



Editorial Note

Truman and the Korean War: Five Command Decisions that Crystallized Containment

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Eisenhower and Southeast Asia, Part I: Building Containment

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Eisenhower and Southeast Asia, Part II: Failure by Choice

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Russian Nuclear Strategy: A Realistic Assessment

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Abstract: Capitalizing on American vacillation, the Soviet Union and North Vietnam fomented insurgency in Laos. Washington would have to risk war with China to prevent communist control. Eisenhower, however, was determined to avoid military conflict with China, and he declined to deploy U.S. ground troops.	
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Abstract: Russia has developed an enormous advantage in low-yield precision nuclear weapons, and envisions their potential use to “de-escalate” conventional conflicts. At the same time, Moscow is preparing for the possibility of massive nuclear escalation. Western deterrence planning should be upgraded accordingly.	
Cover Photo: Image by <i>Reuters</i> in John S. Walker, “Thermonuclear Reactions—Can They Be Used for Man’s Benefit?”, <i>Foreign Affairs</i> (July 1955).	

EDITOR'S NOTE

In this issue of the *Journal of Strategy and Politics*, three articles by Richard Thornton examine the history of American engagement in Asia during the early Cold War period, illuminating antecedents of today's struggle for a new order in the region. The U.S.-Soviet strategic weapons balance and shifting alliances in both camps were particularly important factors. The fourth essay, by Mark Schneider, calls attention to the growing challenge posed by present-day Russia's nuclear capability, which is playing a larger role in its security strategy while the United States has chosen the opposite course.

Thornton first presents a fresh assessment of the origins and objectives of the Korean War in "Truman and Korea: Five Command Decisions that Crystallized Containment." He shows the conflict's implications far beyond the Korean peninsula, identifying, distinct interests of Stalin (to prevent Sino-American rapprochement) and Mao (left with little choice but to fight). For Truman, the war presented an opportunity to shape the regional and global balance of power. Five key decisions by the American president—NSC-68, NSC-76, NSC-73/4, the Inchon invasion, and forcing China into the war—determined the longer-term structural framework.

In "Eisenhower and Southeast Asia, Part I," Thornton looks at the Eisenhower Administration's policy toward Indochina through January 1960. The larger context is the Cold War struggle with the major Communist powers, particularly the emergent ICBM contest between the United States and the USSR. At the same time, Thornton elucidates the importance of other players (Great Britain, France, North and South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia). He finds that Eisenhower maneuvered adroitly in conjunction with strategic weapons developments, but U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia suffered from misjudgment of fissures within the Communist and Western camps.

"Eisenhower and Southeast Asia, Part II" picks up the action in the spring of 1960, with the Eisenhower Administration using American missile prowess to advantage in some areas, but facing deepening political strife in Laos, whose fate would determine the viability of the overland supply line to Communist fighters in South Vietnam (the Ho Chi Minh trail). France played a spoiler role and Moscow was quick to exploit U.S. troubles. By the late summer of 1960, the Sino-Soviet split was clearly evident, but Washington took no advantage of it—and the

American administration itself was divided over which Laotian leadership figure to support. Communist influence prevailed as Eisenhower, determined to avoid war with China, declined to send American ground forces into the fray.

Shifting to the current era, Mark Schneider's "Russian Nuclear Strategy" describes Russia's nuclear first-use doctrine under the direction of Vladimir Putin, and a significant modernization effort to back it up. Schneider argues that Russia has developed impressive new tactical and strategic capabilities, and failure to understand the scope of this threat could have catastrophic consequences in the event of war. The essay is a timely contribution to an evolving discourse in the United States that is newly attentive to Russian assertiveness.

– Joanne Thornton
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