meeting with President Park on 28 March 1970.
genuine sense of having been betrayed by Nixon should have reduced Park’s confidence in the reliability of the U.S. security guarantee. As will be shown below, Park’s sense of betrayal seems to have formed an influential lens through which he viewed and reacted to subsequent changes in the U.S. posture in Asia.

The South Korean Reaction and Effort to Resist Nixon’s Reduction. U.S. officials interacting with President Park and his officials received a number of indicators that Park was likely genuinely shocked by at least the suddenness of the withdrawal announcement and the short deadline for implementing it. A few days after Ambassador Porter delivered the bad news about the force reduction to Park, Ambassador Kim Dong Jo came to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Alexis Johnson, in a state of “real anguish” bearing “a long private letter from Park” to Nixon. 421 Kim told Johnson that he had attempted to communicate to Park that U.S. troop reductions were more likely and more imminent than Park had thought, but Park “had chosen to ignore” various reports “and based on his conversations during the visit [with Nixon], had been confident that there would be no such approach at this time.” Additionally, neither Kim nor Park had interpreted the anti-Vietnam mood in the U.S. Congress as including pressure for troop reductions in Korea. 422 Furthermore, even as late as 20 January 1970, Ambassador Kim had been told by Secretary Laird that pressures for reduction were mounting but that South Korean forces should be modernized before the United States withdrew any of its forces. 423 When Kim sought confirmation during U.S. initiated discussions about increasing the Military Assistance Program (MAP) funds for South Korea, the State Department stonewalled him about the likelihood of troop withdrawals, providing the technically true but disingenuous statement

422 Ibid.
423 “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, January 29, 1970, 1638Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 121, emphasis added. When Kim sought confirmation, he also received misleading assurances from State Department officials who said they did “not have any proposal regarding troop withdrawal to make at [the] time,” a technically true statement given that Nixon did not decide until early March.
that the United States did “not have any proposal regarding troop withdrawal to make at [the] time.” Nixon’s plan had caught President Park off guard with its suddenness despite the warning signs.

The State Department acknowledged internally that the United States had given Park a “bitter pill” to swallow when it asked him to publicly endorse the troop reduction plan in advance of Congress’ approval of modernization assistance for South Korea. Nonetheless, it “believe[d] this step [was] necessary to indicate” to the South Koreans that the United States “mean[t] business,” and in successive meetings with Park, Ambassador Porter continued to turn the screws despite Park’s protests. To help Park keep moving forward with the plan, Nixon sent Park a letter in late May that contained little if any reassurances to Park other than restatements of generic U.S. policy and the advice that Park’s failure to show “initiative” that South Korea was “ready to assume more of the burden of its own defense” might disincline Congress to fund the compensatory MAP funding fully. During the meeting in which Ambassador Porter delivered Nixon’s letter, Park expressed that he understood that his concurrence was required before U.S. troops could be withdrawn, and he claimed there were “too many unknowns” for him to take the initiative on approving a withdrawal prior to 1975. Porter rejoined with abundant clarity that

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424 “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, January 29, 1970, 1638Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 12, emphasis added. See also, Telecon Laird/Kissinger, 21 January 1970, 4:55pm, DNSA.


427 Prior to this meeting, Kissinger had the impression that Porter had President Park “ready” to go along with the plan until first-term democratic senator, Joseph D. Tydings of Maryland, made a speech in the Senate on 9 April that urged President Nixon to demonstrate his intent to implement the Nixon Doctrine by withdrawing one of the divisions from Korea. Ambassador Porter had initially received a “relatively favorable response” to his politically more palatable plan of allowing the South Koreans to “demonstrate the initiative by publicly calling for a reduction in U.S. personnel,” but Sen. Tydings’ statement preempted that option and unnerved officials in Park’s administration. (Telcon, Secretary David M.Kennedy/Kissinger, 15 April 1970, DNSA; “Tydings Urges U.S. Cut Forces in Korea,” New York Times, 10 April 1970.) Although the Tydings statement probably did spook Park, it is unclear in the light of this subsequent meeting if Park had been “ready to go” with what he thought would be negotiations about the plan or if Porter had him ready to go with approving the U.S. plan as presented to him.
the United States was “not asking permission for troops to leave”; it was only obligated by the treaty to *consult* with Park.428

Park clearly was not pleased to be “consulted” only about the question of how, not whether, to implement a unilateral U.S. decision by a non-negotiable deadline. In his letters to President Nixon and his meetings with Ambassador Porter, he vented anger and frustration and resisted the administration’s strong arming to the degree he felt able. In a 15 June letter to Nixon, Park argued in the same vein as Secretary of Defense Laird that the “major part, if not all of [the force modernization efforts] should be implemented in advance” of any U.S. troop reduction. Furthermore, he claimed it would be “impossible to persuade the Korean people to accept the partial withdrawal by the end of June 1971 . . . because of the unexpected shock it would give to them and the shortness of time involved.”429 Revealing his pique, Park made eight bold suggestions that even his foreign minister admitted apologetically were “rather extreme.”430 Park added defiantly that if a “definite mutual accord” was reached on the suggestions he presented in his letter, his government would “then be prepared to have discussions with some flexibility in regard to its basic position . . . of opposing any reduction of the United States’ forces in Korea before the end of 1975.”431 Nixon’s 7 July 1970 response to Park acknowledged that the United


430 Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain) to the Department of State, Honolulu, July 23, 1970, 0548Z,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 173. Admiral McCain reported that the South Korean defense minister’s final comment after their meeting in July 1973 “expressed the hope that his rather extreme demands [that were nearly identical to those in Park’s letter] should not be taken amiss but should be attributed to concern for his country.”

431 “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, June 15, 1970, 1010Z,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 161. The suggestions included “consultations” on: a five year modernization plan, “regular military assistance,” increasing the South Korean overall forces, “developing defense industries in Korea,” maintaining the present command structure of US forces in Korea, strengthening US naval and air forces “in and around Korea,” “reaffirmation of the determination of the United States to take effective and prompt measures” in the event of renewed aggression, and that the reduction of US forces would in “no way affect the role of the United Nations forces in Korea.”
States would provide “a compensatory increase in military assistance” for South Korean force modernization but ignored Park’s other requests.432

Preliminary negotiations in July 1970 with Defense Minister Jung indicated that President Park was clearly transmitting his dissatisfaction and frustration to his subordinates. During discussions at the third annual Security Consultative Conference (SCC) in Honolulu on 21-22 July 1970, U.S. officials rejected South Korean requests to postpone the reductions and let their counterparts know the decision to withdraw 20,000 men “was firm.” Admiral McCain reported to the State Department that “the posture of the Korean delegation . . . had a strong flavor of an aggrieved party who was being deprived of his rights by a faithless friend.” McCain noted the defense minister had “a genuine concern that the proposed withdrawal would jeopardize his country’s security.” Suggesting the pressure the minister was under, McCain added that it was “perhaps indicative of his mood” that the minister told his American counterparts that “various colleagues in the Korean Assembly” had reminded him before he departed for the meeting in Honolulu “of the story of a representative of an ancient Korean king who, having been unable to get an opportunity to speak at an international meeting on a matter of concern to his monarch, had very appropriately committed hari-kari on the spot.”433 U.S. officials who were interviewed years later stated that such South Korean anxieties made the SCC discussions “some of the most difficult [they] had ever attended.”434

When Ambassador Porter and the commander of USFK, General Michaelis, met with Park in August to press him to cooperate, Porter noted that Park “seemed more indecisive” and “more truculent, as [the] reality of U.S. determination to proceed with or without his cooperation


434 Cha, Alignment Despite Antagonism, 66.
became clearer to him.\textsuperscript{435} Park, exhibiting clear signs of stress and anger at various times during the meeting, did not take kindly to having no real say in the matter. He insisted that the South Koreans would not participate in troop reduction talks “unless there [was a] mutually acceptable conclusion of modernization talks” first. Park seemed especially upset that his government “was not consulted in advance of this decision” and that he perceived the Korean delegates would “go into joint troop reduction planning talks to listen only.”\textsuperscript{436} Unfortunately for Park, Nixon had left little room for negotiation. Furthermore, U.S. officials tended to partially discount Park’s outrage as being more rooted in and exaggerated by his own domestic political concerns than genuine security fears of abandonment. The abruptness and inflexibility of the U.S. plan really shook Park and seemed to color the lens through which he judged future developments in the alliance relationship.

\textbf{U.S. Skepticism.} Understanding how U.S. officials perceived the sincerity of Park’s shock and concern advances our understanding of the degree to which U.S. Cold War foreign policy was influenced by allies’ perceptions of U.S. resolve and credibility. In this case, U.S. officials took a compromise position of attempting to reduce concerns about U.S. resolve in the eyes of South Koreans and other attentive Asian allies by offering financial compensation while still aggressively addressing U.S. domestic concerns about entanglement and overextension. American officials understood that President Park and other South Korean officials had a number of reasons to be upset about the withdrawal but some of the more self-serving reasons gave U.S. officials cause to doubt the sincerity of their protestations.

U.S. officials noted in various forums that the South Koreans tended to exaggerate the threat and in moments of candor would indirectly admit to such exaggerations. In many of the preemptive meetings prior to the U.S. withdrawal announcement, the South Korean


\textsuperscript{436} “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, August 4, 1970, 0450Z,” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 175,178. Porter reported, “Park closed his eyes and jiggled his knee as he does under stress.”
representatives emphasized the ever-present North Korean threat and the essential role of U.S. troops in demonstrating both the capability and resolve necessary to deter North Korean “adventurism.” U.S. officials, however, perceived these appeals with various levels of skepticism. Kissinger, for example, found the South Koreans to be “great allies” but also “great pains in the neck.” Secretary of State Rogers found these “scare stories” understandable but overwrought, self-serving, and tedious. The vice president and senior U.S. military officers also noted the self-serving nature of the South Korean arguments but nonetheless acknowledged some legitimacy in their concerns.

Although Secretary of Defense Laird took the middle ground position of advocating for South Korean force modernization prior to a prudent withdrawal, even he grew increasingly frustrated with inconsistencies in South Korean characterizations of the threat as being dire yet manageable. Laird noted that the South Koreans “espouse conviction that the North Korean threat is large and imminent” while also having “blatantly put an arbitrary ceiling on the extent to which they will commit [South Korean] resources to their own defense (5 percent of GNP).” He concluded that “if the threat is as immediate and intense as the [South Koreans] frequently indicate, they could surely sacrifice more in their behalf. . . . They simply want more, no matter what the category and no matter how inconsistent the context.”

South Korea obviously had much to gain financially from a robust U.S. military presence in South Korea and from continued U.S. concern about South Korean security. The U.S. military

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437 See, for example: *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 9, 12, 80.

438 Telecon, Kissinger and Alexis Johnson, 19 April 1972, 6:05pm, DNSA.


441 “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon Washington, July 19, 1971,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 262. Although this report was made in July 1971 (after the withdrawal had been completed), it is representative of other U.S. impressions and the ongoing push to the secure the promised MAP funding.
presence and assistance injected money into the South Korean economy and allowed more of
the South Korean GDP to be spent on non-defense priorities. Eighth Army reported that in 1969
the United States injected over $186 million into the local South Korean economy via the wages
of South Koreans working on U.S. military installations and by U.S. military and civilian
personnel making personal and official purchases on the local economy. Furthermore, in
September 1969, five thousand South Koreans had rallied “at U.S. military compounds to
protest a cut of Korean employees . . . caused by DoD budget cuts.” More significantly, the
United States had provided more than $8.5 billion to South Korea from 1954 to 1970 in various
forms of direct economic aid and through the military assistance program (MAP).
Thus, with
so much money at stake, Ambassador Porter likened “the annual military assistance
appropriation” to a “religious ritual” in which South Korean supplicants beseeched the powerful
United States for favors: “the auspices are carefully examined, the skies searched for portents,
icantations repeated and the powers are appeased” with “always the same” purpose, “more
military assistance.”

Given the orientalist tone of Porter’s description and the fact that the United States had only
recently embarked on the civil rights movement, one might also wonder if the Americans’
assessment of South Koreans had at least moderate racist underpinnings. The evidence in
other scholarly works that have revealed 20th century American racism toward Asians in
international relations makes it likely that at least subtle racism still influenced the United States’

442 U.S. Eighth Army, “Eighth United States Army Chronology, 1 July – 31 December 1969,” (HQ U.S. Eighth Army:
Staff Historian’s Office), 17.

443 Ibid., 9.

444 “Telegram From the Commander in Chief, Pacific (McCain) to the Department of State, Honolulu, July 23, 1970,
estimate, however, that US military spending “contributed on the average only about 15 percent of the real increase
in South Korea’s GNP during the 1965-1969 period.” (“National Intelligence Estimate,

445 Airgram from AmEmbassy Seoul (Porter) to Department of State, Subject US Policy Assessment, March 11, 1970,
in Ostermann and Person, The Rise and Fall of Detente on the Korean Peninsula, 7.
relationship with South Korea during the 1970s. Yet, the documents reviewed for this dissertation give little clear indication of racism other than some orientalism and occasional paternalism, such as when the State Department dismissed South Korean concerns as a “traditional instinctive clutch for the reassuring apron strings.” Indeed, that the United States saw fit to play hardball with its junior partner seems almost solely the outcome of a significant asymmetry in power between the two allies and is perfectly consonant with structural realism. Furthermore, many U.S. military and civilian officials who had frequent contact with the South Koreans tended to refer to them positively. Nonetheless, careful readings of other sources and comparative studies with other countries, including the contemporaneous issue of U.S. troop withdrawal from NATO, will be required to yield a more satisfactory assessment of how much racism might have influenced how U.S. officials assessed and responded to their South Korean counterparts.

One of the more obvious sources of U.S. skepticism was the realization that the timing of the withdrawal posed a near-term, selfish concern for President Park because of his upcoming election in the spring of 1971. Park had emphasized to his citizenry the threat seemingly inherent in the recent invigorated harassment and assassination attempt by North Korea as justification for his successful but controversial effort to modify the South Korean constitution to allow him to run for a third term in the spring of 1971. He told his people, for example, that the North Koreans had “been frantically preparing for war with an ambition to unify the nation under the Communist banner in the early nineteen–seventies” and “having completed all preparation”


448 Secretary of State Cyrus Vance reported to Zbigniew Brzezinski in April 1977 that within the South Korea public “some even see racial overtones in U.S. withdrawal from Korea but not Germany.” (Telegram, SecState to Brzezinski, “Assessment of Korean Position on Ground Force Withdrawal and Human Rights,” 19 April 1977, NLC-10-2-2-23-1, JCL. p. 2. Section 2)
they were “eagerly seeking an opportunity.” A U.S. reduction of forces would cast doubt on the sincerity of this threat narrative and reveal Park’s impotence to influence his “big brother” ally.

U.S. officials were well aware that the troop reduction might undermine political stability in South Korea by weakening Park’s reelection bid and senior U.S. military officers and DoS officials recommended that Park be given plenty of notice about the plan prior to the next election. Porter notified Park about one year in advance of his upcoming election, and in the ensuing months, U.S. officials continued to interpret Park’s resistance to the reduction and his emphasis on the threat from North Korea as being primarily motivated by Park’s domestic political concerns. For example, Undersecretary of State Alexis Johnson reported to Ambassador Porter that the Korean ambassador to the United States, Kim Dong Jo, admitted that “an announcement of a reduction of forces prior to carrying out a modernization of [South Korean] Forces would have profound political effects in Korea.” Given Porter’s own reporting, this surely was no surprise.

A shrewd statesman in his own right, Ambassador Porter seemed particularly wary of the political roots of Park’s protestations. He observed in a telegram to the State Department that Park’s emphasis on the potential threat from North Korea had “obvious benefits for the preparation of a 1971 election campaign which [could] be expected to center largely on the issue of national security. It [could] also be used by the [South Korean government] to impress U.S. observers with the seriousness and imminence of the threat when pointing to the need for additional assistance.” In his cable describing his August meeting with President Park, Porter


suspiciously reported that as he and General Michaelis were leaving the president’s office, Porter looked back at Park as he reviewed the U.S. force reduction plan and found it “odd” that Park was smiling, for “there were certainly no smiles during [their] meeting.”⁴⁵³ Porter interpreted President Park’s “recalcitrance” as stemming from Park’s misleading political “campaign to assure his people” in which he claimed the United States could not reduce its “forces in any degree without his consent” and that the United States had “not notified him of any such intention.” Faced with Park’s “hard line resistance,” Porter advised U.S. officials to “let things simmer for a while and avoid any reaction which would give Park and [his] advisers reason to believe that their tough stand [was] paying off.”⁴⁵⁴ Ambassador Porter and other U.S. officials were right to be skeptical of fiscal and political sources of South Korean protestations but they initially tended to underestimate the magnitude and implications of the South Koreans’ genuine perception of insecurity and U.S. unreliability.

The capability gap and the promise of U.S. compensation. As Walt’s study of alliances recommends for unbalanced bilateral relationships, U.S. skepticism was warranted because the asymmetric power structure of the alliance encouraged the South Koreans to exaggerate their worries. Nonetheless, despite their skepticism, U.S. officials remained aware that the troop reduction plan created a gap in deterrence by reducing both U.S. capability and apparent resolve on the peninsula prior to bolstering the South Koreans’ own military capability sufficiently. This U.S. concern about the capability gap and the reputational “domino effect” it might generate with other allies in the region gave some leverage to the South Koreans. As it became increasingly clear that the United States would go ahead with the withdrawal with or without the support of the South Koreans, President Park still could address some of his

⁴⁵³ “Telegram From Secretary of State Rogers to the Department of State, Taipei, August 1, 1969, 1201Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 179.

abandonment concerns by seeking concessions in two areas: the timing of the withdrawal and the amount of aid South Korea would receive to compensate for the loss. Although Park failed to delay the timing, he managed to extract a fairly generous commitment of financial assistance from the United States.

Unfortunately for the South Koreans, Nixon’s own domestic political concerns trumped South Korean political concerns regarding the timing of the withdrawal.\textsuperscript{455} The apparent acute need to placate Congress made the Nixon administration unyielding regarding the deadline for the withdrawal. As Alexis Johnson explained in April 1970 to Ambassador Kim, Nixon read U.S. domestic political pressure as requiring a good faith cut in U.S. troops in Korea \textit{before} Nixon would even submit a request for additional MAP funding for congressional approval.\textsuperscript{456} The administration’s firm timeline was evidenced in the JCS’s guidance to the Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) specifically emphasizing that the reduction still must be accomplished by 30 June 1971 even though they authorized him “to modify the phasing” of the withdrawal to accommodate South Korean reactions.\textsuperscript{457} Consequently, the South Koreans had no notable success in shifting the deadline.

Nonetheless, the South Koreans did create difficulties for the timetable of the Commander, U.S. Forces, Korea (COMUSFK) by initially refusing to take over positions along the eighteen miles of the DMZ scheduled to be abandoned by the U.S. Second Infantry Division as it

\textsuperscript{455} The documents I examined relating to the withdrawal contain no mentions of domestic protest of the Vietnam War and only references to the mood of Congress. Nonetheless, three weeks after National Guardsmen fired into a crowd of demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio on 4 May 1970, killing four students and wounding nine others, Porter cabled back to Washington that Park had a “lack of sensitivity to American domestic problems bearing on [the withdrawal].” (“Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, May 29, 1970, 1130Z,” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 156).

\textsuperscript{456} “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, April 23, 1970, 0800Z,” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 151. See also “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, May 29, 1970, 1130Z,” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 155-156. The main point of difference was that Park wanted to see the aid package before accepting the withdrawal while the U.S. wanted him to accept the withdrawal to give Congress the “right impression” of willingness to reduce the U.S. forward posture and thereby grease the skids in Congress for approving an aid package. (“Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, May 29, 1970, 1130Z,” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 155-156).

relocated further to the rear.\textsuperscript{458} The South Koreans viewed these U.S. “trip wire” forces along the DMZ as an important deterrent and tangible indicator of U.S. resolve, and they were loath to see them removed. Anonymous South Korean officials confessed to the \textit{New York Times} that they were “particularly disturbed” about the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the DMZ because they “want[ed the] American response to be rapid and automatic.”\textsuperscript{459} Thus, the South Koreans dragged their feet in protest to the agreement and refused to take responsibility for the U.S. sector of the DMZ for as long as their inferior bargaining position allowed during the fall and winter of 1970. Meanwhile, USFK needed to begin withdrawing troops well in advance of the deadline and was doing so primarily by not replacing soldiers who were rotating back to the United States after their normal “short tour” in South Korea was completed. In the absence of an agreement, however, COMUSFK felt obligated to “maintain the required combat effectiveness of 2\textsuperscript{nd} Division units” along the DMZ while he waited for the South Koreans to agree to take over manning those defensive positions. Consequently, COMUSFK was forced to draw down units of the Seventh Infantry Division in the rear rather than the Second Infantry Division troops on the DMZ that the president had approved.\textsuperscript{460} On 2 February 1971, just six days before the commander of USFK was to begin withdrawing the U.S. Second Infantry Division from its position along the DMZ and replace it with South Korean forces, the American

\textsuperscript{458} The withdrawal of one U.S. division also raised the South Koreans’ concerns about the capability of military “command and control” during an attack. The two U.S. divisions had been commanded by a U.S. corps headquarters that would be disbanded when the Seventh Infantry Division was withdrawn. The South Koreans preferred to retain the U.S. corps headquarters infrastructure, its associated artillery, and the command structure of two U.S. divisions presumably to bolster the capability of the two countries to mount a combined defensive quickly and effectively against an attack. As long as the Seventh Infantry Division’s headquarters staff remained to provide command and control, the South Koreans were amenable to filling the 20,000 withdrawn U.S. positions in the divisions’ brigades with their own South Korean forces. (\textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 166-167, 176, 180, 193.) Ambassador Porter and General Michaelis were willing to entertain this option but NSC staffers thought the JCS would not approve and reminded Kissinger that keeping a U.S. led division in place on the DMZ would defeat their objective of reducing the United States’ risk of entanglement. (“Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, July 13, 1970, 5 p.m.” in \textit{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972}, 168.)


\textsuperscript{460} Letter to Under-Secretary of State Ural Johnson from Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard regarding U.S.-South Korean negotiations dealing with the withdrawal of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division from the demilitarized zone (DMZ), 12 Oct 1970, DNSA.
embassy in Seoul reported that the South Koreans were still stalling. 461 On 8 February, however, President Park announced to the public that South Korean troops would take over the American sector of the DMZ, and it was formally transferred on 10 March 1971. 462

The South Koreans had somewhat better success securing compensation than delaying the withdrawal because they could make a fairly strong case that the United States needed to bolster South Korean defenses not only to compensate for the physical capability lost when the Seventh Infantry Division was withdrawn but also to offset the drop in perceived U.S. resolve caused by the reduction of the trip wire force and Nixon’s deference to the prevailing mood of Congress. Given the inherent logic of this concern, the South Koreans pressed for significant compensatory MAP funding and transfers of equipment. This legitimate deterrence concern about the capability gap between the rapid withdrawal of a U.S. division and the slower build-up of South Korean capabilities via MAP spending also tempered the skepticism of U.S. officials, especially the senior military officers, and was repeatedly emphasized by the South Koreans presumably because it was the issue upon which the two sides had the greatest mutual interest and agreement. 463

The ensuing agreement for additional financial assistance involved a fairly generous five-year $1.5 billion commitment of MAP and equipment transfers designed to modernize the South Korean military forces. The plan’s average rate of $300 million per year in MAP grants and equipment transfers was more than 50 percent greater than the annual average of the preceding ten years. 464 Although generous on paper, the South Koreans had already

461 Telegram from AmEmbassy Seoul to Ambassador Brown, 2 Feb 1971, DDRS.

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experienced the effects of U.S. military budget cuts and record low levels of MAP funds for Asia pushed by Congress in 1969 and 1970. Consequently, they expressed grave concern about the delay in compensatory MAP funding because the various American envoys from the executive branch could not guarantee that the Democratic-led Congress would approve the five years of additional funding that Nixon had agreed to provide.

Despite their adamant position on the deadline and magnitude of the reduction, U.S. officials knew the MAP funding was a pig in a poke and attempted to compensate for their less than reassuring statements and actions with other significant financial incentives, many of which were beyond the reach of Congress to deny. In the ensuing months, the United States supplemented the congressionally contingent commitment of about $140 million per year for five years in MAP funding by facilitating the construction of an M-16 rifle plant in South Korea despite the objections of the U.S. manufacturer, Colt; and by giving the South Koreans their first squadron of new F-5 jet fighters, three S-2 antisubmarine aircraft, and an agreement to transfer permanently to the South Koreans some of the equipment and weapons that the United States was providing to South Korean forces fighting in Vietnam as well as all the equipment that the 20,000 U.S. troops departing from South Korea would leave behind.465 Even South Korea’s neighbors noted the generous terms. When Kissinger met secretly with the communist Chinese Premier, Chou-En-Lai, some two years later in November 1972, Chou remarked that the United States “had paid a great price” in “extensive military assistance” when it withdrew the division from South Korea.466


In the end, however, the South Koreans’ fear that Nixon’s check might bounce turned out to be well founded. Congressional cuts to the FY 1972 budget reduced the South Korean MAP funds, and by the end of FY 1973, Congress had cumulatively reduced the first three years of the five-year modernization plan by about $292 million, or 28 percent less than originally programmed despite administration assurances. At the end of FY 1974, the total shortfall in the modernization program was nearly $500 million. All told, Congress reduced the total funding of the five-year $1.5 billion modernization plan funding by about $335 million, or about 20 percent less than negotiated.

Ultimately, the South Koreans had little leverage against their domineering security partner. The asymmetry of the alliance granted the United States considerable advantage in insisting that its entrapment concerns be addressed. By February 1971, U.S. officials had pressured the South Koreans into officially and publicly supporting the troop reduction, and the withdrawal of the Seventh Infantry Division was completed according to the U.S. schedule without major incident in June 1971. The success of the American efforts to address their fear of entrapment,

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467 Memorandum From the Chairman of the National Security Council Under Secretaries Committee (John N. Irwin II) to President Nixon, Washington, March 21, 1972,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 322; U.S. Eighth Army, “Eighth United States Army Chronology, 1 July – 31 December 1973,” (HQ U.S. Eighth Army: Staff Historian’s Office), 10. In September 1973, 8th Army historians recorded that “Pentagon officials predict the $1.5 billion modernization … will not be accomplished within the prescribed five-year period ending mid-1975. Congressional reductions have created a 28 percent deficit in the planned $825 million funding for the first three years and equipment transfers have fallen 30 percent below the $203 million promised.” Estimates of total military assistance vary widely across secondary sources and seem to suffer from over reliance on other secondary sources and/or various methods of categorizing the assistance.


469 USAID, U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants, http://gbk.eads.usaidallnet.gov/query/do?_program=/eads/gbk/countryReport&unit=N. The $1.5B plan was to be a combination of MAP grants and transfer of U.S. excess equipment. Some of the loss of grant funding was offset by Foreign Military Sales (FMS) credits of nearly $57 million” in FY1974. This was projected to grow to $500 million “over the period of FY75-77.” (Attachment “NSSM 211” to memo, Philip C. Habib, Chairman, Interdepartmental Group for East Asia and the Pacific to Lt Gen Brent Scowcroft, 15 November 1974, “NSSM 211 – Review of U.S. Security Assistance to the Republic of Korea (1)” folder, Box 32, US NSC Institutional Records, GRFL). FMS credits were an easier sell in Congress because instead of transferring funds from the treasury to South Korea in grants, they transferred money from the treasury to U.S. contractors in various Congressional districts.
however, must be weighed against the South Korean fears of abandonment it enhanced. Unable to convince the U.S. officials to delay implementation, the South Koreans dragged their feet for as long as they could and extracted considerable compensation. More importantly, mounting South Korean fears of abandonment prompted Park to take subsequent actions that were adverse to U.S. interests and forced the United States to pay a steeper price than the MAP and other financial tally sheets indicated.

**Aftermath and Additional Price of Withdrawal**

Despite their attempts to reassure and compensate the South Koreans, U.S. officials did not do enough to allay South Korean fears of abandonment. U.S. officials needed to walk a fine line in pursuing the benefits of reducing their risk of entanglement and of a more robust South Korean defense capability; pushing the South Koreans too far too fast risked seriously aggravating their abandonment fears, which by most accounts, never seemed far from the surface in any event. Despite the generous compensation package, the emerging U.S. retrenchment policies of the Nixon Doctrine as well as the U.S. actions throughout the troop reduction process consistently indicated a patron state that was hedging its bets.

As noted in chapter 1, the concern of U.S. leaders about their country’s reputation of credibility with its allies, although long noted as an important factor in the Cold War, is still underexamined in historiography and political science, and may have influenced U.S. foreign relations and policy as much as concern with its enemies’ perception of U.S. credibility. With respect to South Korea, aspects of credibility and reputation have been examined within the framework of patron-client state security relationships, which are characterized by the nature and severity of the threat, the importance of the client state, and the credibility of the patron state.⁴⁷⁰ They have also been examined using Synder’s concept of the alliance security

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dilemma. In the case of South Korea, the U.S. patron provided protection and financial aid to South Korea in return for something that South Korea itself wanted—resistance to the spread of communism into South Korea. Even though South Korea had significant economic stakes in the relationship, the dynamic of the relationship pivoted on the United States’ perception of the importance of keeping South Korea free of communism and South Korea’s perception of the importance of the United States to achieving that mutual aim.

Publicly, U.S. officials presented the United States’ security relationship with South Korea as a non-situational commitment but the conjunction of the Nixon Doctrine with the United States’ difficulties in securing an acceptable outcome in Vietnam should have made it increasingly clear to even modestly informed observers on both sides of the Pacific that the nature and degree of U.S. support was, in fact, considerably dependent on the evolving situation in Asia. Indeed, just a month after the United States had completed the withdrawal of the Seventh Infantry Division, Secretary of Defense Laird “cautioned” South Korean officials “against assuming that [their treaty with the United States] involved any so-called ‘automatic’ provisions [to come to the defense of South Korea] like that of NATO.”

Although this warning was aimed at discouraging any South Korean thoughts of preemptively striking the North Koreans, South Koreans could add it to other warnings, the Nixon Doctrine, exercises demonstrating the ability to rapidly reinforce South Korea, the troop reduction activities in 1970 and 1971, and references to more reductions by 1975 to deduce an increasingly situational U.S. commitment to their country despite official reassurances to the contrary.

The records clearly indicate that the United States was concerned about entanglement, cost, and domestic political concerns, but they are less clear on how far U.S. officials calculated that they could push the South Koreans before sparking unacceptably adverse consequences.

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471 “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon Washington, July 19, 1971” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 259. The implicit meaning was not lost on the South Koreans. Prime Minister Kim asserted that “the South Koreans would not ‘provoke’ North Korea.” Laird reported to Washington that “this was apparently to assure the US the ROKs would not use the Modernization program to develop an offensive capability. In subsequent discussions, it became clear the ROK Modernization plan was, per se, a provocation (albeit unavoidable) to the North Koreans.”
After all, despite the U.S. skepticism noted earlier, U.S. officials were well aware of South Korean expressions of insecurity regarding the impending withdrawal and could not entirely dismiss them. In March 1970, Ambassador Porter noted there was a persistent “sense of insecurity” among South Korean officials who “believe[d]” a reduced “U.S. presence in the area” would cause the U.S. commitment to “atrophy.”

John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff reported similar insecurity when he visited South Korea the following spring to witness the U.S. paratroop drop exercise, Operation Freedom Vault, which was in essence a smaller version of the Focus Retina paratroop drop demonstration exercise that had unnerved the South Koreans in 1969. According to Holdridge’s report, if these exercises were meant to reassure the South Koreans, they failed. “Throughout, the [South Koreans] appeared to have almost a phobia about U.S. troop withdrawals and being left alone to face the music.”

Given that U.S. officials were aware of the South Koreans’ concerns and skeptical that they were somewhat exaggerated, and given the official threat assessments, administration priorities, and U.S. actions, we can infer a number of suppositions that likely influenced the troop reduction and the generosity of the financial compensation.

First, as discussed in the previous chapter, U.S. supporters of the troop reduction were satisfied that the United States would retain ample combined capability on the peninsula to deter North Korea even though they did little to offset the possibility that the North Koreans would perceive diminished U.S. resolve due to the movement of the “trip wire” forces away from the DMZ and the overall reduction of U.S. forces. Nonetheless, as Steven Walt argues and Shiping Tang reinforces, U.S. officials’ concerns about the importance of their state’s reputation

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474 Shortly after the completion of the reduction, Secretary of Defense Laird reconfirmed that he thought the military deterrent to North Korea would “be more than sufficient in the foreseeable future” after the withdrawal (“Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, July 19, 1971,” in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972*, 261).
for resolve in the context of the broader Cold War still made them potentially subject to manipulation by allies who “often pretend to be unimpressed” by their ally’s assertion of their resolve, which many key U.S. officials suspected. But the South Koreans’ robust reputation for being staunch anti-communists made it more likely that they would continue to balance against the regional communist states than bandwagon (i.e., realign their interests) with them. Faced with a dynamic in which balancing was more probable, theory suggests that the United States should not have taken a lesser power’s doubts too seriously and should have had considerable freedom to push the South Koreans to accommodate U.S. entanglement concerns. Given this context, the United States was freed to exploit the asymmetry in the alliance to dictate the terms of repositioning its troops as well as the timing and size of the withdrawal.

Other factors, however, were also at work that limited the United States’ willingness to push South Korea too hard or to be too skimpy in compensation. As Walt, McMahon, and others have noted, “the fear that U.S. allies will bandwagon if U.S. credibility weakens has been pervasive since World War II.” Thus, although U.S. officials had little to fear about the South Koreans bandwagoning, they needed to remain cognizant that their actions in South Korea might trigger domino risks of bandwagoning or at least dealignment in other Asian countries possessing more flexibility in their alignment choices. Indeed, a major fear of the Chinese, South Koreans, and other Asian states was that Japan would fill the power void resulting from the Nixon Doctrine. During Nixon’s secret meeting with Chinese Premier Chou in October

475 Tang, “Cult of Reputation”, 46-47. See also: George and Smoke, Deterrence in American Foreign Policy, 370; and Robert Jervis, The Logic of Images in International Relations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 82–83.


477 As discussed in Chapter 2, various U.S. officials worried about the likelihood of this happening in the region as a result of the Nixon Doctrine and the troop reduction in South Korea. More extensive research on regional allies’ perspectives may reveal more precisely how warranted those concerns were.

478 See, for example: “Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, September 1, 1971, 9:30–11 a.m.” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 273; Telegram, From SecState to AmEmbassy Tokyo. 090136Z Jan 1972, DNSA. Japanese Foreign Minister Fukuda told Secretary of State Rogers that “many Asian nations were shocked by the announcement and have told the Japanese that they doubt that the US can be relied upon.”

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1971, Chou repeatedly expressed in various ways his concern “that the Japanese militarists [might] replace the American troops and officers [in South Korea] with the troops and officers of Japan.” At the same time, the United States’ rapprochement with China caused the Japanese to doubt “the validity of the US-Japan relationship.” Furthermore, the Japanese foreign minister, Takeo Fukuda, “insisted” that the United States’ unwillingness to give its Asian allies more advanced notice of Nixon’s surprise announcement of the talks with China “erode[d] 26 years of American efforts in Asia, especially in Taiwan and [South Korea].” In essence, U.S. officials had few options to address the dilemma of how to conduct a regional withdrawal to appease domestic concerns about entanglement and overextension without making it appear like a disengagement from the region. Furthermore, by following a “Europe first” strategy and withdrawing troops mainly from Asia instead of spreading the reduction evenly across Europe and Asia, the United States implicitly confirmed that the threat and/or the interests in Europe were greater for the United States and that the differential was growing.

Second, U.S. officials had to remain cautious not to encourage the South Koreans to take actions that might undermine the stability they so highly valued on the peninsula. This might include an inclination to take chances by initiating conflict with the North in the near term rather than await the possibility of additional U.S. retrenchment in the future, or to pursue the development of their own nuclear deterrent. Finally, U.S. officials wanted the South Koreans to keep their troops in Vietnam until the United States was ready for them to depart. Although U.S. officials gave priority to their entanglement concerns and to appeasing U.S. domestic sentiments by not compromising on the timing or magnitude of the troop reduction in Korea, they hoped their generous financial commitment to South Korea would substitute in part for the diminished physical commitment of American lives literally on the line and thereby reassure

479 Memorandum of Conversation, Great Hall of the People, Peking, October 22, 1971, 4:15 – 8:28 p.m, DNSA, 6, 10, 15, 20.

480 Telegram, From SecState to AmEmbassy Tokyo 090136Z Jan 1972, DNSA.
nervous regional allies as well. Once the troop reduction was complete, however, other regional issues exacerbated the strains and uncertainties in the bilateral relationship caused by the troop reduction and increased the pressure on South Korea to take to the courses of action the United States wanted to avoid.

Although various exacerbating issues had been brewing in quiet talks for a number of years, three notable developments were announced publicly within the few months following the U.S. troop reduction in South Korea. First, after years of negotiation, Japan and the United States signed an agreement on 17 June 1971 to have Okinawa revert to Japanese governance. Although the United States retained rights to base substantial U.S. forces on the island, the Japanese would now be able to put some restrictions on their disposition and employment from this major U.S. forward outpost in East Asia after twenty-six years of unfettered postwar U.S. governance and use of the island. The South Koreans worried that the Japanese might attempt to bar U.S. forces on Okinawa from being used to aid South Korea. Consequently, they took steps to receive assurances that reversion of Okinawa would not undermine their security and ensured, inter alia, that a "Korea clause" was included in the U.S.–Japanese joint communique about the reversion, which explicitly stated that "the security of the Republic of Korea was essential to Japan's own security." As Victor Cha has deftly demonstrated, the ensuing security cooperation between Japan and South Korea "was invariably linked" to both countries' abandonment concerns in the wake of the Nixon Doctrine and its accompanying actions.481

Secondly, of immensely greater strategic concern was Nixon's surprise televised announcement on 15 July 1971 that he would visit China early in 1972. The historic meetings in late February 1972 between Nixon and Chairman Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai transformed the Cold War security dynamic by easing tensions with Communist China, reassuring each side about the other's intentions in Vietnam, and facilitating diplomatic maneuvers to put greater pressure on the Soviet Union by exploiting the deterioration in Sino-

481 Cha, Alignment Despite Antagonism, 75-77.
Soviet relations.\textsuperscript{482} The South Koreans, however, remained skeptical of U.S.–Sino détente. They worried “that superpower détente reflected a fundamental change in U.S. strategic doctrine” and indicated “a tacit U.S. acknowledgement of America’s eroding influence in the region and a rise in Chinese influence.”\textsuperscript{483} The State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research opined in December 1971 that “the easing of great-power tensions and the softening of cold-war rhetoric with its clear distinctions between ‘communist’ and ‘free’ worlds” also threatened internal stability in South Korea by “weaken[ing] the ideological glue that ha[d] long served as a partial substitute for cohesive social institutions.”\textsuperscript{484} In other words, the dynamic upon which President Park had built his external and internal stability was changing more rapidly than he anticipated.

The final major post-withdrawal issue to strike in 1971 was the United Nations General Assembly vote on 25 October 1971 to recognize the People’s Republic of China as the only lawful representative of China to the United Nations. Nixon generally supported “Red China’s” admission to the United Nations and the United States adopted an official “one China policy” that left the question of the legitimate home of the Chinese government unspecified.\textsuperscript{485} To Nixon’s annoyance, however, the UN General Assembly was less willing to live with such deliberate ambiguity and insisted that “one China” occupy only one seat in the assembly. Given that South Korea had been vying for years with its communist conjoined twin for official recognition in the same UN General Assembly, it could not have been comforting to have Communist China win a seat at the expense of its non-communist rival. President Park viewed the ouster of the Republic of China as collateral damage of the rapprochement priorities of the

\textsuperscript{482} Cha, \textit{Alignment Despite Antagonism}, 102; Dalleck, \textit{Nixon and Kissinger}, 267.

\textsuperscript{483} Cha, \textit{Alignment Despite Antagonism}, 111.


\textsuperscript{485} Dalleck, \textit{Nixon and Kissinger}, 266-267, 304, 334.
two greater powers, and told the U.S. ambassador that the “Republic of Korea was concerned that it too could become a victim like the Republic of China.”

These new developments in the bilateral and regional relationships raised grave doubts about the constancy and intensity of the U.S. commitment to South Korea while the threat from North Korea seemed undiminished. Although the vast asymmetry of the U.S.-Korean relationship normally inclined the South Koreans to cooperate with U.S. initiatives, President Park’s deference was contingent on his confidence in the U.S. commitment. As U.S. actions and regional developments called that commitment into question, the South Koreans sought to hedge their bets through less deferential covert and overt means.

The South Koreans’ two main covert efforts after being notified of the force reductions were to attempt to help reverse the apparent harm caused by Nixon’s retrenchment by bribing U.S. congressmen in exchange for favorable actions toward South Korea and to proceed with a clandestine nuclear weapons program that would give them the capability to develop nuclear weaponry on a short timeline. Although the State Department was aware of the influence peddling as early as 1970, the so-called Koreagate scandal fully erupted in 1976 creating bureaucratic headaches for both the Ford and Carter administrations. Ten members of Congress eventually were seriously implicated and three officially reprimanded. The United States also quickly became aware of South Korea’s nuclear ambitions and managed to persuade President Park to desist by mid-decade. The details of both covert efforts are well

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487 Action Memo, “ROK Plans to Develop Nuclear Weapons and Missiles,” (no date), “Korea (4)” folder, Box 9, National Security Advisor, Presidential Country Files for East Asia and the Pacific; Gerald Ford Library; Cha, 113.


covered in other sources and are not necessary to elaborate here to understand them as additional costs of heightened South Korean abandonment fears.\footnote{See, for example: Investigation of Korean-American Relations, report of the House Subcommittee on International Organization, Committee on International Relations, October 31, 1978, 95th Congress, 2nd sess.; Nam, America’s Commitment to South Korea, 108, 156-157; Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas, 171-173; Chae-Jin Lee and Hideo Sato, U.S. Policy Toward Japan and Korea (New York: Praeger, 1982), 73-90.} Indeed, the deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, Richard Sneider, noted regarding the nuclear program that “given U.S. attitudes, one had to admit that the South Koreans had some reason for concern over their future security.”\footnote{Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas, 73.} Although both efforts were troubling and potentially costly to the United States, neither was particularly surprising in light of the developing circumstances.

The finalization of the agreement regarding the U.S. troop withdrawal also prompted the South Koreans to reengage the United States on the more immediate U.S. concern about the South Koreans’ troop contribution to the Vietnam War. When President Park originally offered to provide South Korean combat divisions to help President Johnson’s war efforts in Vietnam, he forged a contingent link between his troops in Vietnam and U.S. forces in South Korea that served as a potential source of leverage.\footnote{The linkage was one element of a “wish list” that the South Koreans presented to the Americans. General Dwight E. Beach, Commander in Chief, United Nations Command, recalled in 1971 that “the ROK wanted their troops to receive the same pay as the Americans, all new US equipment for deploying troops and modernization of the entire ROK Army, Navy and Air Force...The final compromise included a very substantial increase in pay for the troops deployed, as much good equipment as we could then furnish and a US commitment that no US troops would be withdrawn from Korea without prior consultation with the ROK. The latter, to the Koreans, meant that no US troops would be withdrawn without ROK approval.” Stanley Robert Larsen and James Lawton Collins, Jr., Allied Participation in Vietnam (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 1985), 125.} Indeed, Ambassador Porter posited that the South Koreans thought the United States had incurred a moral obligation to retain its troops in South Korea as long as South Korean troops remained in Vietnam.\footnote{Airgram from AmEmbassy Seoul (Porter) to Department of State, Subject US Policy Assessment, March 11, 1970, in Ostermann and Person, The Rise and Fall of Detente on the Korean Peninsula, 1970-1974: A Critical Oral History, Vol. 1, 1970 (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2010), 9.} For some U.S. officials the
sense of moral obligation was mutual, as Congressman John M. Murphy expressed in a speech in South Korea in 1975.494

The implicit linkage between the troops concerned U.S. officials but both sides used the leverage when advantageous.495 In 1968, Cyrus Vance exploited the linkage in the United States’ favor and “really shook” the South Korean prime minister by threatening to withdraw U.S. forces in South Korea if the South Koreans withdrew their forces from Vietnam without U.S. approval.496 Once the decision to withdraw one of the two U.S. divisions in South Korea had been made known to the South Koreans in 1970, however, Park was freed to employ to his advantage what the Americans now viewed as his “prime leverage” because by then he had considerably less to lose in exerting it.497 Furthermore, the United States was already in the process of drawing down its own troops at a much faster rate than the South Koreans, which prompted the Special Assistant to the President of Korea for Political Affairs, Pyong-choon Hahm, to insist to Kissinger’s military assistant, Brigadier General Alexander Haig, that the South Koreans “must not be the last to leave Vietnam.”498

494 Telegram, MG Lee to Gen Stilwell, 13 February 1975, Folder “Incoming Messages (Back channels), Jan-March 1975”, Box 16 “Incoming and Outgoing Back Channel Messages, Jan-Jun,” Richard G. Stilwell papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute. Representative Murphy stated that also noted that “the United States has gladly done her part and has abided not only by her treaty but her moral obligations.” He also noted that some 30 sitting members of Congress “saw service in Korea during that conflict.”


Despite U.S. officials’ subsequent efforts to delink the two issues preemptively, the South Koreans sought to extract more concessions from the United States by variously offering the carrot of sending more of their forces to Vietnam as well as the stick of withdrawing the forces they had there already. President Park repeatedly had his officials use the threat of early withdrawal from Vietnam to obtain for Park a reassuring personal meeting with Nixon before Nixon’s visit to China. Although U.S. officials were initially receptive to granting a short meeting, all Park received in the end was a personal letter from Nixon that contained the same vague assurances regarding the retention of the remaining U.S. military forces in Korea that had preceded the surprise withdrawal of the Seventh Infantry Division, such as “the United States does not now have plans for the withdrawal of additional troops” and would “consult fully” with Park “before deciding on additional force reductions in the Republic of Korea.” With so little on offer from the United States, the South Koreans reduced their combat operations in Vietnam significantly and slightly accelerated their withdrawal from the country. The final South Korean forces departed Vietnam in November 1972.

Just how adversely the South Koreans’ adjustments to their Vietnam operations and withdrawal timeline actually affected U.S. operations in Vietnam or U.S. domestic politics is


beyond the scope of this dissertation. At a minimum, reduced operations and accelerated
withdrawal by the South Koreans would reduce the military pressure the United States could
exert on North Vietnam to get it to the peace table while the public rift between the two allies
would certainly encourage the North Vietnamese. The importance Nixon and other U.S. officials
placed on the South Koreans’ presence in Vietnam, however, indicates that the potential indirect
costs of the U.S. troop reduction in South Korea were substantial. The perceived value of South
Korean troops in Vietnam is evidenced by: the $250 million to $300 million the United States
paid the South Koreans annually to keep them in Vietnam despite a noticeable decline in their
previously praiseworthy efficacy; the administration’s willingness to brave the generally accurate
domestic accusations that Nixon was using South Korean “mercenaries” to reduce the number
of Americans required to fight an increasingly unpopular war; and the amount of U.S.
bureaucratic activity generated by the South Korean threat to withdraw early.503 Thus, the
potential cost of the troop reduction in South Korea went well beyond those captured in the
ledgers of compensatory MAP funding and equipment transfer.

The most surprising and problematic South Korean reaction to the withdrawal of the
Seventh Infantry Division and other U.S.-related developments in the region was President
Park’s series of actions to establish a more authoritarian rule in South Korea. On 6 December
1971, President Park declared a state of emergency in South Korea that he claimed was
necessary due to “the rapid changes in international situations, including the recent admission
of communist China to the United Nations, its effect upon the Korean peninsula and the various

503 For cost, see: “Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Laird to President Nixon, Washington, June 26, 1971,”
in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 249. For efficacy, see for example: “Paper Prepared in the Department of State,
151-152. Initially, U.S. military officials highly regarded South Korean forces fighting in Vietnam in the 1960s (Larsen
and Collins, 140-145). For mercenaries for example, U.S. officials noted in April 1972 that the South Koreans were
asking for “$18 million just to move out of the enclaves.” (“Minutes of a Washington Special Actions Group Meeting,
fanatic moves by North Korean Communists.”504 According to the director of the South Korean CIA, Park’s declaration carried no “legally binding” mandates and was intended to be “an exhortative declaration to ‘awaken’ the [South Korean] people and make them realize there were things that needed to be done to assure the security of Korea.”505 As the South Korean president himself later explained to Ambassador Habib, Park wanted to be in a position of strength during the détente between both China and the United States and the two Koreas to ensure Kim Il Sung did not mistake negotiations for weakness, and to shake his people “from their own apathy” about the enduring threat from North Korea.506

The move took U.S. officials by nearly complete surprise. Not until just four days prior to Park’s declared state of emergency did Secretary of State Rogers cable Ambassador Habib that he was “increasingly concerned” that Park’s “public campaign … emphasizing the North Korean military threat and the weaknesses of South Korean defenses” presaged “some sinister move … against the National Assembly or curtailment of political parties or press.”507 Earlier that same day, the director of the Korean CIA informed Ambassador Phillip Habib in Seoul that President Park was “planning to make a statement sometime during week of December 5 in which he would declare an emergency situation.” Habib was pretty sure Director Yi Hu Rak had not divulged all the details of what was to transpire and concluded that Park’s announcement would begin a “general movement toward increasing government controls in Korea.”508 His instincts were sound. By 27 December 1971, the South Korean parliament passed the “Law on Special

Measures for National Protection and Defense” granting Park “extraordinary emergency powers” that allowed the president to proclaim an emergency “to counter a grave threat to national security or to maintain social peace and order.” Ten months later, Park again caught U.S. officials completely off guard when he declared martial law, suspended the constitution, and dissolved the legislature. South Korea’s Fourth Republic commenced in December 1972 with the “Yushin” reforms to the constitution which allowed for indirect election of the president for an unlimited number of six-year terms by a legislature that had one third of its members directly appointed by the president. The following month, the United States signed a peace treaty with North Vietnam that officially ended its involvement in the war and, in Park’s eyes, validated his actions by “selling out’ the Thieu government” in the process. It is hazardous to seek explanations for the behavior of an increasingly authoritarian president who ruled South Korea for more than sixteen years, for such explanations risk excusing repugnant behavior. Yet it is also hazardous to assume the man’s evolution to dictator was preordained by some twisted ambition encoded in his DNA or psyche. When one examines the regional security and diplomatic events leading up to the December 1971 emergency declaration and the ensuing declaration of martial law in October 1972, one sees events that created great uncertainty for South Korean officials. These events could be used to excuse or explain Park’s actions. In the eyes of Park’s main political rival, Kim Dae-Jung, and


510 Dept of State MemCon, 17 October 1972, Egidio Ortona, Ambassador of Italy, Marshall Green, Assist, Sec for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, DNSA, 2; “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, October 17, 1972,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 419; “National Security Council, Memorandum for the President’s File, 18 October 1972, 1000am, (meeting in the Oval Office),” DNSA, 3.


512 “Telegram From the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea, Washington, October 18, 1972, 1436Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 421.
of the students and other citizens who opposed Park’s authoritarianism, they were an excuse.\textsuperscript{513}

To Park’s sympathizers, they helped explain the actions of a “genuine patriot.”\textsuperscript{514} To U.S. officials attempting to decipher Park’s actions at the time, they appeared to be both.

U.S. diplomats, military officers, and intelligence analysts concluded that Park had undermined South Korean democracy in an attempt to address a “complex” convergence of factors, including: Park’s personal political ambitions; “genuine” concern about the “internal instability” of a country that had “always revolved around an authoritarian President”; concern about the “general course of events in Asia; desire to be in strong position vis-à-vis the North in anticipation of coming negotiations and international competition” within the United Nations; concern about U.S. congressional reluctance to provide the agreed upon levels of aid; and “to prepare his state for sooner or later having to depend on their own resources for security.”\textsuperscript{515}

Park inferred increasing irresolution and even impotence from how the United States treated his Asian neighbors in the Republic of China, South Vietnam, and Pakistan. As briefly mentioned earlier, Park emphasized in his public and private justifications of the state of emergency that Taiwan’s loss of its seat in the United Nations put South Korea’s interests at greater risk of also becoming a “victim” of the détente between greater powers.\textsuperscript{516} He was also disconcerted to see the greatest power in the “free world” unable to end the war against a communist foe in Vietnam on terms acceptable to its client state and unable to prevent East Pakistan (Bangladesh) from


\textsuperscript{514} Telegram, Sneider to SecState, 29 April 1975, “Korea – State Department Telegrams To SECSTATE – NODIS (5)” folder, Box 11, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL, 5.


obtaining independence from West Pakistan in 1972 against U.S. wishes. Although Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil admitted “their dependence on [the United States] was great,” they still “needed to do all [that was] necessary to prepare themselves for any contingency.”

As Ambassador Habib summarized, Park felt “that small powers like Korea must be prepared to look after themselves if at the time of crisis their interests and the interests of the great powers do not happen to coincide.” This may seem like an obvious precaution for a client power to make and, indeed, the South Koreans had already been taking steps in this direction. But Park had not anticipated that what Kissinger somewhat euphemistically described as South Korea’s “more fluid international context” would develop so quickly and require the increased self-reliance so soon. It appeared to both Ambassador Habib and Kissinger that “Park and his small leadership group [had] been motivated by a belief that [Park was] the only man who [could] lead South Korea in meeting" the apparent ensuing challenges in such a short time. Habib concluded Park could be deterred “from his political designs … only by direct and drastic intervention which would threaten Park’s hold on power.”

Park’s risky gambit paid off vis-à-vis the United States in the short term because it convinced Kissinger that pursuing further reductions would be too destabilizing despite

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520 “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, October 17, 1972,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 419.

521 “Memorandum From John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, October 25, 1972,” in FRUS, 423-424; “Memorandum From the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, October 17, 1972,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 419. See also: Telegram, Sneider to SecState, 29 April 1975, “Korea – State Department Telegrams To SECSTATE – NODIS (5)” folder, Box 11, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL, 5.

Ambassador Habib’s advice to the contrary, and thus Nixon and Kissinger did not seriously
countenance any further reductions during the remainder of Nixon’s term in office. In the
long-term, however, Park’s moves to concentrate power in the office of the president proved
counterproductive in a number of ways. They created a rising political backlash within South
Korea that Park would fight for six more years. In the United States, Parks actions jeopardized
the substantial military and financial support he had received since taking power in 1961. From
1961 to the start of the modernization program in July 1970, South Korea received an annual
average of $495 million in economic and military assistance from the United States, and during
the first three years of the modernization program (July 1970 through June 1973) it received an
annual average of nearly $800 million. The next budget to pass Congress after Park’s yushin
reforms, however, slashed total aid to only $200 million, the lowest level since the end of the
Korean War. The high probability that Park knew his actions would put his patron’s funding at
risk suggests that a true concern for his country’s security weighed heavily amongst the
complex array of factors motivating his authoritarianism. Nonetheless, Park’s continued heavy-
handed rule laid seeds of doubt about his reliability as a security partner, eroded his patron
state’s good will toward South Korea, and thereby added to the strategic regional uncertainty
that his nondemocratic practices were allegedly designed to allay.

**Ininsensitivity and Credibility.** Throughout the troop reduction discussions, U.S. officials
showed no real intention to modify their withdrawal plan in any significant way to address South
Korean concerns other than to offer generous financial compensation even though they
admitted they were putting Park in a difficult situation. The relative generosity of the
compensation, however, was not sufficient to make up for the roughshod manner displayed by

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523 "Memorandum From John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for
From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, A–432 Seoul, December 10, 1972," in *FRUS, Korea, 1969-
1972*, 436.

countryReport&unit=N.
U.S. officials in implementing Nixon’s troop reduction in South Korea. The fact that Park’s actions to consolidate power became significantly more severe after the South Koreans were notified of the impending withdrawal suggests that U.S. officials underestimated how their efforts to transform South Korea into “a more confident international actor” enhanced Park’s sense of betrayal and insecurity.\footnote{FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, v. This is the term used by State Department historians editing this volume of the FRUS. They argue that this FRUS volume “demonstrates South Korea’s new confidence” though how to distinguish this alleged bold action as being motivated by confidence rather than by increasing desperation remains unclear.}

Ambassador Porter bears part of the responsibility for setting an insufficiently reassuring tone with President Park. William J. Porter was a career foreign service officer who rose through the ranks after starting out as a private secretary to the U.S. minister to Hungary in 1936.\footnote{“William Porter, 73, U.S. Delegate At Vietnam Peace Talks, Is Dead,” New York Times, 17 March 1988.} He was admired by Nixon and his inner foreign policy circle and had a distinguished career in the Foreign Service. After a visit to Seoul, NSC staff member John H. Holdridge specifically noted that Porter was “an ambassador who keeps firmly in mind his mission of representing the President of the U.S. to the president and people of the country to which he is assigned, rather than the reverse.” Holdridge was sure Porter’s firmness had “caused some strain with his relations with Park” but that the Koreans “basically . . . respect him for doing his job.” Certainly, ambassadors needed to be firm but also walk the tightrope of diplomacy to maximize the obtainment of both short- and long-term U.S. interests, and Porter exhibited some moments of seemingly unnecessary insensitivity even though, as Porter put it, good ambassadors “gotta be able to listen to ‘em cry” sometimes.\footnote{“Memorandum From John H. Holdridge of the National Security Council Staff to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger),Washington, April 13, 1971,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 236-237.}

For instance, after one of his personal strong-arming sessions with President Park in May 1970, Ambassador Porter reported to Washington without any apparent irony that it was Park who “lack[ed] sensitivity to American domestic problems bearing on this [troop reduction]
Based on subsequent conversations with Park, it should have been clear that the reverse was likely true as well. Indeed, Porter’s subsequent genuine or affected puzzlement at Park’s “lack [of] confidence in U.S. intentions and . . . statements” elicited an angry reply from Park that the United States (and perhaps the ambassador to whom he spoke most frequently) was “not respecting or listening to [South Korean] wishes.” For his part, Porter seemed annoyed that Park was not satisfied after receiving the “best assurances we can possibly give” under the domestic constraints facing President Nixon.529

The willingness of the administration to push Park hard on a deal that dictated terms and did not address his main concerns suggests that the vast asymmetry in the relationship encouraged a prevailing posture in the administration that resonated with the secretary of the treasury’s candid and somewhat “cold” view that the South Koreans “live[d] at our sufferance” and encouraged the administration to treat them accordingly.530 For their part, the South Koreans had no illusions that “their life had depended for so long and still depended” upon the United States, and were therefore inclined to defer to U.S. wishes.531 Their forbearance, however, had limits that were dependent on their confidence in the credibility of the U.S. commitment to their security. Porter’s assertive efforts to get them to go along compliantly with the U.S. terms of the troop reduction helped push them too far.532

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530 “Conversation Among President Nixon, Secretary of the Treasury Connally, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson), and Others, Washington, April 17, 1971,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 237.

531 “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State Seoul, December 22, 1971, 0902Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 309. The South Korean Prime Minister told Porter: “they knew there would be no further withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea in 1972. Beyond that, however, they could not be sure of what would happen.”

532 Even reassurance efforts at the highest level went awry. For example, Vice President Spiro Agnew visited with President Park in late August 1970 for six hours as part of a confidence building visit to South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Vietnam. In this case, however, Agnew actually undermined much of his own efforts to reassure the South Koreans when he subsequently stated to the press that all U.S. troops would be withdrawn from South Korea after the modernization of the South Korean forces. (Robert B. Semple, Jr., “Agnew the Diplomat: Administration Is Pleased by Results of Mission and by His Performance,” New York Times, 31 August 1970;
The tone coming from the embassy in Seoul changed noticeably after Ambassador Porter left his post in August 1971 to become the head of the U.S. delegation at the Paris Peace Talks. Porter's successor, Phillip C. Habib, was no push-over but seemed more attuned to the importance of softening a hard-nosed pursuit of U.S. interests with the emollient of appropriately tailored respect, even for client states. Habib, who posthumously was acclaimed by the New York Times as “the outstanding professional diplomat of his generation in the United States,” sent a long telegram to Washington explaining that he had “detected a submerged but real feeling of concern among Koreans that they are being neglected by the United States.” Much as Park had been angered by “U.S. unilateral planning” for the troop withdrawal from Korea, Habib now sensed the Koreans felt “swept along by currents [regarding the drawdown in Vietnam] of which they ha[d] no knowledge and over which they ha[d] no control.” The cumulative effect was creating “a rising trend of Korean concern that the U.S. takes them for granted and that we also are less than prepared to share in advance those discussions of strategy and actions which we are pursuing in regard to matters directly affecting Korea's forces and Korea’s future, both military and political.” Habib’s frank conclusion illustrates the difference between his and his predecessor's ideas of how to treat the South Koreans:

I believe that we are jeopardizing unnecessarily our objectives both here [in South Korea] and in Vietnam if we do not share with Korea, to the extent we can, our plans and intentions regarding those matters that affect them directly. The Korean leadership has an unblemished record in protecting our confidences. I see no reason why we cannot discuss frankly and fully with President Park the course of secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese, our plans for military action and military presence in Vietnam in the near future and to keep him reasonably well informed of our dealings with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. If we do so, I am convinced we will find him understanding and cooperative. If we do not, we are courting unpleasant surprises.


534 “Telegram From the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State, Seoul, May 19, 1972, 0300Z,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 350-351.
Porter’s approach was not driven by ignorance of the adverse consequences and feelings expressed in Habib’s cable; it was rather that he did not seem to think they were of sufficient concern to be addressed in the manner that Habib advocated. Only five months after Habib sent his telegram, Park delivered the “unpleasant surprise” of his authoritarian yushin reforms.

To be fair to Ambassador Porter, Nixon had saddled him with a difficult task and given him few options to assuage the Koreans’ pique. Furthermore, it is unclear if Habib sensed the Koreans’ discontent prior to Park’s declaration of a state of emergency or if the surprise event removed the scales from his eyes. If the latter, he was not alone. Much as Kissinger admitted retrospectively that the administration “could have chosen a more sensitive method of informing the Japanese” about the secret talks with China, Nixon admitted indirectly that the United States had paid an unexpected price for not paying closer attention to South Korean concerns.535 Shortly after Park declared martial law in October 1972, Nixon personally “stressed” to the foreign minister of Japan and the Japanese ambassador that they all should not give South Korea “any reason to feel that it has been deserted.” He acknowledged that “we tend sometimes to keep our eyes only on the big game, such as Japan’s new relations with the PRC, the United States’ new relations with the PRC, Japan’s relations with the Soviet Union, or new developments among the European nations” and “cautioned . . . that wars often come about when we fail to handle small problems, such as Vietnam and Korea.”536 In response to the new authoritarian developments in South Korea, Nixon directed a review of U.S. “policies toward the Korean Peninsula” including its near- and long-term “interests and objectives.”537

535 Lee and Sato, 48.

536 “National Security Council, Memorandum for the President’s File, 18 October 1972, 10:00 a.m.,” DSNA, 4.

537 “National Security Study Memorandum 1541, Washington, April 6, 1972,” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 330-331. For clarity, the review was initiated in April 1972 after the Park was granted special powers in December 1971 but before he declared martial law in October 1972.
Conclusion: Nixon’s Credibility Gap with Korea

Although President Nixon had inherited and added to what the U.S. media called “the credibility gap” with his own citizenry regarding the Vietnam War, he created another credibility gap with the South Koreans almost without any help from his predecessor. First, Nixon’s explicit assurance to Park during their summit in 1969 that he “rejected the idea of decreasing the number of our men staying in [South Korea]” allowed Park to convince himself that withdrawals were not imminent despite the various indicators to the contrary that his advisors and even the American press had noted. Thus, Park interpreted the surprise announcement of the troop reduction as a betrayal of trust that directly undermined his perception of the credibility of the U.S. commitment to his country. After Nixon burned him once, Park was primed to take steps to reduce the consequences if it happened again.

Second, Park’s confidence in the reliability of the American commitment was further undermined by how he was treated once he had been informed of the decision. Park clearly expressed his anger that the promised “consultations” on the matter offered him virtually no opportunity to influence how the reductions would occur, let alone their timing or magnitude. The main choice offered to him was whether to cooperate openly or not. With almost no deference shown to his interests on this matter in which U.S. and South Korean security interests seemed closely aligned, he needed to reassess his willingness to rely on his American security partner.

Third, contemporaneous U.S. actions toward South Korea’s neighbors seemed to confirm Park’s doubts about the ability of weaker states to rely on the United States to give adequate weight to their interests and not trample them under the great powers’ diplomatic agendas. Ironically, the U.S. concern that attentive allies would hedge their bets as they observed the

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United States reduce its presence in South Korea was realized in similar fashion in South Korea itself as Park observed the United States’ treatment of South Vietnam and Taiwan. Taiwan’s seat in the United Nations—a fundamental Taiwanese interest—seemed to be yielded too easily in the interest of U.S. relations with mainland China, and Park had to wonder what South Korean interests the United States would concede to China to nurture the new relationship. Similarly, Park felt that the United States’ approach to getting out of Vietnam “sold out” the South Vietnamese in the process.

Finally, the United States was only willing to “guarantee” Park that no more troop reductions would occur through FY 1973 (June 1973) and compensated him partly with congressionally contingent funding. Given Nixon’s false statement at the 1969 summit and the clear mood of Congress, neither assurance could have been comforting. With so much seemingly at stake and with so much sudden change in the posture of the United States toward South Korea and Asia in general, it is unsurprising that the South Koreans pursued a variety of tactics to influence the U.S. reduction of troops, including delay, threatening to withdraw the troops they were contributing to the Vietnam War, illicit congressional influence, the initial pursuit of a nuclear deterrent, and an entrenchment into authoritarian ways.

The Nixon administration certainly found itself in a difficult situation vis-à-vis South Korea in Nixon’s first term and had serious limitations on the options it could pursue. When fear of Park’s volatility and North Korea’s increasingly provocative actions combined with domestic pressures about overextension and entanglement, a reasonable case for a reduction and relocation of U.S. forces in South Korea could be made despite the misgivings of U.S. military leaders and some senior civilians. Nonetheless, Nixon’s team could have improved the method and pace at which they implemented the troop reduction. Furthermore, actions that make sense in terms of strategic interests and domestic pressures still must be implemented carefully to generate long-term success, and the Nixon administration struggled in this area. Key U.S. officials, including Nixon, Kissinger, Secretary of State Rogers, and Ambassador Porter, did not
adequately anticipate that their obfuscating prevarication regarding the imminent U.S. troop
reduction and their unyielding position on its magnitude and timing would combine with other
regional events to encourage Park to take such extreme measures.

Admittedly, alleviating Park's surprise and anger may have been difficult. Despite
signaling from a variety of administration officials, Park got the wrong impression, mainly from
Nixon's completely false statement at their summit in August 1969. Additionally, bringing Park
in on the decision too early would have risked a South Korean end run around the
administration to appeal directly to Congress. Furthermore, the structural dynamic of the
alliance encouraged South Koreans to exaggerate their fears to extract more from their patron,
and that had to be balanced against genuine security concerns. Thus, U.S. officials were right
to be on guard against undue manipulation by their junior partner, but at the same time they
failed to realize just how much U.S. actions had genuinely shaken South Korean confidence in
U.S. resolve and overall credibility within the region. They needed to more fully acknowledge
that Park was justified in his skepticism of U.S. intentions even if he could profit politically from
exaggerating his anger, stubbornness, and fear of attack from North Korea. More importantly,
the United States could do little to alleviate the South Koreans' sense of uncertainty about the
U.S. commitment because that commitment had, in fact, become more uncertain. What U.S.
officials tried to sell as being an unconditional commitment had become in the shadow of
Vietnam an increasingly conditional commitment regardless of U.S. rhetoric to the contrary.

Despite these difficulties and constraints, U.S. officials may have been able to improve the
implementation of the troop reduction in two main areas. First, better anticipation of and
sensitivity to how the South Koreans and Park in particular would react to the plan may have
opened more opportunities for small but meaningful gestures—such as pre-coordinated points
for concession—by various U.S. officials as they implemented Nixon's troop reduction. The
most significant adjustment, however, would have been to divide the withdrawal into at least two
increments spread over at least two years rather one continuous increment in less than fifteen
months. The first increment might have demonstrated sufficiently the good will Nixon wanted to show to congressional concerns. A two-year program, however, would reduce the disturbingly fast pace of change and the administration could attempt to make the second withdrawal increment conditional on congressional approval of the compensatory MAP funding milestones. Thus, Nixon would demonstrate his good will domestically yet retain leverage to encourage Congress to act and slow the pace of change within the borders of a nervous ally.

Finally, the Nixon troop reduction in South Korea supports an interesting corollary to the alliance security dilemma regarding the interplay between uncertainty about the patron’s resolve and risk aversion by both adversaries and allies. As discussed in earlier chapters, statesmen tend to worry that doubt about their own state’s reputation for resolve will encourage their adversaries to take adverse actions. But this troop reduction case indicates that “the congenital worst-case thinking of statesmen” not only creates persistent fear of abandonment, as Snyder states, but also causes the uncertainties in the perception of resolve to operate in different ways with adversaries and allies.539 In a deterrence scenario, the adversary’s uncertainty about a diminishment in the deterrer’s resolve works in the deterrer’s favor as long as the adversary is risk averse because the risk aversion prompts the adversary to discount the perceived reduction in resolve. Such discounting seems prudent given that resolve is far less detectable and quantifiable than the capability component of credibility. Thus, for the adversary, the greater risk lies in underestimating its opponent’s resolve.540 In contrast, when the deterrer’s allies perceive a reduction in the deterrer’s resolve, as Park appears to have done with U.S. resolve, their risk aversion should magnify rather than discount the perceived drop because, for the ally, the greater risk lies in overestimating the friendly deterrer’s resolve and getting left “holding the bag” when a crisis escalates. Thus, when Park perceived various indicators of declining U.S.


540 Goldstein draws a similar conclusion with respect to free-riding but not couched so clearly in terms of perceived resolve. (Goldstein, 45-46.)
resolve, he took predictable steps to hedge his reliance on the United States for deterrence as described herein.

Even if the nature of the attribution remained uncertain, officials in the Nixon administration belatedly realized the perceived magnitude of the credibility gap that they and ongoing events had created in the region. After Park implemented the *yushin* reforms in December 1972, the prevailing opinion in the executive branch shifted more solidly in the direction of the more cautious position of senior U.S. military leaders. Nonetheless, as will be explored in the next chapter, the ongoing risk of entanglement and overextension in maintaining a significant U.S. military force in South Korea loomed large in the minds of many Democrats in the wake of Vietnam and, to them, advised accepting short-term credibility risks for longer-term credibility and security gains.
CHAPTER 6: COLD WAR CREDIBILITY AND CARTER’S TROOP WITHDRAWAL FAILURE IN KOREA

My commitment to withdraw American ground troops from Korea has not changed . . . I’m very determined that over a [4- or 5-year time period] that our ground troops would be withdrawn.

President Jimmy Carter at a press conference, 9 March 1977

As the civilian airliner made the long flight from one side of the globe to the other, Major General John K. Singlaub had plenty of time to ponder the events that led to his sudden and unexpected trip from South Korea to Washington, DC.\textsuperscript{541} Only two days earlier, on 18 May 1977, this two-star Chief of Staff of the U.S. Forces, Korea (USFK) and distinguished veteran of three wars was quoted on the record as frankly stating that if the United States withdrew its ground forces from South Korea “on the schedule suggested [by President Carter] it will lead to war.”\textsuperscript{542} Although General Singlaub firmly believed President Carter’s proposed withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces in South Korea seriously undermined deterrence of North Korea and thereby risked encouraging Kim Il Sung to resume hostilities, he would have preferred those views not be attributed to him. The ensuing \textit{Washington Post} front-page headline “US General: Korea Pullout Risks War” prompted Singlaub’s sudden recall to Washington to explain himself before the president. This marked the beginning of the Carter administration’s nettlesome “Singlaub affair” and accelerated the momentum already gathering against Carter’s Korean

\textsuperscript{541} John Singlaub, \textit{Hazardous Duty: An American Soldier in the Twentieth Century} (New York, Summit Books: 1991), 391. Singlaub wrote his report on the trip and then had time to catch some sleep.

\textsuperscript{542} Singlaub, 386-389. Singlaub explains he initially thought his comments were off the record and he relates the series of events that led to that conclusion. However, when journalist John Saar gave him the chance to retract his statement, Singlaub chose to stand by his words on the record. For the reporter’s somewhat different perspective on how events transpired, see John Saar, “Background on the Singlaub Affair,” \textit{Washington Post}, 3 June 1977, A27.
withdrawal plans.543

The “Singlaub affair” turned out to be but one of a number of conflicts in which key military
officials and congressional conservatives opposed President Carter’s national security initiatives,
including the Panama Canal treaty, the cancellation of the procurement of the B-1 bomber,
budget cuts that were contributing to a “hollow army,” and the SALT II negotiations. In the case
of Carter’s proposed withdrawal of ground forces from Korea, a wave of insurmountable
resistance from Congress, prominent active duty and retired military officers, conservative-
leaning members of the public, and even members of his cabinet stymied Carter’s ability to
implement one of his top campaign promises. Carter’s tensions with the military over the
Singlaub affair and other issues have been described and analyzed in a number of scholarly
works and autobiographies, and none of the accounts of Carter’s Korean withdrawal policy—
even those with a generally more favorable view of Carter’s presidency and foreign policy—
consider his withdrawal policy well advised.544 Many argue that Carter handled poorly the
tensions it created with the military and Congress and this chapter does not diverge from those
general assessments. Rather, this chapter evaluates more thoroughly than previous works
Carter’s Korean withdrawal policy within the broader context of the three preceding
administrations’ struggles with the issue and examines the Cold War credibility discourse that
infused those debates. Finally, it adds to our understanding of Carter’s motivation for doggedly
pursuing a withdrawal despite widespread opposition to it, and suggests that reducing the


544 Coverage of the tensions between the military and President Carter over this policy generally fall into one of three
broad categories: analysis of Carter’s presidency and/or foreign policy, analysis of presidential leadership styles, or
examinations of civil-military relationships over a number of presidencies. Yet few provide detailed coverage of the
incident. Nam’s America’s Commitment to South Korea provides an excellent, though somewhat meandering,
analysis of the strategic implications of Nixon and Carter’s policy. Singlaub’s Hazardous Duty reveals his perspective
on the incident while Joe Wood and Philip Zelikow’s “Persuading a President: Jimmy Carter & American Troops in
Korea,” Kennedy School of Government Case Program (http://www.case.hks.harvard.edu/casetitle.asp?
caseNo=1319) provides an excellent narrative history focusing on the development and reception of the revised
intelligence assessment of North Korean forces. Don Obersdorfer’s Two Koreas also provides an excellent account
of the incident. In contrast, however, the memoirs of Cyrus Vance (Hard Choices) and Zbigniew Brzezinski (Power
and Principle) provide scant mention of the incident, and President Carter’s memoir, Keeping Faith, contains no
mention of his Korea policy or the military’s opposition to it.

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likelihood of entanglement was the most significant factor in Carter’s withdrawal decision.

Carter’s Korean withdrawal policy helped reveal two main contrasting lessons learned from the Vietnam War that had important implications for credibility discourse in the late Cold War. The first lesson was embodied in Carter’s Korean policy and was consistent with the Nixon Doctrine. Broadly speaking, it sought to reduce the United States’ risk of overextension by empowering allies, reducing tensions with communist countries, and reducing the potential for entanglement abroad. This lesson likely resonated with a deep ideological and practical concern for fiscal responsibility, constrained government, and non-intervention that Michael Hogan observed resisting expansion of U.S. power and commitments in the early Cold War.\(^{545}\) Others, however, drew a conflicting lesson from Vietnam that tapped the credibility fixation of the NSC-68 mindset. They expressed growing alarm that U.S. credibility had been badly damaged by the embarrassment of the Vietnam War, and détente and retrenchment only exacerbated the perception abroad that the United States was exhibiting weakness and irresolution. They were less willing to modify the NSC-68 mindset. As will be shown in the remainder of this chapter, Carter’s advocacy of the ground force withdrawal policy tapped into the discourse and attitudes embodied in the overextension worries in the first lesson. In contrast, resistance to Carter’s ground force withdrawal policy incorporated the fears of U.S. weakness and irresolution of the second lesson, with perceptions of U.S. credibility held in tension between the two “lessons.” Carter built his policy on the foundations of the first lesson but did not sufficiently anticipate or adapt to the resurgent flow of influence of the second lesson.

**Carter’s Motivation and the Tailwinds for Withdrawal**

On 12 December 1974, Georgia governor James Earl Carter announced his candidacy for president and soon indicated his intent to continue the troop withdrawal from South Korea

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\(^{545}\) Hogan, *Cross of Iron*, 7, 70-71.

Given the benefits of the salient commitment to allies and deterrence of North Korea provided by the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea, any decision to withdraw more U.S. forces from Korea would need to be driven by factors that seemed to override these benefits and counter the headwinds against withdrawal that had been increasing in the years prior to Carter’s presidency. As will be discussed below, Carter’s proposal for U.S. ground forces in South Korea initially appeared plausible because it built upon a variety of preexisting initiatives and conditions that appeared sufficient enough to countervail the headwinds. Those conditions included the geopolitical developments and financial strains that prompted Nixon and Kissinger to adopt the Nixon Doctrine and to pursue détente, a newly emerging emphasis on human rights in foreign policy, and most importantly, the strong inclination for disentanglement that pervaded much of the country in the wake of the treaty with North Vietnam.
Existing scholarship offers varying mixes and hierarchies of these three main reasons to explain why Carter initially adopted and then stuck with his ground force withdrawal policy in the face of rising opposition. More specifically, they argue that Carter pursued the troop withdrawal because: 1) he desired to continue Nixon’s attempts to reduce the cost of Cold War commitments to allies; 2) his emphasis on human rights in foreign policy made him want to distance the United States from the authoritarian Park regime and/or to coerce him into reforming; and 3) he desired to avoid “another Vietnam” and believed that U.S. troops in Korea would cause the United States to be drawn into another land war in Asia too easily.548 All three motivations were present and would have been advanced by the troop reduction, but they were not of equal influence on Carter. Furthermore, all three motivations engaged various aspects of the notion of U.S. credibility within the NSC-68 mindset.

As discussed in previous chapters, the strains that the Vietnam War inflicted on U.S. fiscal health and U.S. resolve to engage in extensive containment opened an opportunity for those with influence to reinterpret the NSC-68 mindset that the 1970s had inherited from previous decades. Containment was still important but as the Soviet Union approached military

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parity with the United States, Kissinger sought to “manage” the Soviets rather than resist them anywhere and everywhere.\(^{549}\) Core Cold War foreign policy themes of ideological anticommunism, containment, and realism\(^{550}\) were still present but the talk that the United States would “pay any price, bear any burden” to support them faded.\(^{551}\) More specifically Nixon and Kissinger’s attempted empowerment of key allies under the Nixon Doctrine and their rapprochement with China directly challenged the NSC-68 mindset’s core assumption that the Cold War was a strictly bipolar structure. Instead, they offered a multilateral alternative that could loosen the grip of domino fears. Similarly, Kissinger’s pursuit of détente in the Nixon and Ford administrations contradicted the early Cold War image of the Soviet Union as an aggressively expansionist power that could not be trusted. Thus, although Nixon and Kissinger’s novel Cold War policies were eventually rejected by a resurgent traditional view of the Cold War, they initially gave President Carter enough breathing room to attempt to implement what some have called the first post-Cold War foreign policy.

Many elements of Carter’s overall foreign policy posture can be found in his policy on troop withdrawal from South Korea, but that policy has not received as much attention or scrutiny as his emphasis on human rights, his handling of the Panama Canal treaty, the SALT II talks, the Middle East peace process, and the Iranian hostage crisis. Carter’s position on Korea was consistent with his broader attempts to build upon the important shifts Nixon and Kissinger had made in U.S. foreign policy and to supplant the deeply rooted Cold War themes of “containment,” “realism,” and “anticommunism” with concepts of “preventative diplomacy,”

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\(^{550}\) Rosati, “The Rise and Fall”, 37.

“complex interdependence,” and “human rights.” Early in his presidency, Carter expressed his intent to continue the shift of the Cold War mindset that Nixon and Kissinger had initiated but also to relinquish what he described as “that inordinate fear of communism which led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.” Within six months of taking office, Carter articulated a central element of this new policy in a speech at the University of Notre Dame when he rejected a bipolar understanding of world affairs, claiming the world was “too large and too varied to come under the sway of either one of two superpowers.” Six months later, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski expanded on this reinterpretation of the Cold War dynamic, positing that the United States had “witnessed perhaps the end of a phase in [its] foreign policy, shaped largely since 1945, in which preoccupation particularly with the Cold War … no longer seems warranted by the complex realities within which we operate.”

Drawing upon evidence of Carter’s continuation of some of Nixon’s foreign policy initiatives, some scholars argue that Carter’s position on Korea primarily reflected a desire to adjust the U.S. military posture in Asia to better match U.S. financial resources, which had been put under strain by the Vietnam War and the military expenditures of the Soviet Union. Budget considerations were also certainly at play during this period of high inflation, and the ensuing “budget crunch” forced officials to make difficult decisions about force postures and

552 Rosati, “The Rise and Fall,” 37-39. Within six months of taking office, President Carter articulated a central element of this new policy in his June 1977 speech at the University of Notre Dame when he rejected a bi-polar understanding of world affairs, claiming the world was “too large and too varied to come under the sway of either one of two superpowers.” Six months later, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski expanded on this concept, positing that the United States had “witnessed perhaps the end of a phase in [its] foreign policy, shaped largely since 1945, in which preoccupation particularly with the Cold War … no longer seems warranted by the complex realities within which we operate.”

553 Gaddis, Strategies of Containment, 343.


555 Skidmore, Reversing Course, 44. See also Nam, 142; Perry, 268; Kaufman, Plans Unraveled, 67. Skidmore also argues that avoiding another Vietnam was the other significant component.
even overall strategies. Cutting unnecessary military spending was an important component of Carter’s campaign and the president “immersed himself” in defense budget details his first two years in office. Furthermore, withdrawal from Korea and canceling production of the B-1 bomber were apparently the two biggest money-saving proposals in Carter’s plan to cut defense spending. Nonetheless, although the cost of military commitments abroad was clearly an important underlying factor in Carter’s decision, it does not adequately account for Carter’s insistence on the complete withdrawal of ground troops in Korea rather than spreading the cost reductions more evenly across a greater portion of the military. By leaving a small American ground force on the peninsula and reducing forces at various points around the globe, the United States could realize significant cost savings while still retaining a substantial portion of the benefit from the trip-wire deterrent generated by the remaining ground forces. Indeed, the USFK commander under Carter, General John W. Vessey, Jr., agreed that the United States could withdraw at least one third of its combat forces from South Korea without a significant decrease in the deterrent effect. Thus, although Carter’s decision to withdraw ground forces from Korea was enabled by rising concerns about the financial cost of containment expressed in the Nixon Doctrine, the actual policy appeared to be driven by the more ideologically freighted issues of human rights and the risks of unwanted entanglement already preexisting in the political discourse.

556 See, for example: Memorandum, Jan M. Lodal to Secretary Kissinger, “The Defense Budget and Strategy Changes” 21 October 1974, Folder “Defense, Department of (4) 10/21-23/74,” Box 6, NSA Presidential Agency File 1974-77, GRFL. See also, Auten, 84-95.


558 Auten, Carter’s Conversion, 84-95. The amount saved by relocating the remaining ground forces rather than disbanding them was highly disputed, and came with the additional cost of improving the South Korean military forces. Thus, Auten’s claim warrants more scrutiny in future research.

559 For example, if 75% of the ground forces were removed, the benefits the trip-wire deterrence would diminish by considerably less than 75%. In contrast, a 100% withdrawal would reduce the trip-wire deterrent by 100%. Thus, the United States would gain greater value per unit of troops withdrawn if it left some troops still on the ground than if it completely withdrew all ground forces.

560 U.S. Congress, Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw, 232.
One aspect of Carter’s pursuit of withdrawal from Korea that deviated from Nixon’s was Carter’s concern with human rights, but, it too served to reinforce Carter’s withdrawal plan. Those who emphasized human rights in U.S. foreign policy challenged the prevailing narrow construction of U.S. interests and implicitly appealed to the moralistic component of American exceptionalism. Under Carter’s watch, human rights initially “color[ed] virtually every aspect of U.S. foreign policy” and became one of the main legacies of the Carter administration.\(^{561}\) Carter was genuinely concerned about human rights but embracing the issue during his candidacy also served the useful political function of distinguishing his proposed foreign policy from the notoriously amoral foreign policy of Kissinger and his presidents. Indeed, by the time Carter’s campaign began, concern about President Park’s abuse of human rights and Kissinger’s disregard of them had already been gaining political momentum for a few years.

Antecedents of the human rights motivation for Carter’s Korean policy can be found in shifting public sentiment and in congressional actions leading up to Carter’s candidacy. For example, a *New York Times* editorial pointed out in November 1972 that it was sadly “ironic” to many Americans that their country had expended so much blood and treasure in the Vietnam War “to forestall the progressive toppling of free governments in Asia” when “freedom [was] in fact falling” in the Philippines and South Korea not due to “any external source nor even from internal Communist subversion, but rather from [the presidents of the two countries] who have long received American material and moral support” while “elementary human rights [were] cynically brushed aside.”\(^{562}\) The editorial was a clear indictment of Kissinger’s foreign policy.

In Congress, Representative Donald M. Fraser—a liberal Democrat from Minnesota—led the charge to raise the profile of human rights in policy discourse. He initiated hearings on human rights and U.S. foreign policy in 1973 that catalyzed a gradual change in the “attitudes at

\(^{561}\) Nam, 143.

the State Department and in the United States more broadly about prioritizing human rights in
U.S. foreign policy." 563 The Fraser committee’s efforts inspired Congress to become more
active in passing a variety of human rights legislation, including Section 32 of the Foreign
Assistance Act of 1973, which was designed to make foreign assistance contingent on
acceptable human rights policies.

Although the bulk of the Fraser hearings were directed at the dictatorship in Chile in the
wake of substantiated allegations of covert U.S. assistance to it, Congressman Fraser also led
an effort to reduce military assistance to South Korea as a consequence of Park’s authoritarian
policies. 564 This led the State Department to express concern that the U.S. government’s
“ability to provide assistance and the credibility of [its] commitment to Korea [were] jeopardized
by Congressional action and the public disapproval it reflects.” 565 As Kissinger explained to
President Ford, these authoritarian measures caught the attention of the American “media and
missionary-connected church organizations” in the United States and “resulted in Congressional
Hearings on the deprivation of Human Rights in Korea, and subsequent moves to reduce or
terminate [U.S.] military assistance.” 566 Although most of the funding threatened by Fraser’s
congressional allies was eventually restored by a majority of less activist congressmen, the

563 Sarah B. Snyder, “‘A Call for U.S. Leadership’: Congressional Activism on Human Rights,” Diplomatic History 37:2

564 After conducting a series of over fifteen hearings on human rights in 1973, Fraser’s subcommittee issued a report
in March 1974 that showed that the United States was “giving aid to 58 countries which were dictatorships.”
XXXVIII: Part 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1973-1976, 261.)

565 Shortly after Fraser’s first subcommittee hearing, the State Department’s executive secretary commented to the
deputy National Security Advisor, Lt General Brent Scowcroft, that “Congress has made clear its dislike of the [South
Korean] government’s oppressive measures, and this in turn impacts negatively on our plans to continue stationing of
forces in Korea and provision of military assistance.” (Memorandum, George S. Springsteen (DoS executive
secretary) to Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, “Issues Paper on Korea,” 19 October 1974, Folder “Korea (1),” Box 3,
“NSA Trip Briefing Books and Cables, President Ford,” 12).

566 Memorandum, Henry A. Kissinger to President Ford, “Your Visit to the Republic of Korea,” Folder “November 1974
– Japan, Korea, and USSR, Briefing Book – Seoul (1),” Box 2, NSA Trip Briefing Book and Cable, President Ford,
GRFL, Tab F, 2-3. How American Christian groups’ complaints about Park’s oppression of their fellow South Korean
Christians might have been communicated to and resonated with Carter while he was a presidential candidate is a
topic for future research. South Korean president’s restrictive actions included including kidnapping of the main
political opposition leader Kim Dae Jung with probable intent to murder him, arrest of Christian opposition leaders and
leading intellectuals, the proscription of all campus political activity, and laws against criticizing Park’s constitutional
reforms.
initial budgetary turmoil worried American officials involved with South Korea and undermined South Korean confidence in the U.S. commitment, as described in the previous chapter.

The unprecedented activism by Congress regarding human rights greatly annoyed Henry Kissinger and became a political liability for the Ford administration prior to the 1976 presidential election. Kissinger argued that the State Department must not “pretend that it is sort of a reform school for allies”567 but his self-described attempts to “abolish” the department’s tendency to try “to restructure the domestic situation” of America’s non-democratic allies encountered what Kissinger characterized in a domestic foreign policy speech as a “rebellion against contemporary foreign policy” that many Americans viewed as “excessively pragmatic” and that “sacrifice[d] virtue in the pursuit of stability.”568 Kissinger, however, privately worried that congressional concerns about human rights were “sentimental nonsense” that could result in a “precipitant slide of the American position in the world that [was] totally unprecedented.”569 Kissinger’s subsequent attempts to evade the reporting of human rights violations by specific countries as Congress required under its 502B legislation “sparked a strong reaction” from Congress.570

567 “The Secretary’s Principals and Regionals Staff Meeting, Tuesday, October 22, 1974,” DNSA, 17.


569 “The Secretary’s Principals and Regionals Staff Meeting, Tuesday, October 22, 1974,” DNSA, 13-16, 18. At this meeting in which Kissinger resisted his staff’s recommendation to meet with Fraser and like-minded Congressmen, he added contemptuously, “[Fraser and those of like mind] want us to be anti-Philippine, anti-Korean, anti-Chilean—pro what? Castro?” Kissinger eventually relented and met with the Congressmen but only after Ford had completed his trip to South Korea. See also, Letter, Donald Fraser [and 7 other Congressmen] to President Ford, 24 October 1974, Folder “November 1974 – Japan, Korea, and USSR, General (8)”, Box 3, NSA Trip Briefing Books and Cables, President Ford, GRFL.

570 Keys, 847. During the cordial meeting with Fraser, Kissinger confessed that he was “most allergic to … the obligatory statutes” which restricted his diplomatic space to maneuver and which he felt “very strongly” were “counterproductive.” (“Memorandum of Conversation, December 17, 1974, 5 p.m., Subject: Human Rights” in FRUS, 1969-1976. Vol. XXXVIII: Part 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1973-1976, 260.)
Despite Kissinger’s resistance, the issue of human rights in South Korea and elsewhere rose in prominence and became an issue in the presidential campaign.\(^{571}\) In late 1975, the Fraser committee passed tougher amendments to its previous human rights legislation, forcing a veto by Ford. By April 1976, Fraser’s spotlight on South Korea prompted 119 members of Congress to sign a letter to Ford “to express their increasing difficulty in justifying our military support for the Republic of Korea because of alleged domestic political problems and suppressive policies.” Congress overcame Ford’s veto two months later.\(^ {572}\) Thus, when candidate Carter developed his troop withdrawal initiative for South Korea, he could build it in part upon a foundation of human rights arguments already brought to prominence by Fraser and similarly concerned legislators, and a “public mood” that demanded less support to dictators.\(^ {573}\)

Given the momentum in favor of emphasizing human rights in U.S. foreign policy and Carter’s embrace of it, it is not surprising that some authors argue that Carter sought to withdraw U.S. troops primarily to coerce or punish President Park for his human rights abuses and/or to reduce the taint Park’s abuses would have on the image of the United States.\(^ {574}\) Undoubtedly the perception that Carter was using the troop withdrawal issue to coerce Park was useful in Carter’s genuine efforts to pressure Park to improve human rights but the withdrawal was not merely a bargaining chip. Rather, the evidence suggests that Carter, like Nixon before him, would have pursued ground force withdrawal from South Korea regardless of


\(^{572}\) Letter, Strom Thurmond to Ford, 14 April 1976, folder “FO 3-2/ CO 72 – CO 81, Box 23, White House Central Files, Subject File FO 3-2, GRFL; Keys, 848.

\(^{573}\) Stuckey, xvi-xvii.

\(^{574}\) Authors emphasize various factors or combinations of these factors with little clear consensus as to which if any was the most important. Some prominent examples include: costly commitments and human rights [Mark Perry, Four Stars, 268; Kaufman, Plans Unraveled, 67; Nam, 142-146]; reduced reliance on U.S. military power and human rights [Smith, Morality, Reason, and Power, 103]; reduced reliance on U.S. military power, avoid Asian land war, and human rights [Roehrig, 135]; avoid Asian land war and human rights [John Saar, “Korea Troop Issue Problem for Carter,” Washington Post, 13 November 1976, A1; Gleysteen, 17, 21-22, 29].
the status of human rights there. At the same time, the issue of human rights also was not just “a token excuse to redefine the purpose of the American security commitment to South Korea.” Instead, troop withdrawal and human rights were two important yet largely separate issues for Carter that happened to cohabitate in South Korea and thus could be linked when desirable to achieve progress on either issue. As Vice President Walter Mondale admitted privately to Japan’s Prime Minister Fukuda, “a political connection” certainly existed between the administration’s “stance on troop withdrawals” and its “concerns about President Park’s domestic policies,” but that political link was crafted primarily by congressional pressure rather than by an administration using troop withdrawal to extract human rights concessions.

Indeed, although Carter responded early in his presidency to congressional pressure to put President Park on notice that the Carter administration would “speak out on human rights in Korea as well as in other countries,” his leverage over Park regarding human rights was also limited by Congress. Any inclination to use the troop withdrawal issue primarily as a tool to extract human rights concessions from Park could be undermined by the counter-leverage Park possessed (when conditions were favorable) because Congress’s support of withdrawal was contingent on the compensatory funding that it controlled. If that funding was, in turn,

575 In his thoughtful book, Joo-Hung Nam writes that “The withdrawal pledge may or may not have been intended to punish Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian regime. However that may be, the circumstances surrounding such a coincidence of the human rights and troop withdrawal issues gave the impression that the U.S. administration was trying to divorce itself” from the Park regime (emphasis added). Nam claims “the human rights issue was a token excuse to redefine the purpose of the American security commitment to South Korea” (Nam, 146).

576 Draft memo, Mondale to Carter, “My Second Meeting with Prime Minister Fukuda,” 1 February 1977, NLC-133-120-5-26-7, JCL, 2. There is some documentary evidence that human rights coercion was incorporated into the planned withdrawal despite Cyrus Vance’s October 1976 memo to Carter specifically advising against using threats of cuts in military or economic aid to pressure President Park. (Vance, 449) In a hand written memo to Brzezinski and Vance regarding a meeting the South Korean foreign minister dated 5 Mar 1977, Carter wanted to be sure that Park understood: 1) U.S. forces will be withdrawn 2) U.S.-ROK relations were “at an all time low” in eyes of Congress and the public 3) future military aid was linked to improvements in human rights (Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 88). The third point, however, seems to convey the reality in Congress rather than a use of the withdrawal issue primarily to gain human rights concessions.

577 The NSC noted that opposition was forming in Congress because security assistance programs were not cut to the degree that some congressmen thought were commensurate with their human rights concerns. These congressional opponents argued that too little leverage was being exerted on “countries which depend upon [the United States] for economic and security assistance.” (NSC Weekly Report #24, 17 February 1977, NLC 28-63-3-1-8; White House Memo, “Human rights in Korea,” 4 March 1977, NLC 1-1-2-28-7, JCL).
contingent on human rights reforms that Park controlled, then Park could foot-drag on reforms to undermine congressional funding for a U.S. troop withdrawal that Park feared more than U.S. disapproval of his domestic practices. Given that Park appeared to desire retaining U.S. troops more than receiving compensatory funding after their withdrawal, then one should expect that he would avoid reforming human rights as much as possible when there was a question about U.S. resolve (in the executive or legislative branch) to go forward with the reductions. When Congress and the executive branch were unified and resolute, then Park should concede somewhat on human rights to get funds, as he did during Carter’s first year in office. If, however, the headwinds against Carter were mounting and linked to funding, then Park had more incentive to add to the headwinds to get the bigger payoff, as seemed to happen in ensuring years.

Thus, although human rights concerns in South Korea were important to Carter and undoubtedly boosted his resolve to withdraw ground forces from South Korea, they likely came second behind concerns about entanglement in driving Carter’s troop withdrawal decision. Like the cost-cutting argument, the administration could have used a partial troop withdrawal to punish and/or coerce President Park while still retaining much of the benefit of the trip-wire deterrent if only some or even most of the ground forces were removed. In contrast, any perceived reduction in “taint” resulting from a complete U.S. ground force withdrawal would be diminished by the continued presence of considerable U.S. air forces on the peninsula.

Despite the pressure Carter exerted on Park regarding human rights, the foremost impetus behind his troop withdrawal policy was his concern about military entanglement.579

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578 According to the CIA, the United States’ “substantial pressure” on human rights was effective and prompted South Korea in the first year of Carter’s presidency to do “more than any of the non-Communist Asian governments to improve its [human rights] performance.” The report stated: “In moves clearly reflecting its sensitivity to external scrutiny, Seoul—beginning in July 1977—released nearly 60 political dissidents and moved Kim Tae-chung, the regime’s most prominent critic, from prison to a hospital.” (Central Intelligence Agency, National Foreign Assessment Center, “Human Rights Performance: January 1977- July 1978, September 1978, NLC 28-17-15-9-8, JCL, 7.

579 Although avoiding “another Vietnam” was the “foremost” reason, this study does not argue it accounts for the majority of the causation, merely the plurality.
Entanglement was another aspect of cost calculation involved in the “interest” component of credibility, but like human rights, it had a more normative quality than financial concerns. Rather than ask if the United States could afford to maintain an extensive overseas containment posture, entanglement concerns tended to ask whether the United States should risk American blood and treasure for lesser interests that had lately appeared to be less interconnected than domino fears asserted. In essence, the rise of U.S. entanglement concerns about Korea represented a reevaluation of U.S. Cold War interests and corresponding commitments, and a questioning of extensive containment, which increasingly looked like overextension to many U.S. observers.

Like the momentum behind human rights concerns, the retrenchment and disentanglement strand that motivated Carter also predated his candidacy. As discussed in earlier chapters, U.S. concerns about undesired entanglement in a second Korean conflict had been around at least since Cyrus Vance tried to calm President Park down after the Blue House raid in 1968. By 1974, Nixon felt the rise of public discourse for general retrenchment was significant enough to address it directly in a major foreign policy speech at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis. There he argued that his fellow Americans must not give in to “a new wave of isolationism, blind to both the lessons of the past and the perils of the future.”

Similarly, Secretary of State Kissinger relayed to his subordinates nine months later in 1975 that “significant forces” were “preaching retrenchment.” The anti-war movement’s view that the United States was “over-extended” with “too many commitments too far from home” also

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580 “Address by President Nixon, Annapolis, Maryland, June 5, 1974” in FRUS,1969-1976. Vol. XXXVIII: Part 1, Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1973-1976188. Nixon did acknowledge, however, that “by the later 1960’s” the United States no longer needed to try “to solve everyone’s problems all over the world” and did not possess “inexhaustible resources.”

resonated readily with a deep and enduring strand of American noninterventionism. Those wishing to avoid getting entangled in another Asian war would naturally be concerned about American troops in Korea given that Korea was commonly viewed as one of the more probable tinderboxes.

The preexisting entanglement concerns had two main variants. The first sought to avoid conventional entanglement in another Vietnam-like conflict that would likely be unpopular and seemingly unnecessary. The second variant involved more specific concerns about nuclear weapons being captured by the North Koreans or being used by Americans without due consideration in a rapidly or even automatically escalating conflict. This second variant interacted directly with and appeared to confirm the NSC-68 fear that the possibility of escalation to nuclear war undermined U.S. resolve to respond militarily to low-level aggression.

Unlike the human rights issue, entanglement concerns prior to Carter had begun to be incorporated into executive branch policies without pressure from Congress. In 1974, the Department of Defense and the State Department were already working toward creating a conventional military posture in South Korea expressly designed to reduce the probability of entanglement by reducing the trip wire effect. The Joint Chiefs of Staff’s mid-range planning document, the Joint Strategic Objectives Plan, indicated that “in the Pacific and East Asia, the concept was to assist allies to deter aggression” with the “general U.S. goal” of “no involvement in a land war in Asia.” In the State Department, Philip Habib—who Kissinger had recently promoted from Ambassador to South Korea to Undersecretary for Political Affairs—argued that the United States was “so overinvolved” in South Korea relative to its interests that it was “automatically drawn into these damn political machinations” and “a whole wide range of things

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583 Clever, ed. CINCPAC History, 1974, 1:176-177, emphasis added.
which could happen in Korea which should not be so automatic.” Habib rejected the conclusion in NSSM 154 “U.S. Policy Concerning the Korean Peninsula” that “we don’t have to think about the question of force levels for the time being.” When Kissinger—who respected Habib even though he did not share Habib’s more “dovish” worldview—pointedly asked him if the United States had too many troops in South Korea, Habib replied affirmatively but cautioned that removing the remaining infantry division “would raise holy hob” if attempted in FY1975 but was plausible “by about [19]77.”

These efforts to minimize conventional entanglement were supported by congressmen and even some former defense officials who, throughout 1973 and 1974, called for a reduction or even a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea. In late April 1973, eleven Democratic congressmen argued that the new Sino-American rapprochement allowed for the total withdrawal of U.S. forces in Korea. Nixon’s outreach to China along with a more quiescent North Korea appeared to diminish the threat to South Korea and reduced the magnitude of the Soviet threat in the NSC-68 mindset by fracturing the perception of a unified communist bloc. Even CINCPAC, Admiral Noel Gayler, who seemed inclined by disposition and position to view the world pessimistically, considered “armed conflict on the peninsula” as “unlikely without drastic changes in the international atmosphere.” Additionally, a group of former national security officials headed by Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul C. Warnke argued in July 1973 that there was “no longer any justification for continuing to maintain an American [Army] division

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584 Proceedings, Secretary’s Staff Meeting, 25 January 1974, DNSA. 6, 18-19. Habib argued that the United States had taken the question of its “involvement in Korea . . . for granted over the [preceding] 20 years.” He was also skeptical about a U.S. general retaining operational control of South Korean forces if the UNC was replaced, “believing that we are more apt to be drawn willy-nilly into incidents.” (Briefing Memorandum, Winston Lord to Henry Kissinger, “Highlights of the 19th U.S.–Japan Planning Talks and My Trip to Korea,” 31 July 1974, DNSA, 9).

585 Proceedings, Secretary’s Staff Meeting, 25 January 1974, DNSA, 33.

586 For Kissinger’s view of Habib, see Kissinger, Years of Renewal, 548. For examples of the tension and respect in their relationship, see: Telecon, Ambassador Habib and Kissinger, 9 September 1974, DNSA. For troop reduction and “holy hob”, see: Proceedings, Secretary’s Staff Meeting, 25 January 1974, DNSA, 20-22.

in Korea” because the South Korean ground forces had “about a two-to-one advantage over those of North Korea.”

General Donald V. Bennett, the outgoing commander of USFK, similarly concluded in his final press conference in late July 1973 that a reinvasion by the North Korean army was unlikely, even after withdrawal of U.S. forces from Korea, due to the strength of the South Korean forces. Even Secretary of Defense Schlesinger privately admitted that the United States should be “pulling away slightly from the [South Korean] embrace” and publically disclosed to the House Appropriations Defense subcommittee “the long-range possibility of replacing the lone U.S. division in [South Korea] with a U.S. Army/Marine reserve force based on Guam or Hawaii.”

Candidate Carter and his advisors were well aware of the anti-entanglement sentiment regarding Korea. In May 1975, Carter apparently took keen notice of a Louis Harris public opinion poll that showed “only 14 percent of Americans . . . favored U.S. involvement if North Korea attacked the South, while 65 percent said they would oppose it.” At an address to the American Chamber of Commerce in Tokyo on 28 May 1975, Carter implicitly acknowledged the mandate this poll seemed to provide when he stated: “Our over-involvement in the internal affairs of South-east Asian countries is resulting in a mandatory reassessment by the American people of our basic foreign policies. . . . We have learned that never again should our country


589 Ibid., 5.


591 Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 87. Oberdorfer suggests that Carter’s clear recollection of this “two decades later” indicates it “made a strong impression on Carter.”
became militarily involved in the internal affairs of another nation unless there is a direct and obvious threat to the security of the United States or its people.”

Reducing conventional forces on Korea to minimize conventional entanglement, however, raised the likelihood of a more troubling form of entanglement—the use of nuclear weapons. Like a localized version of President Eisenhower’s “New Look,” U.S. generals in Korea had become more reliant on the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons to halt a North Korean invasion after Nixon withdrew one of the two American infantry divisions there.

Although concerns about nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula smoldered in the mid-1970s as congressmen and even hawkish Secretary of Defense Schlesinger worried that some American nuclear weapons in that region were “not being properly protected” from the “possibility of theft, misappropriation or destruction,” a 1975 visit by DoD civilians revealed a significant disagreement between DoD civilians and military leaders regarding the planning for the defense of South Korea and the perceived possibility of an early use of nuclear weapons if conventional defense proved inadequate.

In February 1975 the commander of USFK, General Richard Stilwell, invited a delegation of DoD civilians to visit his forces in South Korea so he could make a stronger case

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for an air defense capability he preferred.\textsuperscript{594} The briefings that General Stilwell and Lt General James F. Hollingsworth (commander ROK/US I Corps) provided about the overall defense plan for South Korea, however, triggered nuclear entanglement concerns in their civilian guests that the generals had not anticipated. John Tillson of the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans described the briefings as “somewhat unsettling” partly because “General Stilwell indicated a disturbing willingness to use nuclear weapons” if conventional forces proved unable to stop a North Korean attack north of Seoul rather than pursuing a defense in depth strategy that ceded more territory in order to buy time to amass forces for a counteroffensive.\textsuperscript{595} Tillson’s report caught the attention of Mort Abramowitz, deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asian affairs, who expressed similar concerns to some members of the JCS.\textsuperscript{596}

The internal concerns about U.S. nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula spilled over into the public sphere in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon when Secretary of Defense Schlesinger publically acknowledged in the summer of 1975 the classified fact that the United States had nuclear weapons in South Korea, warning adversaries that the “use of tactical nuclear weapons . . . would be carefully considered” but that it would not be “wise” for the North Koreans “to test (American) reactions.”\textsuperscript{597} The ensuing media coverage contributed to a debate in which various congressmen weighed in publically and privately, such as Patricia Schroeder’s comments on a National Town Meeting television program that “U.S tactical nuclear weapons near the border of North and South Korea could trigger nuclear war in a conflict no longer worth


\textsuperscript{595} Memo, John Tillson to Mr. Sullivan thru Mr. Shaw, “Trip to Korea—10-21 February 1971,” 7 March 1975, Folder “Materials on Forward Defense of Korea,” Box 23, “Subject Files Military Exercises, Korean Defensive 1969-1976”, GRFL, 2, 5-7. Tillson reported that Stilwell’s “willingness was based on his appraisal that loss of Seoul would effectively mean the loss of the war. He argued that early nuclear release from Washington would be essential for success.”

\textsuperscript{596} Telegram, Lt Gen Elder (Dir J-5 OJCS) to Gen Stilwell, “Defense of Korea”, 17 April 1975.

a life and death struggle between the United States and the Russians.\(^{598}\)

The presence of U.S. nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and their intended use to halt a major conventional invasion by the North Koreans significantly complicated and amplified the issue of entanglement. Nervousness about the presence of the nuclear weapons in Korea was understandable and was present in both the Nixon and Ford administrations, not just Carter’s. As Representative Schroeder’s statement clearly shows, the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Korea directly engaged the NSC-68 concern that nuclear weapons put “a premium on piecemeal aggression against others, counting on [U.S.] unwillingness to engage in atomic war unless we are directly attacked.”\(^{599}\) Thus, Carter, Congresswoman Schroeder, and other like-minded officials who wanted nuclear weapons removed from the Korean peninsula were expressing the very reluctance to risk nuclear escalation over secondary interests that the authors of NSC-68 feared.

In fact, as Secretary of Defense Schlesinger cautioned in 1975, one could not reduce U.S. conventional capabilities significantly in South Korea without risking “a problem in which one has no alternatives but early recourse to nuclear weapons if one is to resist at all.”\(^{600}\) Thus, for example, if one lacked the resolve to commit to the use of nuclear weapons in defense of Korea but remained fully committed to the defense of South Korea, then one certainly should not further reduce the conventional deterrence present on the peninsula, as Secretary of


Defense Schlesinger explained.\footnote{Clever, ed., \textit{CINCPAC History, 1975.} 1:156).  CINCPAC reported that Schesinger stated that “reduction of our conventional capabilities [can create] a problem in which one has no alternatives but early recourse to nuclear weapons if one is to resist at all.”} If, however, one was revising the U.S. commitment to South Korea and felt reluctant to get conventional or nuclear forces entangled, then one should not only repurpose to reduce the likelihood of conventional entanglement but also remove U.S. nuclear weapons from Korea—which is precisely what Carter sought to do.\footnote{John Saar, “GIs Hit Carter’s S. Korea Pullout Plan,” \textit{Washington Post}, 6 November 1976; Memorandum for the Record, Brzezinski, “Meeting of the President, Secretary of State Vance, Ambassador Young, and Z. Brzezinski,” 29 January 1977, “Carter, Jimmy—Sensitive: [177-9/78]” folder, Box 21, Subject File: Carter, Billy through Carter, Jimmy—Sensitive, JCL; Memorandum of Conversation, “Secure Telephone Conversation with Secretary Harold Brown,” 26 January 1977, “Carter, Jimmy—Sensitive: [177-9/78]” folder, Box 21, Subject File: Carter, Billy through Carter, Jimmy—Sensitive, JCL.  Brzezinski suggested to the secretary of defense that “more secure deployment” might be an acceptable alternative to removal.  Although Carter vaguely stated during his campaign that he did not “foresee the possibility that we would use [tactical nuclear weapons] in a localized war that might erupt in South Korea.” (U.S. Congress, House Administration Committee, \textit{The Presidential Campaign, 1976}, Vol. 1, Parts 1 and 2 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), 1019-1020.), the evidence suggests he did not foresee it because he did not intend to retain tactical nuclear weapons on the peninsula.  This is consistent with Brian Auten’s analysis of Carter’s views on nuclear war and conclusion that Carter thought limited nuclear war was nearly impossible to keep from escalating (Auten, \textit{Carter’s Conversion}, 95).}

Everything else equal, the slight recession of the NSC-68 mindset in the face of détente and heightened concerns about human rights and disentanglement could have sufficiently reduced resistance to additional U.S. troop withdrawals from Korea to allow President Carter to achieve his policy aim once he assumed the presidency despite misgivings within his own administration.  Yet, as Carter attempted to move forward with the withdrawals, a resurgence of the NSC-68 mindset that had been brewing since Nixon and Kissinger attempted to reinterpret the Cold War interacted with the fall of Vietnam in 1975, various world events, and new intelligence reports to sap Carter’s political capital and ultimately trump the worries that supported withdrawal.

\textbf{Preexisting Headwinds Against Additional Withdrawals}

As mentioned earlier, there were two sets of broad lessons from Vietnam.  Just as events interacted with one set of lessons to create momentum in favor of withdrawal prior to Carter’s presidency, so too the second set of lessons interacted with various developments prior to Carter’s presidency.
to Carter’s presidency to create momentum against additional withdrawals. Indeed, the
evidence suggests that the momentum in favor of additional U.S. troop withdrawals from Korea
peaked even before Carter entered office. Thus, even though Nixon favored additional
withdrawals, neither he nor Ford thought that developing situations allowed them during the
remainder of their collective tenure. This momentum against withdrawal was subsequently
mobilized and added to during Carter’s administration. Foremost among the factors contributing
to the headwind against additional withdrawals was the situation in Vietnam.

Within Asia, the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam under the cover of the face-saving
January 1973 peace treaty had undermined U.S. credibility in Asia and, thus, worked against
arguments for more U.S. troop withdrawals from Korea. Because the South Koreans continued
to view the U.S. forces stationed in their country as “the single most important element in the
U.S. commitment,” senior civilian and military officials admitted that “the size and role of U.S.
forces in Korea [was] as much a political as a military problem.”603 As discussed in the
preceding chapter, the State Department continued to value U.S. forces in Korea as much for
their contribution to assuring an ally as for their effect on deterring an invasion by the North
Korean enemy. Furthermore, U.S. officials also understood that the PRC, the USSR, and
Japan did not desire “the precipitous or complete withdrawal of United States forces from
Korea.”604 Thus, as early as April 1973, the United States had informed the South Koreans that
there would “be no reduction of U.S. force levels in Korea through the end of FY1974” despite

603 Memorandum, Richard Sneider (Acting Chairman, Interdepartmental Group for East Asia and the Pacific) to Mr.
Sneider characterized the U.S. force as a “hostage, being positioned in a such a way that U.S. involvement in event
of hostilities was all but guaranteed.” See also: Memorandum, George S. Springsteen (DoS executive secretary) to
Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, “Issues Paper on Korea,” 19 October 1974, Folder "Korea (1)”, Box 3, “NSA Trip Briefing
Books and Cables, President Ford,” GRFL.

604 Memorandum, Richard Sneider (Acting Chairman, Interdepartmental Group for East Asia and the Pacific) to Mr.
(Annex F, p. 6)
“some tentative planning for reducing the remaining U.S. division to a brigade.” By October 1973, the State Department concluded that “a significant U.S. military presence will remain an essential element of our overall posture in East Asia” through “at least” 1978 and that “reductions should occur only in the context of decreasing tensions.” Otherwise, “precipitous and sizeable U.S. force reductions would be widely interpreted as a U.S. withdrawal from Asian affairs, and would erode confidence in U.S. commitments and staying power.” No withdrawals were advisable until U.S. officials had a better sense of the trajectory of world events after the United States exited the Vietnam War.

When South Vietnam finally fell in 1975, it not only appeared to confirm to withdrawal proponents the futility of getting entangled in some places around the globe, it also heightened ongoing concerns with the state of U.S. resolve that directly affected decisions about U.S. forces in Korea. For example, the fall of Vietnam was the final straw that ended a two-year effort by elements within the U.S. government to remove the remaining U.S. trip wire force on the DMZ in Korea, a single U.S. rifle company that remained behind to guard a 500 meter strip of the DMZ after Nixon removed the Seventh Infantry Division from its position along the DMZ. According to an OSD memo, the removal of the company had been approved around 1973 “but implementation ha[d] been repeatedly held up.” When the effort was renewed in

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605 Memorandum, Richard Sneider (Acting Chairman, Interdepartmental Group for East Asia and the Pacific) to Mr. Henry A. Kissinger, “NSSM 154- United States Policy concerning the Korean Peninsula”, 3 April 1973, DNSA, 5-6. Sneider characterized the U.S. force as a “hostage, being positioned in a such a way that U.S. involvement in event of hostilities was all but guaranteed.” See also: Memorandum, George S. Springsteen (DoS executive secretary) to Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, “Issues Paper on Korea,” 19 October 1974, Folder “Korea (1)”, Box 3, “NSA Trip Briefing Books and Cables, President Ford,” GRFL.


607 National Security Decision Memorandum 251, 29 March 1974, DNSA.


609 Memorandum, OSD (General Wickham) to The Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), “US Company on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ),” 19 February 1975, “Korea (6)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File-Far East, GRFL.
early 1975 and characterized as a “relatively minor matter,” members of the NSC staff objected to the move, suggesting that it was “more important” to the Department of Defense to appease a congressional desire “to reduce the risk of U.S. involvement in any renewed hostilities in Korea than to reduce the [actual likelihood] of renewed hostilities there.”\(^6\) The NSC assessment of Congress’s mood seemed accurate given that Senator Sam A. Nunn, during his visit to South Korea that same month, repeatedly told the commander of USFK, General Richard G. Stilwell, that “Congress had to be convinced that [the United States] wouldn’t be inadvertently drawn into a war” in Korea.\(^6\) Despite the NSC objection, approval of the company’s withdrawal seemed imminent until the collapse of South Vietnam later that same month so heightened U.S. officials’ concerns about American credibility in the region that the White House directed on 30 April 1975 “that, until further notice, there will be no withdrawal of U.S. forces from overseas areas without express approval of the president.”\(^6\) The halt of the withdrawal of a U.S. Army company of just some one hundred men was emblematic of the influence the Vietnam War and the subsequent collapse of South Vietnam had on the debate over the broader U.S. deterrence posture in East Asia, especially the tension between offering credible extended deterrence and getting entangled.

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\(^6\) Memorandum, OSD (General Wickham) to The Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Scowcroft), “US Company on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ),” 19 February 1975, “Korea (6)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File-Far East, GRFL; Memorandum, W.R. Smyser and Clinton E. Granger (NSC) to Secretary Kissinger, “Wrong Signals to Pyongyang,” 29 January 1975, “Korea (2)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File, Far East, GRFL, 3. They assessed that the DoD was agreeing to withdraw forces from South Korea “as a means of coping with [the administration’s] problems with the Congress.” See also: Memorandum, W. R. Smyser (NSC) to General Scowcroft (NSA), “U.S. Company in the Korean DMZ,” 20 February 1975, “Korea (3)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File-Far East, GRFL; Memorandum, Smyser and Granger to Secretary Kissinger, “Proposed Changes in Deployment Structure of U.S. Forces in South Korea,” 18 April 1975, “Korea (6)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL, emphasis added.


The fall of South Vietnam to the communist north gave pause to thoughtful observers across the political spectrum. The *New York Times* observed in May 1975 that “after Vietnam, pressure that had been building up in Congress to begin the withdrawal of forces from South Korea seems to be abating” even among “the more outspoken, younger liberals.” They predicted however, that this abatement would be temporary and “a Congressional test” might come in 1976 “on whether the United States wasn’t to maintain a sizable military presence in South Korea.”613 Two days after the article was published, the U.S. House of Representatives voted 311 to 95 against U.S. military strength reductions overseas.614

Maintaining the impression of resolve in South Korea remained on the minds of senior U.S. leaders in South Korea in the wake of Vietnam. The Commander of I Corps, Lt. General James F. Hollingsworth, reported that he thought U.S. “non-intervention” during the final days of the South Vietnam regime had led key officials in South Korea to “firmly believe that they could be caught in the same situation.”615 Similarly, Ambassador Richard L. Sneider observed that President Park had “gone considerable distance toward discounting” the United States. Sneider and General Stilwell shared Park’s concern “about the possibility of a North Korean military effort, aimed to test both the [South Korean] and United States’ reaction ... although not in the exaggerated terms held by the Korean leadership.”616 A couple months later, Sneider argued that U.S. policy was “too ambiguous and short-term, applied incrementally, usually in a reactive fashion with the long-term goals left to an uncertain future” and stuck in an increasingly outdated


614 CINCPAC History, 1975, II:572.


616 Telegram, AmEmbassy Seoul (Sneider) to SecState, “Vietnam Reaction,” 9 April 1975, “Korea-State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE-NODIS (5)” folder, Box 11, NSA Presidential Country File-Far East, GRFL. See also: MemCon, August 26, 1975, Minister Suh’s Office, “Korea (11)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL, 2; Telegram, Sneider to SecState, 29 April 1975, “Korea – State Department Telegrams To SECSTATE – NODIS (5)” folder, Box 11, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL.
“client state philosophy.” “These uncertainties” likely justified to Park his “internal repression” and “induce[d] optimism on the part of North Korea about our withdrawal and doubts in Japan about our credibility and about the future of Korea.”

With the specter of bandwagoning and realignment in the air, Ford and Kissinger went through pains to convey to allies and adversaries that there was no “slackening” of U.S. “resolve to meet our commitments or to respond to challenges.” Additionally, some of Kissinger’s advisors warned that the outcome in Vietnam must not “escalate into such a national trauma that the result will be a total paralysis of policy-making.” They even advocated a reapplication of domino thinking when they stated the United States must demonstrate by its reactions “to minor issues as well as major ones” that it was “not in headlong retreat.” With these concerns in mind, the United States redoubled its efforts to assure its Asian allies.

In the remainder of 1975, Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller met with the South Korean foreign minister during the funeral ceremonies of Chiang Kai-Shek and the American secretary of defense, secretary of state, and president all made successive visits to Seoul. They consistently conveyed the message that the United States had “no plans to alter its force deployments in the Republic of Korea.” Secretary Schlesinger—showing the independence from and disagreement with key U.S. foreign policy positions that contributed to his firing just two months later—even went beyond official guidance to suggest that there would be “no basic


changes” in the level of U.S. forces in Korea “over the next five years” and went beyond the assurances provided by any previous high U.S. officials in stating that there was “no question” in his mind that the U.S. reaction to “major aggression” by the North Koreans “would be immediate.”

The pushback against the perception of slackening resolve can also be observed in the military’s resistance to nuclear withdrawal from Korea. This additional precursor headwind presaged how resistance would crystalize around making an unambiguous commitment to Korea. When the intensified concern about the use of nuclear weapons to stop a major North Korean invasion was brought to the attention of senior military officials in the mid-1970s, they reacted logically according to the assumptions of the NSC-68 mindset regarding commitments. They worried that “experienced [military] staff” were being second-guessed by “ill-informed and militarily unlettered civilian bureaucrats” who were contributing to a “kind of internal erosion of our commitments and defeatism about them.” The JCS feared that if U.S. nuclear weapons were removed from South Korea, then “the army mission of deterring conventional and nuclear attacks against ground forces of the U.S. and its principal allies would be greatly diminished, and the overall national deterrent posture would be seriously weakened.” After all, if the commitment to robustly defend South Korea was indeed firm, then one could not simultaneously reduce conventional forces and not be prepared to use tactical nuclear weapons to offset the

621 MemCon, President Park’s Office, August 27, 1975, “Korea (11)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL, 2; MemCon, August 26, 1975, Minister Suh’s Office, “Korea (11)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL, 3. See also: Memorandum, Thomas J. Barnes to General Scowcroft, “Secretary Schlesinger’s Discussions in Seoul,” 29 September 1975, “Korea (12)” folder, Box 9, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL.

622 For “ill-informed,” see: Telegram, Gen Stilwell to VADM Train, JCS Dir of Staff, 30 May 1975, “Outgoing Messages (backchannel), April-June 1975” folder, Box 16, Richard G. Stilwell papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute 2, 7. For “internal erosion,” see: Telegram, Lt Gen Elder (Dir J-5 OJCS) to Gen Stilwell, “Defense of Korea”, 17 April 1975, “Incoming Messages (backchannel), April-June 1975 folder, Box 16 “Incoming and Outgoing Back Channel Messages, Jan-Jun,” Richard G. Stilwell papers, U.S. Army Military History Institute, 2. Stilwell added that these officials had “undertaken to interpret our work to the Washington community and raise all sorts of alarms” when they “simply [didn’t] know what they [were] talking about.”

reduced conventional capability.

The presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Korea directly engaged the NSC-68 concern that the risk of nuclear war would reduce U.S. resolve as it did for Carter, Congressmen Schroeder, and other like-minded officials who wanted the weapons removed from the peninsula. In essence, if doubts existed about U.S. resolve to use the nuclear weapons, then deterrence was undermined if they remained. To senior military officers, however, the preferred remedy was to remove the doubts rather than the weapons. After all, if there was little doubt that they would be used, then deterrence was enhanced because the willingness to run the risk of nuclear escalation presumably more unambiguously communicated resolve while simultaneously increasing capability, thereby bolstering the credibility of the deterrent in both its resolve and capability components to such a degree that U.S. leaders would likely never need to use the weapons. Paradoxically, one could allay most of the fear of using nuclear weapons by committing to do what the very thing one feared. Both arguments were correct depending on how U.S. officials thought their adversaries perceived U.S. resolve. Given intelligence reports about how Kim Il Sung apparently feared the U.S. nuclear weapons, it appears that Carter’s opponents had the stronger case in this matter provided the United States could continue to project the resolve to use the weapons.\(^{624}\)

The director of strategic planning for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lt. General John H. Elder, Jr. clearly expressed frustration with the emerging lack of resolve to use nuclear weapons in South Korea’s defense when he told a deputy assistant secretary of defense, Morton I. Abramowitz, that the U.S. nuclear plans for tactical nuclear weapons were “not a proper matter for OSD concern” and that doubts about their use suggested that the United States’ agreement to defend South Korea was qualified by the phrase “unless the use of nuclear weapons should

\(^{624}\) Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessment Center, "North Korean Strategy and Tactics: An Appraisal," April 1978, NLC-4-39-1-8-6, JCL.
be required.”

Lt. General Elder cabled the commander of USFK, that he responded forcefully, explaining “if that was the interpretation that responsible, repeat responsible people in the executive branch took, this was a political question which needed to be worked out with the Koreans and reflected in the guidance to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, in turn, [the commander of USFK].” That Elder thought the plans affecting the first use of nuclear weapons were not a concern for the civilians in OSD seems hard to fathom unless one accepts the assumption that the commitment to South Korea was presently unconditional. The USFK force commander related the potentially dire consequences of being uncommitted to a robust nuclear defense of South Korea, writing that the government’s unwillingness to “use nuclear weapons to save Seoul . . . would be sacrificing the six million people of Seoul” and the “loss of Seoul would effectively mean the loss of the war.” In light of this logic, General Elder’s subsequent comment was spot on—if the civilian leadership was exhibiting a change in the U.S. resolve to use tactical nuclear weapons in Korea, the decision would have significant implications for deterrence credibility in Korea and needed to be communicated down the chain of command. Furthermore, having words not match plans and actions could lead adversaries to think that the United States was bluffing and seriously undermine the credibility of the nuclear deterrent in other conflicts and standoffs.

The downslide of American prestige and credibility over the years that Vietnam unraveled played out not only between the United States and individual allies but also on the world stage at the United Nations. The fact that the North Koreans sought to exploit this situation in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to remove the UN justification for U.S. nuclear force.

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troops in South Korea created another argument against withdrawal in the years just prior to Carter's presidency. Every year since 1954, the UNGA passed resolutions regarding the United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK) annual report about the "problem of the independence of Korea," which was known informally within the United Nations as the "Korean Question." Early on, UNGA resolutions reaffirmed the objective of establishing a unified, independent, and democratic Korea; confirmed that UN forces could be withdrawn when those conditions were met; and granted the South Koreans but not the North Koreans the prestige and implicit legitimacy to observe the Korean Question debates. The decolonization in the 1960s, however, created an influx of "Third World" countries hostile to "Western" hegemony. Consequently, previously lopsided votes in support of the Western resolutions on Korea became more closely contested. From the U.S. perspective, unilateral troop withdrawals by the United States while the North Koreans were pushing for a similar result in the United Nation would potentially look like a concession to communist-led international pressure and diminish U.S. prestige.

Kissinger and other U.S. officials viewed prestige as a commodity worth defending. Thus, the administration expended "considerable amounts of money and manpower" to keep

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628 Pak, 9.

629 Unsurprisingly, the Soviet Union and North Korea opposed the United Nations' involvement in the Korean Question. They sought the dissolution of UNCURK, the removal of UN military forces on the peninsula, and the dissolution of the multinational United Nations Command (UNC) that was headed by the top American general in Korea and exercised operational control over the majority of South Korean military forces in upholding the armistice agreement and defending South Korea from attack by the North (Pak, 10-18). See also, "Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, September 28, 1971, 5:30 p.m." in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 283.


631 "Prestige" is the respect and admiration that a state receives from others for possessing or appearing to possess a variety of attributes that are even more variously defined in scholarly literature than those contributing to "credibility" (which is itself a component of prestige).
the most damaging UNGA initiatives at bay even though they acknowledged the need to make careful concessions as the tide continued to rise against their position on the “Korean Question.” In late 1969, U.S. officials were already anticipating the gradual erosion of South Korea’s favorable balance of influence in the General Assembly and viewed South Korean efforts to isolate North Korea diplomatically as “a losing battle” and an “unproductive” use of resources. Over the next couple years, they conceded that it would be increasingly difficult to maintain UNCURK and acknowledged that it had “no real value anymore.” Nonetheless, U.S. officials desired to limit the erosion of the UN position on the Korean peninsula and did not want any significant changes to the status quo until after the U.S. presidential election in November 1972. To that end, Kissinger offered to the Chinese ambassador that if they “avoided a debate in the UN” in 1972, then the United States “would use [its] influence to bring about a dismantling of UNCURK.” In 1973, UNCURK was dissolved as agreed.

In contrast to their amenability on dissolving UNCURK, the United States and its allies viewed the North Korean effort to obtain a favorable vote on the dissolution of the United Nations’ military command (UNC) in Korea as an undesirable attempt to remove “the UN cloak from [the U.S.] military presence in South Korea.” Nonetheless, as the tide continued to turn...

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636 MemCon, HAK and Ambassador Huang Hua, 26 July 1972, DNSA. For other sources on the U.S. position on UNCURK, see for example: MemCon HAK and Huang Hua, PRC ambassador to the United Nations, 4 August 1972 (DNSA); “Memorandum From the Acting Executive Secretary of the Department of State (Miller) to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, July 3, 1972” in FRUS, Korea, 1969-1972, 366-368.

against the South Koreans in the UNGA, South Korea and the United States expressed their willingness in 1974 to entertain the UNC dissolution by January 1976 as long as an alternative to the Armistice Agreement was agreed upon.\textsuperscript{638} CINCPAC, however, was more cautious and advised that “the US should use all its political resources (including the power of veto in the UN Security Council) to insure the continuation of the UNC” until the details and implications had been fully evaluated.\textsuperscript{639} Furthermore, he cautioned that the United States be “prepared to accept [significant politico-military] changes, without actively advocating them” so that the dissolution of the UNC would be more likely to be viewed as “directly related to a bipolar confrontation which has been redefined over time” rather than a change in U.S. resolve.\textsuperscript{640} In other words, CINCPAC wisely wanted the UNC dissolution to be attributed to a change in the situation and not to a change in the U.S. disposition.

By 1975, North Korea had accumulated more influence while that of the United States continued to dissipate. Thus, despite “enormous efforts, including very substantial costs in diplomatic capital and credibility” and “strong arm-twisting” of various smaller states by Kissinger and the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, the Cold War Korean debate culminated in 1975 with a partial victory for North Korea when the General Assembly passed, for the first time in twenty-seven years, the North Korean resolution that included a call for the dissolution of the UNC and the withdrawal of all foreign troops.\textsuperscript{641} The United States viewed the latter condition as intolerable and would have faced the embarrassment of exercising its veto if the North


\textsuperscript{639} Carl O. Clever, ed., \textit{Commander in Chief Pacific Command History, 1972} (Camp Smith, Hawaii: HQ CINCPAC, 1973) 1:48. (hereinafter, Clever, ed., \textit{CINCPAC History, 1972}). Australia and other member states desired continued adherence to the Armistice Agreement. More than 60 years after the signing of the Korean Armistice agreement in July 1953, the UNC is still in place upholding the Armistice.

\textsuperscript{640} Clever, ed., \textit{CINCPAC History, 1972}, 1:137.

\textsuperscript{641} Telegram, Ambassador Scali (UN) to Secretary Kissinger, “Korea and Khmer,” 15 January 1975, “People’s Republic of China – Korea (1)” folder, Box 8, NSA NSC East Asian and Pacific Staff Files, GRFL, 1-2.
Korean resolution reached the Security Council. Fortunately, the General Assembly also simultaneously adopted a conflicting Western resolution that maintained the Armistice and “devis[ed] an alternative arrangement for the dissolution of UNC.” The 1975 vote was the high-water mark of North Korean influence in the United Nations until both North Korea and South Korea were formally admitted to the United Nations in 1991.

The 1970s UN debate about the Korean Question serves as a useful indicator of the state of U.S. prestige and credibility at the time, and Washington’s influence relative to the communist powers. Interestingly, the United States was willing to expend considerable time and resources to protect a façade of prestige within the United Nations even as its influence over individual countries continued to erode. But in the larger picture of maintaining a credible extended deterrence posture where intangible perceptions of resolve mattered, perceptions of prestige might have mattered too. U.S. officials did not expect the effect of Vietnam on U.S. credibility and prestige to be necessarily long-lasting. Thus, costly efforts in the United Nations and elsewhere to stem its erosive effect and curb its momentum might have hastened the recovery of at least some U.S. credibility and prestige or at least disrupted the possibility of a snowballing decline.

Concerns about the perceived decline of American prestige, capability, and resolve that were reflected in other American policies also indirectly undermined momentum for additional troop withdrawals in Korea. Indeed, Nixon’s “doctrine” and his policy of détente were seen by many as an “aberration” in U.S. foreign policy that indicated American weakness rather than

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642 The U.S. had already used it veto that same year to deny UN membership to North and South Vietnam because South Korea had not simultaneously been offered membership.

643 Pak, 18-20.

644 Note: credibility is a subcomponent of prestige that can theoretically remain untouched even when overall prestige drops due to the diminishment of its other components. The U.S. desire to maintain prestige within the UN may be a fruitful area for future study.
diplomatic savvy. As Kissinger noted in an interview with Time magazine in October 1975, some Americans viewed détente as “a favor” the United States granted to the Soviet Union, but to Kissinger, détente was an indispensable strategy because the world had changed and the United States was “no longer predominant.” If a shift in the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union was indeed occurring, the United States could attempt to adapt to it via policies like détente or it could make greater sacrifices and expend greater effort to maintain its superiority. Regardless of whether “the détente debate suffer[ed] from a number of misconceptions and oversimplifications” as Kissinger complained, the traditional NSC-68 mindset could not allow adaptation because it assumed the Soviets were an aggressive, expansionist power that would exploit weakness and, in essence, the Nixon-Kissinger containment strategy “was an admission of American weakness.” Thus, to détente’s critics in the United States and abroad, détente sounded like a French word for appeasement or defeatism. Projecting weakness was intolerable to the NSC-68 mindset and was at odds with American masculinity and patriotism. To some opponents of détente, those who were allegedly “opposed to a strong military force” acted “out of ignorance or cowardice or malice” and “flinch[ed] from the possibility of confronting malevolent, violent people.”

Unsurprisingly, resistance to détente rapidly grew. The Committee on the Present Danger was emblematic of this resistance and its relationship to the NSC-68 mindset. Although the magnitude of the influence of the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD) is still disputed, its resistance to détente and other policies of perceived weakness illustrates how its wellspring, the traditional NSC-68 mindset, eventually interacted with Carter’s troop withdrawal initiative.

The CPD was founded to return the United States containment strategy to the robust, expansive version that predated the Vietnam War. Interestingly, the main author of NSC-68, Paul Nitze, was one of the founding members of the Committee. Even President Ford’s own secretary of defense was closely associated with the CPD and was so outspoken against détente that Ford saw fit to fire him. Secretary Schlesinger’s farewell address in November 1975 expressed the perceived direness of the situation in which declining American “military power” would “inevitably bring a drastic and unwelcome alteration to the preferred way of life in the United States and among our allies.” The Committee tapped into widespread American frustrations and channeled them into a promise of resurgent American power.

In some respects, American military weakness was, as Schlesinger explained, “a matter of simple arithmetic.” As described in Chapter 4, budget cuts were already cutting deep at the time of Nixon’s withdrawal of forces in 1971. The severe belt-tightening imposed on the DoD by a Congress reticent to sustain military funding was further exacerbated by the erosion of the dollar by the double digit inflation of 1974 and early 1975. From 1973 through 1979, for instance, military pay consistently lagged behind inflation so that by 1979 the purchasing power of the military salary was 18 percent less than it was in 1972. Similarly, the military assessed six of its ten Army divisions stationed in the United States as “not combat ready.”

The concerns about material deficiencies in U.S. military forces were accompanied by concerns about the quality and cost of American military recruits after Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird implemented the All-Volunteer Force (AVF) in July 1973. Most senior military leaders opposed adoption because they feared the quality and morale would drop while their

cost increased. President Ronald Reagan’s assistant secretary of defense (manpower, reserve affairs, installations, and logistics), Lawrence J. Korb, described the AVF at the end of the Carter administration as “undermanned” with “recruit quality in terms of test scores and educational levels” at “all-time lows” (e.g., 54 percent of Army recruits had a high school diploma, well below the Army’s Vietnam-era level of 77 percent) while “morale had plummeted.” Furthermore, senior officers wondered if using market forces to recruit soldiers would enervate the fighting spirit of the forces. The negative trend in the actual and perceived capability of the U.S. military in the Ford and Carter years came to be described in the early 1980s as a “hollow force.” Even American masculinity itself appeared to be in crisis. Given the evolving zeitgeist, a president who desired to weaken containment in Korea would have a hard time selling the idea to an increasing number of Americans who embraced the desire for their country to reassert greatness again.

While a wide array of Americans worried about national weakness, administration officials argued that internal instability in both the United States and South Korea was yet another reason to maintain U.S. forces at the status quo levels in Korea. In Washington, domestic political pressure on Nixon increased when the Senate Watergate committee was convened in May 1973 and culminated on 8 August 1974, when President Nixon resigned in disgrace. In the wake of the unprecedented power transition in the United States, U.S. forces

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worldwide temporarily went to a higher state of alert to convey readiness and resolve to fight despite the political turbulence at home, and urgent telegrams containing reassurances were sent to various key world leaders including a message for President Park from President Ford saying that Ford was “fully committed to honoring all the international understandings reached by the United States in its relations with [South Korea].”

Meanwhile, key U.S. officials in the executive branch were growing more concerned about South Korea’s internal stability as President Park faced increasingly potent domestic opposition to his authoritarian rule and human rights violations. Although withdrawal advocates argued that Park’s increasing authoritarianism should encourage the United States to disengage more from Korea, the mounting internal resistance to Park’s rule suggested that a withdrawal might be further destabilizing. Then on 15 August 1974, exactly one week after Nixon’s resignation and just weeks after Kissinger had been briefed that Japanese officials were concerned that the North Koreans might seek to exploit the strains in the Japanese-Korean relationship and Park’s “fragile domestic position,” the U.S.-Japanese-Korean security triangle was further destabilized when a South Korean residing in Japan killed President Park’s wife in Seoul with a bullet meant for her husband.

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658 Flash Telegram, Henry Kissinger to Ambassador Habib, “Presidential Message,” 9 August 1974, “Korea-State Department Telegrams From SECSTATE – EXDIS,” Box 11, NSA Presidential Country Files-Far East, GRFL. See also, for example: Meeting with Japanese Ambassador Yasukawa, Secret, Memorandum of Conversation, 9 August 1974, DNSA.

659 See for example: Proceedings, Secretary’s Staff Meeting, 25 January 1974, DNSA, 8


661 “Issues/Talking Points: Korean Peninsula”, November 1974, DNSA; MemCon, “Foreign Minister Toshio Kimura Call on The Secretary,” 27 September 1974, DNSA. According to the Japanese Foreign Minister about 620,000 Koreans resided in Japan at the time of the assassination; 60 percent from North Korea and 40 percent from South Korea. Minister Kimura commented, “It is as if we have our own 38th parallel in Japan…Those from North Korea are definitely loyal to the regime in North Korea…Of the South Koreans in Japan, perhaps 60 percent are loyal to the ROK, and 40 percent to the North Koreans.”
The assassination attempt and tragic death of Park’s wife quelled talk of changes in U.S. forces in Korea and garnered for Park what he had been unable to obtain for three years—a personal meeting with the president of the United States. As Kissinger explained to President Ford, Park had been seeking such a meeting since “late 1971 on the eve of [Nixon’s] China trip . . . to get assurances on basic U.S. intentions.” Two subsequent “tentative plans” for a meeting “fell through when Park tightened political controls at home shortly before the contemplated dates for the visits.” Given that the Nixon administration had already initiated the planning for the first ever U.S. presidential trip to Japan for later that year, it was not hard to add a stop in South Korea even though Kissinger was not keen on the attention it would bring to the human rights debate in the United States. As Kissinger’s executive secretary explained to National Security Advisor Lt. General Brent Scowcroft, “the visit provides a timely opportunity for a forceful reiteration of the American commitment to the security and welfare of the Korean people.” He cautioned, however, that “demonstrat[ing] these convictions against a background of internal dissention in Korea and increasing American public concern over Park’s disregard for human rights [would] not be easy.” Despite these concerns, the trip turned out to be a general success for both presidents.

Ford received a warm welcome from the estimated two million cheering South Koreans who lined his route from the airport to the center of Seoul, and President Ford gave Park a more satisfying reassurance than President Nixon had been willing to offer when Park met with him in

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663 Memorandum of Conversation, Ambassador Yasukawa and Secretary Kissinger, 19 July 1974, DNSA; Telecon, “Ambassador Drobynin/Secretary Kissinger,” 26 August 1974, DNSA, 2; Telecon, Mr. Hummel and Secretary Kissinger, 7 September 1974, DNSA; Telecon, Ambassador Habib and Secretary Kissinger, 9 September 1974, DNSA. The idea of adding a stop in South Korea appears to have arisen only around 7 September 1974.

California in 1969. In their joint communiqué, Ford reverted to the stronger, more unambiguous commitment expressed during the Johnson administration. He updated Nixon’s earlier vague promise “to meet armed attack against the Republic of Korea in accordance with the Mutual Defense Treaty between the Republic of Korea and the United States” with Johnson’s previous promise of “prompt and effective assistance to repel armed attack,” and “assured President Park that the United States has no plan to reduce the present level of United States forces in Korea.” Although that statement may have been true at the time, the push for withdrawal still was not completely off the table.

Unsurprisingly, Kim Il Sung’s provocations also influenced the thinking about withdrawal in the years just prior to Carter’s presidency, but in both directions. In public, President Ford was unambiguous about his commitment to keep U.S. troops in South Korea and he used Carter’s contrary position on Korea during the presidential election campaign to paint him as naïve and lacking nuance. When, for example, he was asked in May 1976 for his views on Carter’s call for the gradual withdrawal of troops and atomic weapons from Korea, Ford responded that Carter’s judgment on this was “not a very solid one” and lacked the benefit of “detailed briefings and the detailed recommendations of our top military leaders.” Those briefings likely included a number of troubling developments in North Korea that seemed to indicate Kim Il Sung’s resolve to reunite the two Koreas might have been greater than anticipated. In November 1974 and again in March 1975, infiltration tunnels capable of passing

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a substantial volume of troops and equipment below the DMZ had been discovered in South Korean territory. At the time, USFK suspected that there may have been as many as eleven more tunnels yet undiscovered. Then in April 1975, Kim Il Sung visited Peking for the first time since 1961 and issued an unusually provocative statement about forcibly reuniting the two Koreas. American observers warned that “Kim Il-Sung’s track record for adventurism in [the] past [gave] no room for complacency,” but they also noted that the PRC made a “rather extraordinary demonstration of [its] desire to indicate publicly that it ha[d] not encouraged any precipitous action by Kim.” The mixed messages tended to be interpreted according to individuals’ confirmation bias. Military officers tasked with the defense of South Korea were alert to the possibility that their deterrence efficacy was eroding while those most concerned about the uncontrolled escalation of provocations looked for ways to reduce its likelihood.

The dual concerns came through clearly in the aftermath of the “tree cutting” incident in August 1976, when North Korean forces attacked a UN team that was pruning a tree in the DMZ to improve their observation post’s field of view. Two American officers attached to the UN unit were bludgeoned to death. Although intelligence reports conflicted as to whether the attack was authorized at a high level, Kissinger and senior military officers interpreted it as a result of weakening U.S. credibility and a reputation for irresolution resulting from the tepid responses to the seizure of the USS Pueblo in 1968 and the downing on the EC-121 in 1969. They

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669 Telegram, USLO Peking (Holdridge) to SecState, “Kim Il Sung banquet speech,” 19 April 1975, “People’s Republic of China – Korea (3)” folder, Box 9, NSA NSC East Asian and Pacific Staff Files, GRFL. See also: Telegram, Sneider to SecState, “Kim Il-Sung visit to Peking,” 21 April 1975, “People’s Republic of China – Korea (3)” folder, Box 9, NSA NSC East Asian and Pacific Staff Files, GRFL.

670 Telegram, Sneider to SecState, “Visit of Kim Il-Sung to Peking”, 17 April 1975, “Korea-State Department Telegrams to SECSTATE-NODIS (5)” folder, Box 11, NSA Presidential Country File-Far East, GRFL; Telegram, Am Consul Hong Kong (Cross) to SecState, “Ta Kung Pao on Kim Il-Sung Visit,” 29 April 1975, “People’s Republic of China – Korea (3)” folder, Box 9, NSA NSC East Asian and Pacific Staff Files, GRFL.

671 Assessment of National Foreign Intelligence Production Vol 2, 1 December 1976, NLC-17-138-4-5-2, JCL, 17; DDCI Briefing for 18 August WSAG Meeting, “North Korea,” 18 August 1976, “Korea-North Korean Tree Incident, 8/18/76 (1)” folder, Box 10, NSA Presidential Country File – Far East, GRFL. For “tepid” see, for example: Singlaub, 371.
insisted on a firm demonstration of resolve. Kissinger put forces on DEFCON 3 and invoked his “madman” theory, stating “[i]t will be useful for us to generate enough activity so that the North Koreans begin to wonder what those crazy American bastards are doing or are capable of doing in this election year.”672 Accompanied by a massive show of force under the aptly named Operation Paul Bunyan, another UN team returned to the tree that had been pruned and cut it down entirely. The Commander of U.S. Forces Korea, General Richard Stilwell, concluded, “it was the immediate availability of the Second Division that enabled the United States to react with dispatch and with restraint to reassert its rights, redeem its honor, and, in the end, strengthen deterrence.”673 True or not, the strong response undoubtedly helped curb the possibility of a dispositional attribution of irresolution.

The escalation that occurred over the tree cutting incident, however, also may have renewed President Ford’s concerns about entanglement, and rightfully so. According the USFK chief of staff at the time, Maj. General John Singlaub, General Stilwell deliberately kept the White House out of the planning process for as long as possible. USFK gave the National Command Authority just a little over thirty-one hours to scrutinize a plan that in Singlaub’s supportive view risked a 50 percent chance of starting a major war primarily to defend U.S. honor and demonstrate U.S. resolve.674 The benefit of running such a high risk was far from indisputable. It is not surprising and likely not coincidental, then, that just a month after the incident, NSSM 246 initiated a review of the “national defense policy and military posture” that, inter alia, sought to hedge U.S. bets in Korea. It asked the DoD to “examine the extent to which

674 Singlaub, 373-374, 376.
forward deployments of military forces are necessary to support U.S. interests and tasked the State Department to examine “whether [the United States] can maintain [its] support of Korea while reducing U.S. vulnerability to events there.” Thus, although a variety of headwinds were working against additional withdrawals, the executive branch was once again primed to address entanglement concerns just prior to Carter’s election.

In sum, events that increased uncertainty in the first half of 1970s derailed Nixon’s original plan for an eventual withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces that he had initiated with the withdrawal and deactivation of the Seventh Infantry Division. Instead, the instability and the erosion of U.S. credibility and prestige caused by domestic and world events in 1973 and 1974 prompted the Nixon-Ford administration to minimize changes to the status quo on the Korean peninsula at least through fiscal year 1975 despite a domestic American sentiment to retrench and increasing American outrage with Park’s human rights violations.

President Carter’s Attempt to Withdraw More U.S. Forces from Korea

After his inauguration, President Carter wasted no time putting into motion his U.S. troop withdrawal plan, which had been identified by his transition team as one of the top fifteen foreign policy initiatives that Carter’s National Security Council (NSC) would pursue. The advisors who favored withdrawal understood the purpose of the trip-wire deterrent but its value was overridden by the risk that a country that was not “vital” to U.S. national interests could get the United States automatically drawn into another “land war in Asia that would tear this country

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On 29 January 1977, Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, issued Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM) 13, which directed that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance lead a review of U.S. “policies toward the Korean Peninsula.” Vance—who had raised the alarm about entanglement to President Johnson nearly a decade earlier after the Blue House raid in 1968—was now tasked to lead an implicitly anti-entanglement effort to “[examine] possible courses of action for dealing with … (a) [r]eductions in U.S. conventional force levels on the peninsula;” and “(b) [s]outhward deployment within Korea of U.S. forces.” The southward troop (re)deployment particularly reveals Carter’s entanglement concerns because relocating those forces would do little if anything to contribute to any objectives (e.g., cost reduction, human rights, or reducing US forces abroad) other than reducing the trip wire effect.679 The next month, the PRM-10 Force Posture Report presented worldwide military force posture options for the president in light of the dominant threat from the Soviet Union and other possible regional conflicts. Interestingly, the report characterized the overall U.S. position in East Asia

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678 The Carter administration’s classified internal study, “PRM/NSC-10 Military Strategy and Force Posture Review – Final Report,” indicated that protecting Europe and Japan were vital interests, but no mention was made of South Korea as a vital interest. (PRM-10 Comprehensive Net Assessment and Military Force Posture Review, 18 Feb 1977, http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm10.pdf, JCL, 8). This formal assessment also corresponds to the view of one of Carter’s advisors, retired admiral Gene R. LaRocque, who recalled telling Carter that “[o]n a scale of importance to us, I’d put Korea about 1 and the Middle east (sic) and Europe about 10.” (Don Oberdorfer, “Carter's Decision on Korea Traced to Early 1975,” Washington Post, 12 June 1977). Furthermore, a Brookings Institute senior fellow recalled telling Carter that “the most important reason” to remove ground forces “was avoid (sic) getting the U.S. involved with ground forces almost automatically in a new war.” Adm. (ret.) LaRocque recalled expressing concern that ill-considered actions by either North Korea or South Korea “could get us involved in a land war in Asia and it would tear this country apart.” (quoted in Don Oberdorfer, “Carter's Decision on Korea Traced to Early 1975,” Washington Post, 12 Jun, 1977). Additionally, Ambassador Gleysteen, observed that when he was still a member of the National Security Council, the most common argument he heard “for reducing American forces [in Korea]” came “from people overreacting to our experience in Vietnam.” (Gleysteen, Massive Entanglement, 17-18). Lastly, an unnamed official allegedly stated that with the troop withdrawal “[President Carter] will not be forced into committing ground troops without the support of the Congress and the public.” (Wood and Zelikow, 7).

679 PRM-13, Korea, 26 Jan 1977, http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/prmemorandums/prm13.pdf, JCL, 1-2. Although the PRM-13 also tasks the officials to look into “(d) Future U.S. military assistance levels for the ROK; (e) ROK nuclear intentions and efforts to acquire access to advance missile technology; (f) Diplomatic initiatives to reduce tensions on the peninsula; (g) U.S. relations with North Korea;” and “(h) The human rights problem in Korea.”, none of these except item (h) could be argued as eclipsing the avoidance of the "trip wire" effect as the primary reason for troop withdrawal. Item “d” was designed to enable the safe withdrawal of US troop by compensating their absence with increases and improvements to South Korea’s military forces. Concerns over ROK nuclear intentions (item “e”) would suggest that US troops should remain in Korea to provide greater US deterrence to reduced South Korea’s perceived need to acquire nuclear weapons as an additional deterrent. The diplomacy of items “f” and “g” are consistent with all possible motivations for withdrawing troops and doesn’t favor one motivation over another. Item “h” has already been argued above.
(which focused heavily on Japan, moderately on Korea, and to a lesser extent on Thailand and Taiwan) as currently “moving towards an offshore military posture which avoids automatic involvement in regional hostilities.” Reporters who allegedly received insider knowledge relayed that the intent was to transform the U.S. “presence in Asia from a land-based posture to an off-shore posture” to reduce “the risk of automatic involvement.”

In May 1977, Carter authorized his planned troop withdrawal by signing PD-12, which directed that the “U.S. 2nd Division and supporting elements shall be gradually withdrawn from Korea.” Like Nixon and Ford before him, Carter intended the Second Division to be redeployed to U.S. soil to serve as a “reserve force.” Two of the three brigades of the Second Division were to be withdrawn “no later than the end of June 1980.” Although PD-12 stated that Carter would “determine at a later date the timing for the completion of ground force withdrawals . . . following consultations with key Congressional leaders and the governments of South Korea and Japan,” it gave every indication that Carter still intended to withdraw those remaining troops eventually. For the next two and half years, Carter stuck to his plan tenaciously despite increasing opposition in his Cabinet, the Congress, and the U.S. military.

According to Carter’s secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, “almost all” of Carter’s executive branch advisors “had serious misgivings” about the withdrawal plan, including most of his department’s East Asia Bureau. NSC staffer Michael Armacost, however, recalled that “most decision makers had reservations about the withdrawal at the outset, but none felt strongly enough about the issue to take on the new president’s program.”

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683 Wood and Zelikow, 9.
Carter’s plan, though they differed in how much to resist it. Vance’s memoir is vague as to how his views might have evolved over time before he concluded that the withdrawal was ill-advised, but the records consulted for this study suggest that he initially supported Carter’s position. In a policy memo to Carter prior to the inauguration, Vance characterized Korea as “a trouble spot which can explode at any moment,” which was consistent with the concerns he expressed and the withdrawal he advocated to Lyndon Johnson in 1968.\footnote{Vance, 449.} Furthermore, the vague lawyerly wording of the policy memo noted that it was “correct to work toward the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces on a phased basis,” which left plenty of room for Carter to interpret a more aggressive schedule than other officials thought wise.

Vance’s position on the withdrawal, however, may have already begun to turn in April 1977 after he received a private briefing from the commander of the ROK/US I Corps, Lt. General John H. Cushman, who had developed a relationship with Vance when he worked with him in 1961-62. During the meeting, Cushman argued that without the Second Division in South Korea, the allies would “probably” be unable to keep North Korean forces out of Seoul if they launched a surprise invasion.\footnote{John H. Cushman, “Korea, 1976-1978 – A Memoir,” April 1998, Box 1, John H. Cushman papers, USAMHI, 27, 29.} Nonetheless, at a policy meeting later that same month, Vance still leaned toward a five-year, three-stage withdrawal” much like the plan Carter authorized the following month.\footnote{Policy Review Committee Meeting, Subject: Korea, 21 April 1977, “Meetings—PRC 14: 4/21/77” folder, Box 24, Subject File, Meetings—Muskie/Brown/Brzezinski: 10/80-1/81 through Meetings—PRC 55: 2/27/78, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, JCL.} By 1979, however, Vance had moved closer to the DoD position, advocating that the withdrawal should “be stretch[ed] out and slow[ed] down” and its “final stages” made “explicitly contingent upon reduction of tensions and improvement of military balance” on the Korean peninsula.\footnote{Policy Review Committee, 8 June 1979, “Meetings—PRC 110: 6/8/79” folder, Box 25, Subject File, Meetings—PRC 56A: 3/8/78 thru Meetings – PRC 156: 11/5/80, Donated Historical Material Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, JCL.}
favor the withdrawals” but this assessment is a bit misleading. Brzezinski clearly expressed his early misgivings about the Carter administration’s foreign policy in Asia, suggesting that it lacked “coherence” and was “disjointed.” He repeatedly urged caution in executing the troop withdrawal in Korea “lest our timing and execution of these initiatives convey unintended signals of declining interest in Asia.” At the same time, however, Brzezinski thought that Carter simply could not back away completely from his decision, explaining to policy insiders that “this may have been the wrong decision, but [we] cannot afford to go back on it.” He knew he was “going against [his] Asian experts” in recommending that the president begin the withdrawal “as scheduled,” but he thought “that the President cannot change his decision” and could only afford politically to “slow down the pace” of withdrawal rather than cancel the withdrawal outright.

While Carter’s inner circle restrained their criticism, Congress and senior military officers chipped away at Carter’s justification for the withdrawal.

Resistance to Carter’s plan appeared to be strongest among senior military officers and was used to good effect by various congressional committees. Initially, however, the top U.S. military leaders in Korea seemed prepared to give Carter the benefit of the doubt. They assumed that Carter’s policy resulted from the ignorance of a Washington outsider and that he would come around once he knew the whole story. For example, Lt. General Cushman, the commander of the ROK/US I Corp in 1977, wrote to the commander of US Forces (COMFOR) Korea, General John W. Vessey, Jr., that he could not “believe that the President’s policy on Korea is as inflexible, nor his decision as final, as they are being interpreted to be.”

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688 Vance, 129.


690 Ibid.; Telegram, SecState to Brzezinski, “Assessment of Korean Position on Ground Force Withdrawal and Human Rights,” 19 April 1977, NLC-10-2-2-23-1, JCL. Brzezinski underlined Vance’s suggestion that they “move cautiously on actual withdrawal of 2nd Division over four to five year period by not pulling out too large a force too early…and by reducing nuclear weapons only gradually.”

expected “that as the realities of the situation are better understood the decision will change.”

Similarly, General Vessey thought that once he personally explained the various recent troubling indicators of North Korean hostile intent and increased offensive capability to the president, Carter would naturally change his mind. Vessey was wrong.

Ironically, on the same day Carter signed PRM-10 with its implicit assumption that all ground troops would be removed from South Korea, General Vessey met with Carter in the Oval Office for thirty minutes to explain why he thought the withdrawal was a bad idea. From the U.S. Forces Korea perspective, the timing of Carter’s withdrawal was unpropitious. As Vessey had explained in a newspaper interview just a few weeks before Carter took office, an ongoing intelligence reassessment was indicating that North Korea had secretly managed to increase its combat capability substantially while the United States was preoccupied in Vietnam. In his view, a U.S. withdrawal in the face of such a buildup would “increase considerably” the likelihood that Kim Il Sung would be willing to gamble on forcibly reuniting the two Koreas.

Carter, however, was set on his plan and had been prepared by his transition team to expect the military services to be accustomed to making decisions “relatively unchecked by civilian authority” and to exhibit “pessimism in tone and conclusions.” Less than three weeks after being briefed by General Vessey, the president publicly announced on 9 March that his “commitment to withdraw American ground troops from Korea has not changed.” He explained

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693 Washington Post, January 9, 1977; Singlaub, 383.


that he had “talked to General Vessey” and was “very determined” to withdraw the U.S. ground forces in Korea over “a 4- or 5-year time period.” The following day, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Richard Holbrook, revealed the details of Carter’s withdrawal plan to the House Sub-Committee on Asian and Pacific Affairs. Carter made his withdrawal plan official on 5 May 1977 by signing Presidential Directive 12 (PD-12). Just three weeks after President Carter signed PD-12, Major General Singlaub made his ill-fated critique of Carter’s policy and the subsequent long flight to Washington D.C. When General Singlaub and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown appeared before Carter in the Oval Office on 21 May, Carter stated that he had lost confidence in Singlaub and would reassign him to duties outside of Korea. The resulting media storm stiffened resistance in military circles and raised the hackles of conservatives in Congress.

The reaction of the press and Congress to Singlaub’s “firing” was swift and dramatic. The media made the strained but irresistible analogy to the Truman-MacArthur drama over the same peninsula twenty-six years earlier and a congressional subcommittee scheduled hearings to investigate the matter. On 25 May, just four days after being “fired” by Carter, Maj. General Singlaub testified before the Investigations Subcommittee of the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services. Singlaub’s testimony—particularly regarding the recent intelligence reassessment that North Korea had significantly greater military capability than previously thought—prompted the chairman of the subcommittee, Representative Samuel S.

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698 Thornton, 93.

699 Singlaub, 397-398.
Stratton (a hawkish Democrat),\textsuperscript{700} to launch what Representative Thomas J. Downey (a more liberal Democrat) disparaged as a “frontal assault” on Carter's Korea policy.\textsuperscript{701}

The congressional hearings held in May through September 1977 and January 1978 provided a prominent yet safe venue for senior military officers to provide their professional reservations about Carter’s plan and to reveal new intelligence reports about increases in North Korea’s military capability that played a crucial role in undoing Carter’s planned withdrawal. After first hearing from Singlaub, the Investigations Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee received testimony from nearly the entire chain of command and closely associated regional commands above Singlaub, including: the commander of I Corps (Lt. General Cushman), the recently retired and current commanders of USFK (Generals Stilwell and Vessey), the Commander of 7\textsuperscript{th} Fleet (Vice Admiral Robert Baldwin), the commander of PACAF’s 13\textsuperscript{th} Air Force (Maj. General Freddie L. Poston), CINCPAC (Admiral Maurice Weisner), the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army (General Bernard W. Rogers), and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (General George S. Brown). All the officers, with the exception of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressed their opposition to President Carter’s plan in some form or another.\textsuperscript{702}


\textsuperscript{701} \textit{The Washington Post} ran a front page article with the headline “House Panel Begins ‘Frontal Assault’ On Korea Policy.” (Washington Post, May 26, 1977, A1). Rep Thomas J. Downey expressed concern that “our committee is providing a frontal assault on the President’s policy by using the general today”; U.S. Congress, \textit{Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw}, 42. For Rep Ronald V. Dellums’ more vociferous commentary against the hearings, see U.S. Congress, \textit{Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw}, 21. See also, Gleysteen, 26. Although this subcommittee apparently had not been consulted about the withdrawal, the House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs had been advised of the plan in March, 1977 (Thornton, 93).

\textsuperscript{702} U.S. Congress, \textit{Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw}, 4 [Singlaub], 79 [Rogers], 235 [Vessey], 430 [Weisner]. The Chairman of the JCS, Air Force general George S. Brown was more circumspect than the other officers. He admitted he supported the president’s decision but repeatedly indicated his support was contingent on Congress providing the full measure of compensatory support included in the plan (pp. 112,128, 133-134, 139, 153) and then, perhaps tellingly, dodged the question when asked if “the Congress ...should be supportive of the policy.” (p. 139) Admiral Baldwin’s response for his opinion about the plan was redacted in the Congressional Record, but his preference against the plan can be inferred (pp. 218-219).
Analysis of congressional testimony and the contemporaneous writings of some of the key senior officers reveals that the fundamental differences between the position of the officers and their president were basically the same as they were when Nixon implemented the withdrawal of the Seventh Infantry Division in 1970, but a number of points were expressed more clearly and strongly about Carter’s withdrawal than Nixon’s. First, whereas the Vietnam War had weakened withdrawal proponents’ commitment to South Korea, it strengthened the commitment of withdrawal opponents, mainly because they thought it wise to double down on demonstrating U.S. resolve. As they did during the Nixon withdrawal, U.S. officers generally rejected the implicit assumption within the proposed Carter withdrawal that it was okay to weaken the commitment to South Korea to avoid “another Vietnam.” Consequently, although most of the testimony was about the importance of the U.S. ground forces in providing a strong deterrent to North Korean aggression, the importance of providing that deterrence was predicated on the assumed importance of the commitment to defend South Korea.

The link between the perceived importance of the commitment and the importance of strong deterrence even came out clearly in the testimony of the most circumspect of the officers, General George S. Brown. He said he was willing to accept the “slightly higher” risk caused by Carter’s withdrawal plan as long as the compensatory aid provided to the South Koreans was accompanied by “visible signs of commitment.” Brown repeatedly reminded the congressmen, however, that the plan would not work if they were not “totally supportive” of the effort. The issue of commitment was so pivotal that the military leadership in South Korea had the USKF judge advocate prepare a legal opinion about the nature of the U.S. commitment to South Korea. He asserted that the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea was as obligatory from a legal

703 The situation with South Korea, many argued, was significantly different than the one with South Vietnam because the South Koreans were far more strongly anti-communist, the peninsula had more strategic importance, and because the United States had formal treaty obligations to South Korea.

standpoint as was the commitment to defend NATO. In sum, these officers viewed the U.S. commitment as non-negotiable so long as the original conditions that prompted the commitment had not changed significantly.

Second, withdrawal opponents believed the existing U.S. presence in South Korea would nearly guarantee that deterrence would hold while a failure of deterrence would nearly guarantee U.S. involvement despite a president’s wishes to the contrary. General Stilwell (the recently retired commander of USFK) argued that the deterrent effect of having the Second Division deployed along North Korea’s most likely route of invasion “guarantee[d] that neither the United States nor the Republic of Korea—nor Japan—will ever be involved in another war on the Korean peninsula.” A civilian UNC official who had worked in South Korea for more than a decade wrote to his friend in Vice President Walter Mondale’s office to express a similar point. He argued that a credible U.S. military presence could “prevent war [in Korea] for as long as it is reasonable to speculate into the future” and if he “had the slightest doubt about this,” he “would have sent [his] family home long ago.”

On the one hand, the possibility of entanglement seemed remote while U.S. troops remained. On the other, top U.S. Army generals thought the removal of ground troops would only change how the United States would fight to defend South Korea; they could not imagine that there would be a question of if the United States would fight . . . and fight to win. General Stilwell argued that the “United States’ responsibility for the armistice agreement, the Mutual Defense Treaty, the stakes at issue, and international credibility all assure[d]” that “[s]hould another war erupt in Korea, the United States will be militarily involved, irrespective of the


707 Letter, an unspecified friend of General Cushman “on UNC staff” wrote to his friend “Bill” who worked for Vice President Mondale, (written between 1 April and 1 July 1977), Box 3, John H. Cushman papers, USAMHI, 13-15.
configuration of its force deployments at the time.”  The general asserted that at a more localized level, the question of “if the U.S. would fight” had already been answered in the standing guidance to COMFOR Korea who, according to General Vessey’s testimony, had “the authority to fight back and defend Korea with whatever forces that we have. We are not going to call Washington before we shoot back, I assure you of that.” When Representative Stratton pressed for clarification as to what would happen if the president said “Wait a minute, we don’t want to get involved in a war here on the continent of Asia; it may be better to take a better look at this,” Vessey replied: “I don’t think the President has a choice. If the North Koreans attack, we are into it already.” Contrary to Carter’s assumption that a ground troop withdrawal would give him more time and options if deterrence failed, his generals held that a North Korean attack would automatically force the “dual-hatted” commander of USFK to defend “the command,” which under his authority as the CINC of United Nations Command in Korea meant “defend the whole Republic of Korea.”

Third, although more politically cautious generals like John Vessey and George Brown agreed that the withdrawal risk was “acceptable” if adequate compensatory measures were provided to the South Koreans, the fact that they saw “no economic gain” from the withdrawal inevitably raised the question of why anyone would accept more risk for no gain unless one indeed was reducing the surety of the commitment. In contrast, maintaining the troops in

708 McGovern and Stilwell, Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea, 23, original emphasis.
709 U.S. Congress, Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw, 241. It appears Vessey was referring to the rules of engagement that were authorized for his command.
710 U.S. Congress, Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw, 242-243. Technically, the 2nd Division was not under Vessey’s operational control as CINC UNC – that is, he technically couldn’t order them to attack - until they were formally transferred to Vessey by CINCPAC. However, the rules of engagement (which determined under what circumstances US troops could fire upon the enemy) would in effect get US forces involved automatically from the onset of hostilities because they expected some of the first North Korean attacks to be air forces targeting the US air defense systems in South Korea.
711 See, for example: U.S. Congress, Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw, 127-128. General Vessey also told a New York Times reporter in August 1977 the withdrawal “won’t be cheap for us if we’re to do what the President says we’re going to do.” His conditional “if” clearly communicated that he thought the withdrawal was far from a decided matter despite the president’s directive. (Bernard Weinraub, “U.S. Commander Says Seoul Needs Big Arms Buildup,” New York Times, 3 August 1977.)
place for deterrence seemed like a bargain compared to risking war, as General Stilwell argued when he quoted his successor as saying “the cost of one day of war in blood and resources could equate to fifty years of deterrence.”\(^{712}\) Furthermore, it was commonly viewed that although the U.S. ground forces comprised only a small fraction (< 8 percent) of the South Korean ground force, the U.S. soldiers “[had] a value all out of proportion to their number” because the Second Division represented “the tip of the iceberg of U.S. combat power.”\(^{713}\) Consequently, the U.S. troops provided such a powerful psychological deterrent beyond their inherent combat capability that, in Vessey’s opinion, most of the deterrent effect would be retained even if one third of the U.S. combat troops were removed.\(^{714}\) Conversely, the trip-wire deterrent of the Second Division served such an important and “unique, nontransferable function” that not “even four or five [South Korean] divisions could assume the political and psychological components of its mission.”\(^{715}\) South Korean military leaders apparently agreed, for they felt it was necessary to add an “alpha factor” of additional power above and beyond the quantifiable loss of U.S. firepower “to compensate for the loss of the psychological weight of having the Americans present.”\(^{716}\) Even an increase in U.S. air and naval forces could not compensate for the loss of the trip-wire deterrent of “the U.S. soldier on the ground” because the North Koreans might recall “that [the United States] had air and naval forces very close to

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\(^{712}\) McGovern and Stilwell, *Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea?*, 23. In this pamphlet, McGovern argued for withdrawal and Stilwell argued against it.

\(^{713}\) Ibid., 22; U.S. Congress, *Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw*, 31. Singlaub answered a question regarding the importance of the trip wire deterrent with one of the longest and most smoothly presented replies in his entire testimony.


Vietnam and we did not use them. And Vietnam went down the tube.”717 With U.S. air units “out of ‘harm’s way,” the North Koreans might gamble on the United States not being willing to make the “deliberate, agonizing U.S. national decision to commit them to battle.”718 Consequently, people like Representative Sam Stratton, the chairman of the subcommittee investigating the withdrawal, found it “hard to understand” why the United States would voluntarily “take an action that would upset a relatively stable situation” when “the last thing we want is another war in Asia.”719

Given the military’s perceptions of the fixity of the commitment, the nearly guaranteed deterrence provided by the U.S. troops, and the high cost of replacing that deterrent effect, then the withdrawal led them to only one of two conclusions, as bluntly stated by a civilian UNC official to his friend on Vice President Walter Mondale’s staff: “Since in the Korean view, and in the view of our military here, the withdrawal policy is not supportable on military grounds, they view it as either idiotic or as indicative of an intention to welsh on our commitment.”720 Either option, if true, was extra hard to swallow given that these officers felt they were forced to deal with similarly dumb and dishonorable decisions recently in Vietnam when they were not allowed to attack the targets they wanted and when Congress failed to support the South Vietnamese after the United States withdrew from the war.721 For example, when asked directly by Republican Congressman Floyd D. Spence (South Carolina) if he thought the United States was “committed to Korea,” General Brown told the committee that he could not “guess” but that he would “go to [his] grave ashamed” that his fellow Americans did not provide the resources they

718 McGovern and Stilwell, Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea?, 22.
719 U.S. Congress, Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw, 323.
720 Letter, an unspecified friend of General Cushman “on UNC staff” wrote to his friend “Bill” who worked for Vice President Mondale, (written between 1 April and 1 July 1977), Box 3, John H. Cushman papers, USAMHI, 13-15.
had promised to the South Vietnamese after the United States had withdrawn from the war. 722

As resistance to modifying the commitment to South Korea grained traction in both practical and value-laden arguments, new developments afforded the opportunity for the capability component of U.S. deterrence in South Korea to be questioned.

As Carter pressed forward with his withdrawal plan despite clear resistance from his military officers and many in his own cabinet, high placed resistors looked for ways to slow the pace of withdrawal and buy more time to find other ways to convince the president to modify his policy. 723 As Cyrus Vance recalled, “[w]ith the president dug in, we had no choice but to wait for an opportunity to reargue the case.”724 Fortunately for them, Congress’ willingness to authorize the compensatory funding that was needed to make the withdrawal work was undermined when some of their members were caught up in a scandal in which a South Korean Central Intelligence Agency agent attempted “to bribe as many as ninety members of Congress and other officials” in an effort to influence U.S. policy toward South Korea. 725 The scandal provided an important delay in the implementation of the withdrawal plan that allowed opposition to and evidence against withdrawal to accumulate to a tipping point.

The resulting souring of Congress on funding South Korea was quick and deep. Richard Holbrooke estimated that “at least 100 votes in the House [had] been lost on the compensatory package simply because of Koreagate.”726 The incident also created an unprecedented “rawnness” and “serious strain” in the U.S.-South Korean relationship as the South Koreans

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722 U.S. Congress, Hearings on Review of the Policy Decision to Withdraw, 131, 142. See also: 132.
723 Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 93-94; Gleysteen, 23.
724 Vance, 129. Vance goes on to say this opportunity “presented itself” when Carter visited South Korea in 1979. However, opportunities to at least stall the process of the withdrawal arose earlier.
725 Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 92.
firmly resisted the Senate’s attempts to get the South Korean agent, Tong-sun Park, to testify.\textsuperscript{727} The scandal gathered increasing momentum throughout 1977 so that by the end of the year, a quiet investigation originally begun by the Ford administration in 1975 had grown into four very public “full-scale congressional investigations” plus separate FBI and IRS investigations.\textsuperscript{728} By early 1978, the topic of South Korea had become so toxic that the State Department’s country director for Korea quipped that “Congress probably could not have passed a bill stating that Korea was a peninsula in Northeast Asia.”\textsuperscript{729} Until the Koreagate scandal receded from prominence, Congress was not in the position to authorize any aid to South Korea without seeming guilty of being unduly influenced by Seoul’s agents.\textsuperscript{730}

Although the ongoing Koreagate scandal in Congress had stalled Carter’s withdrawal timeline, it alone had not yet brought the overall advisability of withdrawal into serious doubt. The CIA even estimated in May 1978 that the Koreagate scandal was “fading” and that South Korean “anxieties over U.S. troop withdrawals [had] eased.”\textsuperscript{731} The congressional inquiries and public debate following the Singlaub firing, however, allowed emerging questions about changing military capabilities on the peninsula to become more prominent in the debate. Singlaub’s testimony and the new intelligence he and others brought before the subcommittee began to raise serious doubts about the appropriateness of the withdrawal based on questions of capability rather than commitment and resolve. In effect, while Koreagate had put the withdrawal into suspended animation, the new intelligence reports began the process that slowly cut off the policy’s life support. It was the beginning of the slow death of Carter’s effort to

\textsuperscript{727} Telegram, SecState (Vance) to White House (Brzezinski), “Current Difficulties in US-Korean Relations” (retransmission of telegram to Seoul), 6 December 1977, NLC-16-110-1-27-2, JCL.

\textsuperscript{728} Kaufman, 70; Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 92; Rich, 19.

\textsuperscript{729} Rich, 19. Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 92.

\textsuperscript{730} Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 92.

The delay caused by the Koreagate scandal gave the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) time to review, essentially confirm, and circulate an Army intelligence estimate that North Korea’s forces had a far greater capability than previously believed. This reassessment of North Korea’s capability (and implicitly, its intent) undermined the proposed withdrawal policy. Prior to the reassessment, the withdrawal debate mainly centered on the interest and resolve components of credibility with the concept of commitment overlapping both elements, while the question of relative capability went relatively uncontested by both sides. Withdrawal opponents argued that the United States should maintain a robust commitment to South Korea because it had an important interest in defending South Korea itself and because it heightened deterrence and encouraged friendly bandwagoning by demonstrating U.S. resolve to adversaries and allies. Nonetheless, these arguments were open to contestation because the magnitude of U.S. interest in South Korea and the magnitude of the psychological value that U.S. ground troops added to the deterrence posture in South Korea were both open to a wide range of interpretation by a wide range of interested parties. In contrast, the combat capabilities of forces on either side of the DMZ were more readily quantifiable and could only be assessed credibly by a small cadre of experts with specialized knowledge. Thus, the new intelligence estimates tended to carry more decisive weight in the debate than previous arguments.

The Army’s new assessments of the North Korean order of battle began emerging only after the end of the Vietnam War because during the war, intelligence efforts were directed at Vietnam with less scrutiny directed at other adversaries. In 1974, U.S. intelligence agencies assessed that while their attentions were diverted to Vietnam, they had underestimated the

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732 For an excellent account of the intelligence developments, see Wood and Zelikow, “Persuading a President.”
North Korean Army order of battle by about 8 percent. By late 1975, a new Army intelligence assessment indicated that “North Korean tank forces were about 80 percent larger than previously estimated.” U.S. officers in Korea expressed great interest in the new estimate but the reaction in Washington was muted. When General Vessey took command of USFK in 1976, he called for more focus on order of battle estimates and the amount of warning the United States would have before a North Korean attack. By May 1978 even the CIA, who remained sanguine about Kim’s intentions, accepted that “the static military balance between North and South Korea alone now favors the North by a substantial margin” and represented “a shift from the rough parity that existed eight years ago.” As noted by an NSC staffer, the news was bad for Carter’s withdrawal policy and could “further compound [his] problems on the Hill.”

At least a few key officials remained skeptical of the new intelligence reports well after the intelligence community had been swayed. Without additional explanation, Brzezinski wrote in the margins of the 1978 CIA military balance report that their “conclusion” was “absurd.” Similarly, one of his NSC staffers scoffed at the results of a wargame conducted by General Cushman, Army Commander of I Corps in Korea, a year earlier. Noting that the wargame concluded that “North Korean forces would have captured Seoul, but for the presence of the U.S. 2nd Division,” the analyst offered that the findings “may tell me more about the utility of wargaming than the relative balance in Korea.”

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733 Clever, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1974*, 1: 171; Clever, ed., *CINCPAC History, 1975*, 1:157. Prior to the new assessment, the strength was estimated at 386,000 and by 1975 it was estimated at 417,000.

734 Wood and Zelikow, “Persuading a President,” 5.


737 Central Intelligence Agency National Foreign Assessments Center, “Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula, 10 May 1978, NCL-4-39-1-2-2. (original emphasis)

738 Memo, Far East to Brzezinski, “Evening Report,” 19 April 1977, NLC-10-2-2-7-9, JCL.
integrity of those who developed the intelligence reports. Years after he left office, he still believed that military intelligence agencies had “doctored” the intelligence assessment, a charge that at least some within those agencies shared.\textsuperscript{739}

Such skepticism is understandable, but it is unclear whether it was warranted. Under the Nixon and Ford administrations, senior officers sometimes offered unduly pessimistic and hidebound assessments of the North Korean threat and the broader security situation, and Carter was warned to expect similar by his transition team. Retaining the Second Infantry Division in South Korea, especially if it meant it would not be disbanded like the Seventh Infantry Division, would uphold Army prestige relative to the other services, maintain its share of the budget, and even retain more senior officer billets during a time when the Army was feeling battered by post-Vietnam malaise, budget cuts, and the All-Volunteer force.\textsuperscript{740} Doubts about the assessments were likely exacerbated by the broad sense of mutual distrust between military officers and civilian policymakers that emerged as they sought to explain the outcome in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{741} Furthermore, it may have been hard for some to accept senior officers’ reading of the security situation in Korea when these same officers made questionable statements such as, “no responsible Korean citizen wants greater individual liberty at the expense of less external security.”\textsuperscript{742} Nonetheless, no convincing evidence has yet been found to indicate that self-serving motives unduly biased what appear to be the military officers’ honest assessments about the risk of additional withdrawals, concerns that many well-informed civilian officials shared.

\textsuperscript{739} Oberdorfer, Two Koreas, 103; Wood and Zelikow, “Persuading a President,” 19-22.

\textsuperscript{740} See, for example: Wood and Zelikow, “Persuading a President,” 21.


\textsuperscript{742} McGovern and Stilwell, Withdrawal of U.S. troops from Korea?, 17.
Unfortunately for Carter, the rapid execution of his withdrawal plan hinged on his ability to convince Congress to authorize substantial financial and military aid for South Korea to compensate for the loss of American ground forces. Without such compensation to reduce the ensuing military imbalance between North Korea and South Korea, the reluctant accession to his plan by foreign powers and his own cabinet would likely evaporate. Indeed, Morton Abramowitz predicted that if they went ahead with withdrawal as scheduled, General Vessey was “likely to resign” and they would “lose the JCS.”\(^{743}\) The Koreagate scandal stalled progress on the withdrawals long enough for yet more new intelligence reports to exert increasing influence on key members of Congress. Indeed, Senator John H. Glenn, Jr.—who chaired the Asian Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and thus would be crucial to shepherding the compensatory funding legislation through Congress—found the new assessments troubling.\(^{744}\) He conducted a study with his colleague Hubert H. Humphrey, Jr. that recommended in January 1978 that Congress should require “a detailed Presidential report prior to each military withdrawal phase” that would “include assessments of the military balance on the peninsula.”\(^{745}\) Congress passed the recommended legislation later that year.\(^{746}\) Even the public was of two minds about the withdrawal. A paradoxical public opinion poll in March 1978 found that an increasingly large majority “favored the gradual withdrawal of American ground troops from South Korea” but also opposed “the idea of transferring $800 million worth of American military equipment to South Korea” that would make the withdrawal feasible.\(^{747}\)


\(^{744}\) Memo, East Asia (NSC) to Brzezinski, “Weekly Report,” 6 April 1978, NLC-10-10-5-1-3, JCL.

\(^{745}\) Hubert Humphrey and John Glenn, US Troop Withdrawal from the Republic of Korea, a report to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, January 1978, 5.

\(^{746}\) Rich, 24.

\(^{747}\) Memorandum, NSC East Asia to Brzezinski, “Evening Report,” 18 April 1978, NLC-10-7-3-9, 4.
Given the obstacles to implementation, Brzezinski’s staff recommended “postponement” of the initial increment of withdrawal because it would “delete the thorny issue from an already excessively troubled Executive-Legislative agenda” and preserve control over the policy that the so-called Stratton Solution sought to erode by trading “partial support of the withdrawal policy this year for a Congressional veto over subsequent withdrawals.”748 Realizing the $1 billion in aid essential to the withdrawal plan was indefinitely stalled in Congress, Brzezinski convinced Carter to reschedule the withdrawal in April 1978 so that only one combat battalion would be withdrawn by the first scheduled increment rather than all three battalions of the combat brigade.749

With the withdrawals delayed, military intelligence officials redoubled their efforts in 1978 to assess the North Korean order of battle, and their results only stiffened congressional opposition. By October 1978, defense intelligence officials reported that North Korea’s ground forces were at least 20 to 40 percent more numerous across a variety of categories than they had calculated in their 1977 estimates. In January 1979, “the essential thrust of the Army study was leaked to the Army Times and [was] quickly picked up by other major newspapers.” As implications of the new intelligence reports became more widely accepted, the White House ordered a secret new study of the withdrawal policy (PRM-45) in early 1979 while Carter publically announced in February that he would hold future withdrawals “in abeyance until the evolving intelligence picture could be more closely analyzed.”750 Unsurprisingly, the dramatic increase in the estimates yielded clearer opposition from Congress.


750 Rich, 27.
For example, in January 1979, Senators Sam Nunn, John Glenn, Robert Byrd, and Gary Hart published a report recommending that Carter halt additional troop withdrawals, and in June Senator John Glenn issued a second report that abandoned the subtlety of the previous Humphrey-Glenn report and flatly recommended a reversal in the withdrawal policy and a complete stop to “U.S. troop withdrawals indefinitely.”

With opposition mounting all around him, Carter was forced to abandon his troop withdrawal plan. Several weeks after making a state visit to South Korea in July 1979, Carter announced that withdrawals would be suspended until 1981, at which time the military balance would be reassessed. The wording of the statement indicated the policy was still potentially viable, but in reality Carter’s withdrawal was unmistakably defeated. Shortly after 1981 arrived a new American president, Ronald Reagan, welcomed a new South Korean president, Chun dudhwan, as the first foreign visitor to the Reagan White House despite the abysmal human rights record Chun had accumulated since seizing power several months after the assassination of President Park Chung-hee in October 1979. The symbolism could not have been clearer. Carter’s attempt to apply a post-Cold War foreign policy to South Korea was over. Human rights would once again be downplayed and staunch commitments to anti-communist allies would be reinvigorated.

Conclusion

In principle, President Carter’s idea to withdraw all U.S. ground forces gradually from South Korea was justifiable. Nixon had set the precedent for a complete withdrawal years earlier, and even the U.S. military commanders in Korea viewed an eventual withdrawal as acceptable and possibly even advisable. Withdrawal could be justified from a number of mutually reinforcing objectives, including long-term cost savings, objections to South Korea’s

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human rights record, and a desire to minimize the potential for entanglement in another land war in Asia. Authors have used varying mixes of these objectives to explain the motivation behind Carter’s staunch advocacy of withdrawal, but upon closer examination, only the desire to avoid the risk of entanglement adequately explains why Carter sought to withdraw all U.S. ground forces and on such a short timeline.

With a dramatic reduction of forces already made by Nixon and with the proposal for full elimination of ground forces already considered seven years earlier, one might think Carter’s initiative might have been less controversial. As Carter campaigned for president, the winds of change seemed favorable. Carter’s withdrawal plan was built upon a variety of preexisting, consonant initiatives and conditions such as détente, increasing concern with human rights, and most importantly, a post-Vietnam inclination for disentanglement. The momentum seemed favorable enough that the Department of State’s Carter-era Korean desk officer remarked, “[i]n the autumn of 1976 it would have taken a very savvy seer to have forecast that two years later the new Democratic President would have serious trouble with the Congress over his policy to withdraw U.S. ground troops from Korea.”

Carter, however, could not withdraw ground forces from South Korea without signaling a changed commitment to a staunch Cold War ally, and doing so came into direct conflict with a competing and resurgent post-Vietnam narrative that viewed the post-Vietnam disentanglement lesson as an incorrect conclusion that signaled weakness and irresolution. This alternative interpretation of the lesson of Vietnam resonated with the NSC-68 mindset that put a premium on demonstrating credible deterrence through strength and resolve. Thus, withdrawal opponents worried that the withdrawal confirmed post-Vietnam perceptions of U.S. weakness and irresolution and thereby increased the risk of war on the Korean peninsula to unacceptable levels and/or undermined deterrence and allied relations too much and in too many other places to be justified. Opposition came from a variety of quarters as various officials questioned

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Carter’s timing and cost-benefit analysis, but those who embraced the NSC-68 mindset tended
to be the strongest opponents because the mindset’s assumptions generated more dire
consequences from withdrawal.

Senior military officers tended to worry the most about the increased risk of resumed
warfare between the two Koreas. They argued that withdrawal increased the risk of war by
signaling to North Korea that the United States did not have the resolve to use its existing
capability on the peninsula and therefore encouraged Kim Il Sung to think that the scales had
tipped in his favor. Accepting a higher risk of war on peninsula, however, only made sense if
one’s commitment to Korea had diminished in terms of a diminished rational interest or value in
defending Korea or a diminished resolve to do so. Those who embraced a NSC-68 mindset
argued against both of these options. In the first case, they rejected the assertion that the Cold
War dynamic had changed enough to change the U.S. interest in defending South Korea. In the
second case, the mindset put a premium on demonstrating credibility and especially resolve.
From this perspective, it made no sense to increase the likelihood of getting involved in a costly
war that one had no choice but to fight. In other words, disentanglement was not an option no
matter how much one desired it. Ironically, withdrawal opponents and advocates shared the
same goal of avoiding entanglement in another war in Asia, but they viewed U.S. troops in
South Korea very differently due to their assumption about the commitment to South Korea.
Withdrawal advocates viewed the promise of entanglement as unwisely risking a costly war to
defend an insufficiently valuable interest. In contrast, withdrawal opponents viewed the promise
of entanglement as nearly guaranteeing deterrence because it clearly conveyed America’s
resolve to uphold a commitment the United States could not yet afford to abandon.

Civilian opponents to withdrawal tended to be more agnostic about both the increased
risk of war and adjusting the commitment to Korea, but they shared the military’s secondary
concern about adverse effects beyond the peninsula. They were somewhat more willing to
accept an adjustment of U.S. interest in South Korea and accept that the nature of the Cold War
conflict had changed. Nonetheless, they worried about the timing of the withdrawal. They argued that withdrawing too soon after the Vietnam War would be misinterpreted by adversaries and allies as a diminishment of U.S. resolve or an admission of weakness that could create additional problems for the United States at a number of locations around the world rather than a understandable reassessment of interests and Cold War dynamics.

Both of these variants of concern about other countries’ perceptions of components of U.S. credibility had merit even if senior military officers may have been overly pessimistic about the effect that declining U.S. credibility would likely have on Kim Il Sung’s “adventurism,” but the third component of credibility—capability—proved to be the decisive factor in overturning Carter’s initiative. Arguments about perceptions are hard to quantify for cost-benefit analyses, and reasonable people can come to different conclusions based on their accompanying assumptions. Thus, a determined president could discount opposition that was based primarily on perceptions of U.S. resolve. In contrast, the combat capabilities on either side of the DMZ were more readily quantifiable and could only be assessed credibly by a small cadre of experts with specialized knowledge. Furthermore, these experts already primarily resided in the opposition camp prior to the new intelligence revelations. Thus, although the military had no monopoly on assessing how U.S. resolve or interests were perceived by others, they did have a near monopoly on assessing relative military capability on either side of the DMZ. Absent the new capability estimates, the dispute between withdrawal opponents and proponents likely would have been intense and costly for Carter, but he still might have been able to pull off more if not all of the withdrawal. As the military’s seemingly more tangible and credible assessments of capability became incorporated into the public opposition to the withdrawals, however, Carter’s ability to counter the opposition steadily eroded.

The changing relative military capability estimates tipped the scales because even those willing to entertain the ground force withdrawal did not favor withdrawal at any cost. They conducted their own mental risk analysis and were willing to accept more risk (but still not
completely abandon South Korea) because they did not value the commitment to South Korea as much as withdrawal opponents. Nonetheless, their risk tolerance had a limit and the new intelligence reports about improved North Korean military capability raised the perceived level of risk to intolerable levels for many key withdrawal supporters despite their initial skepticism. In essence, what military officers could not do via normal channels of advice to the president they accomplished through the more sympathetic ear, and the purse string control, of the Congress.

In the end, Carter’s policy became hopelessly ensnared on two developments that were unforeseeable when he was a presidential candidate. First, the rapid pace of Carter’s plan required him to get Congress’s approval to transfer significant amounts of U.S. military equipment and compensatory funds to South Korea to offset the loss of U.S. combat capability upon withdrawal. Congress, however, was in no position to authorize the transfer while embroiled in the Koreagate scandal. Second, Carter’s planned elimination of the trip-wire deterrent would reduce the threat of automatic U.S. involvement in a ground war in Korea but also would increase to some unknown degree the likelihood of a war between the two Koreas. As long as the South Korean forces appeared to be in rough parity with the North’s forces, the increased risk caused by the loss of the trip-wire deterrent seemed bearable even if unwise to Carter’s key advisors. Once the Singlaub hearings opened the door to new intelligence estimates and once Koreagate provided the time for them to be confirmed and circulated, an insurmountable number of officials came to view the risk of entangling at least U.S. air and sea combat forces in another Korean war in the absence of the trip-wire seemed greater than the risk of a ground war if the trip-wire deterrent remained in place.

Carter’s firing of Singlaub backfired. Instead of pushing aside internal resistance to his policy and reasserting his presidential control of foreign policy, Carter poured gasoline on coals simmering in a NSC-68 mindset. Singlaub’s high profile firing and subsequent congressional

753 Interestingly, the importance of the capability assessments in generating insurmountable resistance to Carter’s plan resonates with Daryl Press’ argument that leaders rely far more on estimates of capability rather than resolve when estimating the overall credibility of deterrence. (Press, 1, 6.)
testimony served as a catalyst to strengthen and hasten action by the preexisting reservoir of opposition to Carter’s policy. The firing opened a new substantial and increasingly politicized conduit of congressional (and conservative) resistance to Carter’s policy that directly pitted the NSC-68 mindset against Carter’s attempt to recast it. In the end, Carter’s desire to avoid U.S. involvement in another seemingly unwinnable ground conflict in Asia created an unwinnable conflict with his military, his cabinet, and the Congress.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

_I am taking every possible step at this level to introspectively and objectively examine the way we do business to identify potential savings, rational alternatives, and acceptable tradeoffs in the accomplishment of our mission . . . I urge you to consider similar actions—remaining skeptical of long sacred preserves._

General Haines (CINCUSARPAC) to General Michaelis, 3 September 1969

Credibility is an important yet surprisingly complicated element of deterrence, and oversimplifications of the concept and its components plagued U.S. foreign policy not only in the years leading up to the deepening of the Vietnam War but also in the years following it. Initially, the American characterization of the threat environment in the early Cold War had led military and civilian leaders to adopt a precariously extended deterrence posture that put a premium on demonstrating U.S. credibility. As the strains of the Vietnam War prompted many elite Americans to question the wisdom of the existing deterrence posture and prompted foreign observers to question U.S. credibility, presidents looked at the potential tinderbox of Korea as a natural location for preemptively adjusting the U.S. deterrence posture to better align with evolving national interests and better match the apparent limits of U.S. capability and resolve. Inevitably, U.S. credibility became the central focus of the ensuing debate in the 1970s.

This dissertation has shown that the troop withdrawal debate engaged a NSC-68 mindset that had been forged in the early post-World War II period and passed down through the ensuing decades. Although scholars differ on its specific components, they have long noted that this identifiable mindset and its key assumptions encouraged a “fixation” on U.S. credibility. Scholars, however, have tended to ignore or discount the presence of this mindset’s “credibility”
imperative in the post-Vietnam Cold War. The relatively static conflict between North Korea and South Korea provides a unique, relatively unchanging backdrop against which to evaluate this neglected period of U.S. Cold War credibility concerns. Diachronic analysis of the troop withdrawal debate and decision making reveals important continuities and discontinuities in U.S. Cold War thinking, and highlights the ebb and flow of the influence of the early Cold War mindset as it competed with other values and imperatives, especially cost and disentanglement, that were themselves entwined with the deeper cultural currents of fiscal responsibility and noninterventionism. One finds that the recession in the prominence of credibility concerns in the early 1970s was modest and temporary, and that the NSC-68 mindset and credibility fixation still exerted considerable influence on U.S. policymakers, sometimes distorted their decision making, and provided enemies and allies opportunities to leverage exaggerated U.S. concerns about credibility to their advantage.

When one examines the debate about U.S. troop withdrawal from South Korea across ten years and three presidencies, considerable continuity on both sides of the issue emerges. The question of withdrawal engaged important, deeply rooted American concerns that were raised consistently across the three presidencies of the 1970s. These concerns yielded diametrically opposed solutions that remained in tension throughout the debate, variously leaning in favor of one side or the other. For withdrawal proponents, entanglement was the foremost fundamental concern and troubled all three presidents. From day one of his presidency, Nixon was primed to seek disentanglement from South Korea as part of the broader strategic realignment he intended under what became known as the Nixon Doctrine. Even when directly provoked by North Korea’s downing of an American EC-121 early in his presidency, Nixon merely postured rather than risk escalation and entanglement after a retaliatory strike. Next, Ford prudently halted further withdrawal considerations during the crisis of credibility that flowed from Nixon’s resignation and the unraveling of South Vietnam. Nonetheless, the North Korean provocations he experienced during his short tenure apparently
prompted him to look into a less risky posture on the Korean peninsula by the end of his term. As for Carter, disentanglement was the preeminent driver of his continuation of the Nixon withdrawal.

Both Nixon and Carter, however, sought more than just less risk in Korea. They also sought to transform the U.S. approach to the Cold War. Initially, both Nixon and Carter sought to make U.S. forward deterrence more financially sustainable and more palatable to changing domestic perceptions of U.S. interests and resolve. Nixon also undermined fundamental assumptions of the NSC-68 mindset with his rapprochement with China and policy of détente. The former transformed the rigid bipolar structure of the early Cold War while the latter mostly unsuccessfully attempted to transform the Soviet enemy into a less rapacious combatant than NSC-68 had painted. Carter similarly challenged the hegemonic NSC-68 mindset by reinterpreting U.S. interests with the addition of human rights considerations in foreign policy, viewing the Cold War as multilateral, and attempting to reduce the American single-minded fixation on the Soviet Union.

As Nixon and Carter took steps to redefine America’s conception of and strategic approach to the evolving Cold War, however, they encountered headwinds that emanated from a NSC-68 mindset consisting of interlocking assumptions about the nature of the Cold War and the communist enemy. This mindset resisted arguments that some of its key assumptions, such as rigid bipolarity and the high risk of falling dominoes, were less valid than previously assumed and that other strategic approaches were consequently logically permissible. Instead, the internally consistent logic of the Cold War mindset required that U.S. credibility and reputation be highly valued and that the United States commit to defending much of the “free world.” Thus, when Nixon and Carter sought to apply their revised approach to the Cold War to Korea, adherents of the NSC-68 mindset argued that the troop reduction policy was illogical and dangerous because they did not agree that conditions had changed enough to allow it.
In particular, senior U.S. military officers tended to emphasize the credibility of the United States’ commitments to its allies. They correctly argued that U.S. presidents could not change the U.S. military posture in South Korea without implicitly changing the U.S. commitment to its ally and, by extension, cause other allies and adversaries to wonder about the durability of the U.S. commitment to other countries. As U.S. military and civilian officials debated the merits of the troop reduction from 1969 to 1979, they grappled within a preexisting, complex system of interacting structural and ideational factors that tended to calcify commitments for fear that others would interpret adjustments to U.S. commitments as reflecting changing resolve rather than changing interests. Senior military leaders’ concerns about U.S. credibility were rooted in logical arguments, but those arguments were based on assumptions that became increasingly questionable as the Cold War evolved in the 1970s.

Both sides of the debate generally agreed that adequate capability and a reputation for keeping commitments were important to the credibility of the United States’ extended deterrence posture. U.S. military officers, however, tended to assume that U.S. interests had changed little since the early Cold War and, thus, commitments should not be changed either. In contrast, many civilian officials thought that the evolution of the Cold War allowed U.S. interests to be less rigidly constrained than the NSC-68 mindset posited, and they desired the flexibility that a less rigid construction of the Cold War afforded. For example, Kissinger shared the military’s keen concern about credibility, but he did not share the same impression of the fixity of commitments. He and Nixon argued that commitments should be based on interests, and those interests were not necessarily as static as senior military leaders tended to assert. Kissinger understood the potential damage of changing one’s commitment after it was challenged but, like the nineteenth century practitioners of realpolitik that he admired, one could and should adjust commitments in light of changing situations prior to them being challenged.

Such shifts in commitments nonetheless carried some risks, and military leaders were correct in arguing that adjustments to commitments in light of reassessed interests or resolve
could adversely affect the credibility of U.S. deterrence elsewhere. At the same time, however, military leaders discounted arguments that U.S. credibility could also be undermined by maintaining an unaltered commitment when there had been a clear decline in the need or resolve to maintain it. To military leaders, the interest in Korea had not sufficiently diminished to warrant a change in the commitment. As for resolve, they noted its decline but assumed they could remove the vagaries of that irrational element from the deterrence equation by maintaining a robust trip wire force strong enough to deter the North Koreans from testing U.S. resolve in the first place, and vulnerable enough to generate resolve from the spilled blood of American soldiers if deterrence failed. Their arguments were consistent in content across the ten years of debate, though they increased in intensity as the decade progressed.

Like the U.S. military, the South Koreans were consistent in their opposition to the withdrawal even though they conceded to their dominant partner when necessary. Indeed, U.S. and South Korean behavior closely followed the theoretical pattern of “free riding” described by Stephen Walt’s alliance theory and of the “alliance security dilemma” described by Glenn Snyder in that South Korean leaders exhibited fears of possible “abandonment” by the United States while U.S. officials exhibited fears of “entrapment” in a conflict that exceeded their interests. Nonetheless, the frequency with which U.S. officials expressed concern about allies doubting U.S. credibility suggests that the fear of allies bandwagoning with proximate communist powers during the Cold War (in addition to concerns about adversaries testing credibility) deserves still more attention in the analysis of the influence of credibility concerns during the Cold War. In the case of the troop withdrawal, U.S. officials tended to express conceptual understanding of genuine South Korean concerns but exhibited insufficient sensitivity and attentiveness to them in practice. Indeed, although the South Koreans tended to “free ride” when feasible, South Korean fears of abandonment appear to have been more genuine and consequential than withdrawal advocates anticipated.
Admittedly, U.S. officials would have had difficulty convincing President Park of U.S. steadfastness when U.S. actions appeared to communicate an increasingly conditional commitment to South Korea. Nonetheless, they proceeded more briskly and brusquely with the reduction than was warranted. Nixon’s off-script assurance to Park at their meeting in 1969 that the United States was not contemplating troop reductions amounted to a betrayal of trust that Park found difficult to forgive. U.S. reluctance to engage in any subsequent substantive consultation with Park only added to his mistrust and frustration. Additionally, U.S. heavy handedness with Taiwan and South Vietnam seemed to confirm Park’s doubts about the ability of weaker states to rely on the United States to give adequate weight to their interests and not trample them under the great powers’ diplomatic agendas. With so much seemingly at stake and with so much sudden change in the posture of the United States toward South Korea and Asia in general, it is not surprising that the South Koreans pursued a variety of tactics to influence the U.S. reduction of troops, including delay, threatening to withdraw the troops they were contributing to the Vietnam War, illicit congressional influence, the initial pursuit of a nuclear deterrent, and an entrenchment into authoritarian ways.

Interestingly, both the U.S. military and the South Koreans escalated their opposition to more U.S. troop reductions after Nixon’s first round of reductions. Two main factors seem to explain the majority of this behavior, though other factors were likely at play too. First, additional withdrawals raised the risk that the South Koreans would lose the trip wire guarantee of U.S. commitment completely, and thereby run substantially greater risk of deterrence failure. With more at risk, more vigorous opposition seemed warranted. Second, the adverse effect of the Vietnam War on U.S. credibility made it appear all the more urgent to withdrawal opponents for the United States to demonstrate clearly its abiding commitment to its other Asian allies.

Although there was much continuity in the debate across the decade, important discontinuities can also be identified. Daniel Sargent has argued that the 1970s saw the “advent of a distinctive post-Cold War era” that was certainly shaped by the Cold War dynamic
but also transformed by various other emerging historical forces, including globalization.754 Although such a claim lies beyond the narrower focus of this dissertation, this work engages in a similar purpose of examining the evolution of the influence of the Cold War on U.S. foreign relations of the 1970s through the far more focused lens of the troop withdrawal debate. As explained above, the key points raised by either side of the troop withdrawal debate did not change much throughout the 1970s. The traction of their arguments, however, varied with changing events and perceptions. Indeed, the debate over U.S. troop reductions in South Korea serves as a useful (though imperfect) barometer of how changing circumstances and attitudes influenced American thinking about the Cold War in the 1970s. In particular, it helps reveal the ebb and flow of the influence of the early Cold War mindset and its emphasis on credibility and reputation compared to other significant, enduring, and competing concerns. In analyzing the interplay and contestation between a NSC-68 mindset born in an earlier era and other influences that gained traction in 1970s, it finds three main influences challenging the traditional mindset’s hold on the withdrawal issue. Furthermore, these influences seem to reverberate beyond South Korea, though affirmation of this impression will need to await additional research.

The first of these influences was the changing perception of U.S. financial capability stemming from the erosive effects of inflation and other factors of political economy. Of the three influences, these financial considerations were somewhat less controversial. Withdrawal advocates could deliberately and subconsciously draw upon a deep traditional value of financial responsibility and, more indirectly, on the tradition of having a small standing army. Consequently, the arguments of withdrawal opponents were constrained mainly to debating the cost savings of the withdrawal and the direness of the financial situation. Cost considerations, however, began to lose their force even as they continued to mount because the Soviets and the North Koreans appeared to grow in military capability relative to the United States. As the

global and local balance of power appeared to shift, withdrawal opponents could leverage the
dire consequences of insufficient action against communism envisioned in the NSC-68 mindset
to argue that the United States could not spare expenses while so keenly pressed by the enemy.

The second influence challenging the traditional mindset emerged from changing
perceptions of the cost-benefit calculations of defending various far-flung interests. The failure
of the United States to convert blood and treasure into victory in Vietnam was certainly an
important factor in changing cost-benefit perceptions, but it was not the only one. As explained
in Chapter 2, cost-benefit calculations of extended deterrence could vary widely depending on
one’s view of the probability that subsequent dominoes would fall. As the domino theory
became more openly derided in the wake of the Vietnam War, the benefits of commitments
made under different domino calculations would naturally be questioned. Other changes in
international relations, however, also suggested changes to traditional cost-benefit calculations.
For example, if détente held, then the aggressiveness of the Soviet enemy had to be
reevaluated. Similarly, if the opening of China truly weakened the bipolar structure of the Cold
War, then the bandwagoning component of domino fears had to be readjusted. The cost-
benefit calculations of the early Cold War no longer seemed so simple. Nonetheless, the
various attempts by the executive branch to reinterpret the Cold War in the 1970s were mostly
rolled back by the time the troop withdrawal debate ended and more traditional cost-benefit
calculations resurged.

The third influence was closely related to the second and emanated from changing
perceptions of U.S. resolve as Americans questioned the point of the Vietnam War. Whereas
interests were the “rational” motivation for keeping or adjusting commitments, resolve captured
the irrational motivations for keeping or adjusting commitments. No decisionmakers were
completely rational human computers; they had emotions, cultural values, and personal
experiences that affected their calculated inclinations to adjust commitments or to remain
steadfast. Consequently, observers could not simply ignore apparent changes in resolve.
When rational calculations on both sides of the debate diverged, however, the natural trend was to attribute the divergence to the irrational element of resolve rather than to more closely examine the calculations and their critical supporting assumptions. Thus, commitment stalwarts could appear irrationally hawkish to withdrawal supporters while commitment adjusters appeared irrationally dovish and even cowardly to withdrawal opponents. Interestingly, elites on both sides of the debate perceived a decline in average U.S. resolve but came to opposite conclusions about how to address it in South Korea. Withdrawal advocates sought to diminish the risk of entanglement so as to better align with a reasonable—though not solely rational—diminished U.S. resolve to and/or interest in robustly defending South Korea. In contrast, withdrawal opponents viewed the risk of entanglement as the primary way to counteract an irrational diminishment in resolve to defend an interest that had not changed substantially.

Of the three influences, the perceived diminishment of apparent resolve seemed to exert the most constant influence, but as noted above, that influence could work in both directions. Furthermore, as an intangible and highly subjective factor, beliefs about resolve tended to be stronger than the accompanying arguments. As new intelligence analysis came in the latter half of the 1970s about significantly increased North Korean military capability, withdrawal opponents could accept a stalemate on the point of resolve and instead emphasize the increasing apparent disparity in tangible military capability on either side of the DMZ.

Another noticeable variation over the course of the debate is that a Republican succeeded in initiating a substantial withdrawal whereas a Democrat subsequently failed in his attempt to complete the withdrawal. It thus might be tempting to conclude that Nixon, a Republican and proven cold warrior, succeeded partly because the military gave him the benefit of the doubt whereas Carter, an anti-war Democrat, was not afforded the same deference. Although that line of argument cannot be completely discounted as a variable influence, far too many other important changes occurred in the context of the debate to give much weight to an explanation rooted primarily in partisan politics. After all, Nixon’s Republican pedigree did not
spare his attempts to recast the Cold War dynamic from the mounting skepticism of other NSC-68riors prior to the Carter administration. Also, in addition to the changing influences noted above, the simple fact that Nixon’s weakening of the trip wire effect would likely have far less effect on deterring North Korea than Carter’s proposed elimination of it can alone explain a significant portion of the increased resistance to Carter’s plan. Finally, altered context also changed the minds of Democrats who initially supported the withdrawal. Perhaps most notable in this regard was Cyrus Vance, who was probably the most prominent official to have the president’s ear at both the advent and the end of the troop withdrawal debate. Over the course of the debate, Vance transformed from a special envoy highly concerned about entangling provocations by either of the Koreas after the Blue House raid in 1968 to a secretary of state who, by 1978, had grown more wary of the ripples caused by the perceived erosion of U.S. credibility than by entanglement.

The importance of credibility in deterrence is timeless. Yet, the fact that humans have worried about it for thousands of years does not mean that credibility is well understood or pursued rationally. The debate over the reduction and possible withdrawal of U.S. ground forces in South Korea stirred deep concerns of patriotic Americans on either side of the issue who saw the world differently and who advised conflicting adaptations to the evolving international political dynamic. It is hardly surprising that the Vietnam War exerted significant influence on the debate, amplifying fears of entanglement on the one side and fears of eroded resolve and credibility on the other. The Vietnam War cast a long shadow on subsequent events in Asia and beyond, and has overshadowed historical study of this and other notable aspects of the Cold War of the 1970s. But the lessons of Vietnam and the fears it evoked were processed by participants within the broader context of a Cold War that was variously perceived as evolving in significant ways or mostly unchanged in its fundamentals, and those perceptions strongly influenced policy positions on troop withdrawal from South Korea.
The troop withdrawal debate intersected with a number of topics beyond Cold War discourse (and the scope of this dissertation) that could be used in other work to bolster investigations into alliance theory, deterrence theory, civil-military relations, threat perceptions, security discourse, foreign policy decision making, etc. Furthermore, a number of questions also merit future research to better ascertain the troop withdrawal debate’s contribution to and reflection of the Cold War of the 1970s. How well did the U.S. perception of South Korean reactions compare to what can be gleaned from South Korean sources? What more can be learned about the influence of the Cold War mindset by extending the analysis into the early Reagan administration or by comparing this troop reduction to the contemporaneous push to reduce U.S. troop contributions to NATO? What would the investigation of other military and congressional sources reveal about pathways of influence and resistance, and about the perpetuation or alteration of discursive elements? Although this dissertation opens a small but important window into the Cold War of the 1970s, our understanding of it will certainly modify as researchers make sense of a growing number of declassified documents from this era.

Today, deterrence credibility remains profoundly relevant as the hegemonic peace of a truly post-Cold War era erodes in the face of rising powers, resurgent aggression from old adversaries, proliferation of weapons of mass effect, and new ideological motivations. Nonetheless, as the debates over President Obama’s “red line” in Syria, his reaction to Russia’s seizure of Crimea and threats to eastern Ukraine, and his response to ISIS suggest, official and popular understandings of the components of credibility are still muddled and contested, both in theoretical understanding and by perceptions of how the world is or should be. As Americans engage in ongoing debate about credibility in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, they can profitably look to the past to gain insight into how assumptions, blind spots, and even emotions and culture can affect what we hope to be a rational debate.
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