

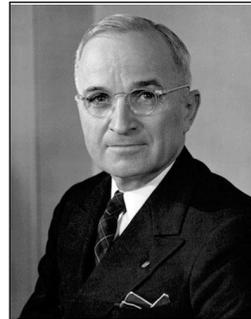
# Truman and the Pacific War End Game

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Most historical accounts dealing with the end of the Pacific War focus naturally enough on U.S. policy toward Japan, the dropping of the atomic bomb, and the role of Soviet entry into the war. These enormous and significant events deserve the treatment they have received. Contrary to conventional argument, however, President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb was not intended to keep the Russians out of the war, which was impossible. It was to prod them into it prematurely, and by bringing the war to an early end, limit their conquest. Truman's main objective in ending the war early was to limit Soviet gains in the Far East to the mainland, and prevent a Soviet invasion of Japan proper.



Harry Truman thought that FDR made a bad bargain at Yalta. He decided to revise the deal and to prevent the Soviets from occupying Japan as FDR intended.

Soon after assuming office, Truman undertook a major review of the strategy FDR had pursued during the war, particularly the commitments made to Stalin for Soviet entry into the war against Japan. The conclusion was that FDR had made a bad bargain, offering rewards far in excess of expected gains. "So far," Truman decided, relations with the Soviet Union "had been a one way street."<sup>1</sup> In his

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zeal to destroy German Fascism, Japanese militarism, and British colonialism, FDR opened the door to the rise of Communist imperialism. As a result, Truman revised the end game strategy to ensure American control of Japan and to divide Korea. However, he adhered strictly to FDR's commitments with regard to China.<sup>2</sup>

### *FDR's Strategy*

On China, FDR had devised an ingenious solution to a fundamental conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Long-term Soviet strategy had been to establish buffer zones around the borders of the nation. In Europe, this meant the creation of satellite states in Eastern



FDR believed that Stalin would cooperate with the USA after the war if his territorial desires were met. ([FDR Library](#))

Europe; in Asia, the buffer zones were Manchuria, Outer Mongolia, and Sinkiang. The Soviets had already established a satellite state in Outer Mongolia, exerted substantial influence in Sinkiang, and were poised to take a page from Japan's book in seizing Manchuria.

For close to half a century the United States had espoused the strategy of the Open Door for China, which meant unreserved support for Chinese territorial integrity. American and Russian strategies were thus in direct conflict, particularly over Manchuria. FDR's solution to this conflict was to propose that in return for Soviet commitment to China's territorial integrity, the United States would insure that the Soviet Union's "preeminent interests" would be safeguarded in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia.

The Soviet Union's preeminent interests were to be safeguarded through the instrumentality of the Chinese Communists, who would control Manchuria. The problem was that in early 1945 there was no Communist presence in Manchuria. But, as the war came

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<sup>1</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1 (New York: Signet, 1955), 93.

<sup>2</sup> For U.S. China policy, see Richard C. Thornton, *China: A Political History: 1917-1980* (Boulder: Westview, 1982), chapters 6 to 8, and for U.S. policy toward Korea, see *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945: Volume VI, The British Commonwealth, the Far East* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1969), 1018-57.

to an end the Chinese Communists would rush from their Yen-an redoubt to take control in the southern Manchurian countryside. The Russian invasion force that would enter Manchuria against Japan would be accompanied by a Chinese baggage-train army that would take control of the northern part of Manchuria.<sup>3</sup>

The cement that was supposed to bind Roosevelt's solution for China together was a treaty of friendship and alliance between the Soviet Union and China, and Mao Zedong's commitment to enter into a coalition with Chiang Kai-Shek's National Government. The U.S. government would encourage and support both negotiations.

On Korea, at Cairo, in November 1943, FDR, Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek had agreed, "in due course Korea shall become free and independent." By the time of Yalta, however, the plan for Korea had morphed into a three-power trusteeship, which now included the Soviet Union, but not Great Britain, with independence receding into an indeterminate future.<sup>4</sup> In truth, three-power trusteeship would lead to the division of Korea, just as four-power occupation would lead to the division of Germany.

On Japan, the United States and the Soviet Union had pursued a pincer strategy, just as against Germany. At the conferences of Tehran and Yalta, FDR and Stalin had agreed to defeat Germany first, and then Japan. But by the end of May 1945, after the defeat of Germany, four developments had combined to persuade the new President to change U.S. strategy toward the Far East.

First, was the realization that Stalin had badly outmaneuvered the United States in Europe. FDR had agreed to a strong Soviet position in Eastern Europe, but not in Central Europe. Shifting Poland two hundred miles to the west to insure a weak post-war Germany opened the door for a Soviet demarche into Central Europe. A pro-Soviet Czech government transferred the eastern tip of Czechoslovakia, the sub-Carpathian Ukraine, to the Soviet Union in June 1945, which gave the Soviets a direct border on Hungary for the first time and a strong position in Central Europe, indeed, extending all

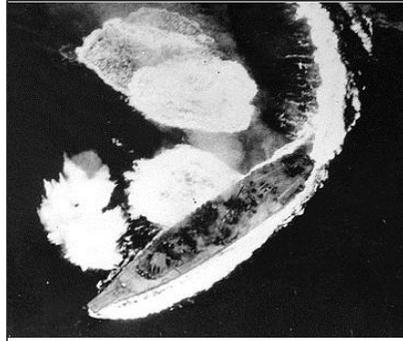
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<sup>3</sup> See Thornton, *China: A Political History*, 180-84.

<sup>4</sup> James Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington, D.C.: OCMH, 1972), 6-7.

the way to Austria.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say, Truman was alarmed that the Soviet Union's "expanding demands" in Europe would find similar expression in the Far East.

Second, was the fact that by spring Japan was defeated. The Japanese navy and air force had ceased to exist as viable forces. From March, the U.S. Navy had commenced a blockade of the country, was mining its harbors, bombarding its coastal cities, and had cut off all access to and from the home islands. The Air Force had also commenced massive incendiary bombing raids against most cities.



The sinking of the battleship *Yamato* during the Battle of Okinawa in April 1945 marked the end of Japan's naval power. ([U.S. Navy](#))

Third, was Japanese willingness to end the war. They were extending peace feelers to the Americans in Zurich, to the Swedes in Oslo, and to the Russians in Moscow.<sup>6</sup> The sole condition was that the Emperor continue to reign. What followed from this was the realization that Soviet entry into the Pacific War was no longer necessary, or, in Truman's mind, desirable, to defeat Japan.

The fourth and key development enabling a change of strategy was discovery that the atomic bomb would be available for use by early August. Manhattan Project scientists had devised two types of bombs, a uranium version with a gun trigger and a plutonium version detonated by an implosion device. By February 1945, scientists were sufficiently confident that the uranium bomb, called "little boy," would work that they decided that it was unnecessary to test it. The

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<sup>5</sup> "Czechoslovak Cession of the Carpatho-Ukraine (Ruthenia) to the U.S.S. R.," *New York Times*, June 29, 1945.

<sup>6</sup> See Gerhard Krebs, "Operation Super Sunrise? Japanese-United States Peace Feelers in Switzerland, 1945," *Journal of Military History* (October 2005), 1091-92; see David Irving, "Release When Ready," (online) for the discussions in Oslo; and Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005), 94-95, for the discussions in Moscow.

more complicated implosion-type plutonium bomb, called “fat man,” would require testing, which was scheduled for early July.

On May 31, 1945, the Interim Committee, chaired by Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and tasked to analyze the bomb program, had determined that two bombs would be available by early August, pending the July test of the plutonium device. The committee recommended and Truman agreed that the bombs should be used against Japan without warning and without informing the Soviet Union in advance. From this point, the atomic bomb would play a central role in Truman’s plans.<sup>7</sup>

The decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan had been made while Harry Hopkins was in Moscow, from May 26 to June 6. His mission was first and foremost to demonstrate continuity in the transition from FDR to Truman and to smooth over growing post-war, European disputes, especially regarding Poland. He was also to obtain Stalin’s agreement for a meeting of the big three, and confirm arrangements for Soviet entry into the war against Japan. In fact, Hopkins and Stalin went over the entire agenda that would be discussed at the Potsdam conference.<sup>8</sup>

Stalin affirmed his commitment to join the war against Japan, on condition that China signed a treaty legalizing the Yalta accords. He also agreed to a four-power trusteeship for Korea (which would shortly be changed to a three-power trusteeship, eliminating Great Britain). As to Japan, Stalin affirmed the unconditional surrender formula and informed Hopkins that “the Soviet Army will be properly deployed on the Manchurian positions by August 8th.” He also told him “Russia would expect to share in the actual occupation of Japan and that he wanted an agreement with us and the British as to zones of occupation...”<sup>9</sup>

Truman would support what FDR had committed the United States to do in writing in the Yalta agreement, but he would not support what had not been committed to in writing, namely, the

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur H. Compton, *Atomic Quest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 237.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1950), 883-916.

<sup>9</sup> Truman, *op. cit.*, 294-95.

invasion, division, and occupation of Japan, and the three-power trusteeship for Korea.

At Yalta, FDR and Stalin had signed a secret agreement declaring that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan on condition that:

1. The status quo in Outer Mongolia would be preserved.
2. In Manchuria, the port of Darien would be “internationalized” and Port Arthur would be “leased” to the Soviet Union.
3. China and the USSR would “jointly operate” the Chinese Eastern and the South Manchurian railroads.
4. “The southern part of Sakhalin as well as all islands adjacent to it shall be returned to the Soviet Union.”
5. The Kurile Islands would be “handed over” to the Soviet Union.

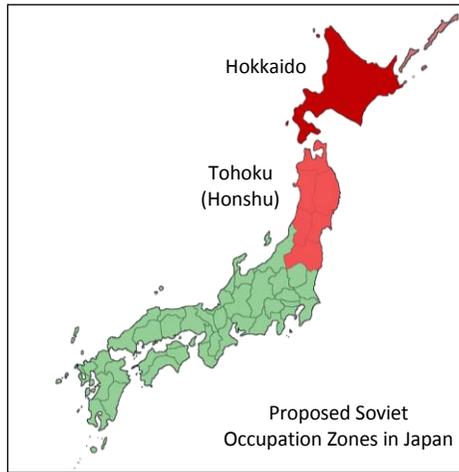
Chiang Kai-shek had not been consulted about the agreement. Despite the clear violations of Chinese sovereignty regarding the ports and railroads in Manchuria, the agreement went on to state that the Soviet Union stood ready to conclude a treaty of friendship and alliance with China to “legalize” these concessions. Finally, the President committed himself to obtain Chiang Kai-shek’s “concurrence on advice from Marshal Stalin.”<sup>10</sup>

The position the Soviet Union would acquire as a result of its participation in the war would make the Russians a global equal to the United States, particularly if the Soviets occupied a substantial part of Japan. They would incorporate a significant portion of the impressive industrial plant the Japanese had constructed in Japan, Manchuria, and Korea and acquire the ice-free ports that they lacked. Moreover, the longer the war lasted the stronger would be the Soviet claim to occupy Japan.

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<sup>10</sup> United States Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, *The Conferences at Malta and Yalta 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1955), 984.

Although it was never made explicit, FDR and Stalin clearly had an “understanding” regarding the pursuit of a pincer strategy that involved the joint invasion, division, and occupation of Japan. A few days after the Yalta meeting, for example, a War Department study proposed two options for the Soviet occupation of Japan. One was for them



to occupy Hokkaido, Japan’s entire northernmost island, and the other was for the occupation of all of Hokkaido and northern Honshu, a region called Tohoku.<sup>11</sup> The latter alternative would have allocated half of Japan to Soviet occupation.

But there was more. FDR had agreed at Yalta on two programs to assist the Soviet Union in the war against Japan, *Operation Milepost* and *Project Hula*. *Milepost* extended lend-lease. Nearly a billion and a half dollars in aid went to Nakhodka and Vladivostok from April to September 1945. *Operation Hula* was a program designed to transfer 180 naval craft to the Soviet Union as well as train 12,000 Russian naval personnel in their use. Thirty frigates, thirty LCI transports, numerous minesweeping and coastal patrol craft were included in this package. The training and transfer point for the *Hula* program was at Cold Bay in the Aleutian Islands.<sup>12</sup>

FDR made no formal commitment to support the Soviet invasion, division, and occupation of Japan. Nor had he formally agreed to a three-power trusteeship for Korea. The absence of formal commitments for the occupation of Japan and trusteeship for Korea,

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<sup>11</sup> “Occupation and Control of Japan in the Post-Defeat Period,” February 15, 1945. ABC 357, National Archives, Records Group 165.

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Russell, *Project Hula: Secret Soviet-American Cooperation in the War Against Japan* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1997) and Albert Weeks, *Russia’s Life Saver: Lend Lease Aid to the USSR* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 144.

unlike the Yalta agreements concerning Mongolia, Manchuria, Sakhalin and the Kuriles, were Truman's way out of FDR's bad bargain.

### *Truman's Revision*

Truman developed his strategy in collaboration with his soon-to-be Secretary of State, Jimmy Byrnes. Together they drew from the various policy positions espoused by FDR's top aides. General Marshall, FDR's wartime confidant and grand strategist, argued for the completion of the grand pincer strategies pursued since Tehran. That meant the joint U.S.-Soviet invasion of Japan, the Russians from the north and the Americans from the south, meeting in Tokyo. General MacArthur, the Pacific field commander, also supported this strategy, although he earlier had proposed an invasion of the Tokyo plain, instead of Kyushu.<sup>13</sup>

Secretary of War Henry Stimson, Assistant Secretary of State Joseph Grew, and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal, based on knowledge of the atomic bomb and Japanese peace feelers indicating a willingness to end the war on condition that the Emperor's prerogatives were preserved, argued for acceptance of the Japanese condition in order to bring about an early end to the war short of invasion. Admiral Earnest King, General Hap Arnold, and Admiral Chester Nimitz, argued that Japan could be forced to surrender without an invasion by an intensification of the naval blockade and aerial bombardment already under way.

The Stimson group's proposal to modify unconditional surrender might have brought a prompt end to the conflict, but at the cost of leaving the Japanese regime intact without removing the prospects for resurgence of Japanese militarism. The military arguments for blockade and bombardment would have meant the continuation of the war for several more months, whether Japan was invaded or not. Soviet participation in the war and demands to join in the occupation would thus be inevitable.

None of these proposals addressed the larger issue of the postwar structure of the Far East and the respective Soviet and

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<sup>13</sup> *The Entry of the Soviet Union into the War Against Japan: Military Plans, 1941-1945* (Washington, Department of Defense, 1955), 51-52.

American positions in it. Truman and Byrnes set about crafting a broader solution. It involved a sharp turn away from FDR's strategy toward Japan and Korea, but adherence to it with regard to China. To achieve it they sought to drop the atomic bomb and end the war six months to a year sooner than expected. Thus, there would be no need to invade Japan proper, and the Soviet Union could be excluded from any occupation role.

The Russians would nevertheless enter the war, but be limited in their advance to the Asian mainland and, as we shall see, to the Kuriles. To limit the Soviet position in Korea, Truman sought its division. And to circumscribe the Soviet position in Manchuria, he supported FDR's plan for the creation of a coalition government in China comprised of Communists and Nationalists.

Truman's advisors prepare for Potsdam aboard the USS *Augusta*.  
Left to Right: Bohlen, Matthews, Byrnes, and Cohen. ([NARA](#))



It appears that Truman and Byrnes worked out the final details of their strategy aboard the USS *Augusta* en route to the Potsdam conference, July 7-14. On this trip, Truman excluded all of his advisers except for Byrnes and Admiral William Leahy, his liaison with the Joint Chiefs. Also with him were three State Department officials: Chip Bohlen, the department's top Russian specialist; Freeman Matthews, Director of European Affairs; and, Ben Cohen, trusted legal analyst and expert draftsman. During the weeklong trip Truman and Byrnes met several times each day to work out their approach, frequently consulting his advisers as necessary.

Truman had not one, but two aces in the hole in the great game of strategic poker he was about to play with Stalin. Not only did he have the power to bring the war to an earlier-than-planned end with the atomic bomb, but also he had the Emperor's conditional willingness to end the war.

U.S. intelligence, *Ultra* and *Magic*, indicated that the Japanese were playing a very risky and dangerous endgame. They were attempting to keep the conflict a one-front war by enlisting the Russians as mediators, even though the Soviets had denounced the Neutrality Treaty on April 5 and were moving troops to the Far East. To Japan's ambassador to the Soviet Union, Naotake Sato, these moves meant that the Russians were preparing to invade Japan at the most opportune moment. Indeed, the Kuniaki Koiso government fell the same day the Russians denounced the treaty and was replaced by the Kantaro Suzuki government.<sup>14</sup>

The U.S. *Ultra* and *Magic* radio intercept analysts were carefully observing Japan's defense moves. Even as they were sending out peace feelers, the Japanese were preparing for a determined defense of the homeland with a strategy code-named *Ketsu-go*. The Japanese assumed that the U.S. would invade the southernmost island of Kyushu and were reinforcing the island to the maximum extent, but were not strengthening the defenses of Hokkaido. Indeed, they were drawing down forces there for redeployment to Kyushu.<sup>15</sup>

The Imperial Conference of June 8 had adopted the "basic strategy... for guiding the war," which was to fight a one-front war against the United States, attempt to administer a decisive defeat in repulsing the invasion of Kyushu, and sue for peace on favorable terms through a Soviet mediation. Two weeks later, the Japanese amended

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<sup>14</sup> There is some controversy over whether the Soviet denunciation of the treaty or the U.S. invasion of Okinawa precipitated the fall of the Koiso government. David James offers a different answer. Japan had sent a special envoy to Moscow early in January before Yalta to consult with Stalin about the "general situation." He returned to Tokyo on April 3. The special cabinet meeting of the fifth led to the resignation of the government. The suggestion is that Stalin had disappointed Koiso's expectations, prompting his resignation. David James, *The Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1951), 297.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas MacEachin, *The Final Months of the War With Japan: Signals Intelligence, U.S. Invasion Planning and the A-Bomb Decision* (Washington, D.C.: CIA, 1998), 20. The Japanese had redeployed the 77<sup>th</sup> division from Hokkaido to Kyushu.

this scenario to seek Soviet mediation *before* the decisive battle occurred.<sup>16</sup>

Although the lynchpin of this strategy was Soviet neutrality, the Supreme War Council acknowledged that the Russians “planned to expand their influence in the Far East by striking at the most opportune moment.” This meant that *if* the mediation plan failed and the Russians entered the war, the Japanese would immediately surrender to the United States to forestall the division of their country, which I believe was their paramount concern.<sup>17</sup>

Japan hoped to insure that the Russians adhered strictly to the terms of the Neutrality Pact, which was to remain in force for one year after it was denounced. In discussions with the Russians, the Japanese increased the amount they were willing to pay to keep them out of the war. From initially offering fishing rights, to giving up Sakhalin, they ended up offering to give up all their mainland conquests in return for not only mediation of a peace settlement, but also an alliance.

Unbeknownst to the Japanese or the Americans, however, Stalin had already issued orders to prepare for entry into the war after his very first conversation with Harry Hopkins, on June 26. He ordered his armies to be ready to attack by August 20. He wanted everything prepared by August 1, over three months before the planned U.S. invasion of Kyushu.<sup>18</sup>

In this context, Japanese peace feelers to end the war on condition that there was no prejudice against the prerogatives of the Emperor must be understood as an attempt to open a private dialogue with Truman, yet keep the ultimate decision in Hirohito’s hands. The defeat and dismemberment of Germany had to have been uppermost in the Emperor’s mind. The greatest danger Japan faced was not merely destruction and defeat, which were inevitable, but dismemberment and the end of the *Kokutai*. The *Kokutai* was a term with layers of meanings centered on the concept of the national polity, but its irreducible meaning was the integrity of the state

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<sup>16</sup> Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 106.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-96.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

structure. There could be recovery from destruction and defeat, but not from dismemberment.

If Truman understood that the Japanese leadership's main concern was preservation of the state, then he knew that the status of the Emperor was negotiable, despite the Japanese attempt to identify the Emperor with the state. He certainly knew that he could obtain an end to the war at any time, if he were willing to compromise on the Emperor's status, as Stimson, Forrestal, and Grew urged. But, that was the worst case and he would choose it, if and only if the Russian invasion of the main islands became unavoidable.

Thus, the President's carefully crafted strategy was to bring the war to an early end, prod the Russians into Manchuria, limit them to the extent possible in Korea, acquiesce in the Soviet seizure of the Kuriles, but exclude them entirely from Japan proper. He would fulfill FDR's Yalta commitments to the letter, but preserve America's dominant position in the Pacific by taking complete control of Japan.

Simple in concept, the strategy would be complicated to execute, because the Russians could be expected to contest their exclusion from Japan. The atomic bomb would be the key to success, prompting the Emperor to save his country from dismemberment by bringing to a quick end a war that was expected to last for at least another half year and guarantee Japan's dismemberment.

### *The Potsdam Conference*

At Potsdam, Truman initiated the Pacific aspect of his strategy on a broad canvas. He agreed to a settlement dividing Germany and Europe on very advantageous terms for Stalin, even while publicly denying he had done so, but presented him with a *fait accompli* in the Pacific.<sup>19</sup>



Stalin and Truman at Potsdam.  
(NARA)

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<sup>19</sup> For discussion of Truman's European strategy, see Charles Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam* (New York: Dell, 1975).

During the two-week-long conference, Truman, Stalin, and Churchill, focused most of their deliberations on European issues, much to the discomfiture of Stalin who had come to the conference eager to work out plans for the final, joint invasion and occupation of Japan.

Both behind the scenes and in discussions with Stalin, Truman carefully positioned the United States for the endgame. During his first meeting with the Soviet leader, on July 17, Truman asked for his assurance that the Open Door policy would apply to all of Manchuria and that Darien be “internationalized,” as stipulated in the Yalta agreement.<sup>20</sup> Raising the issue of the Open Door shocked Stalin for it was a new demand for an American presence throughout Manchuria, and a clear deviation from FDR’s policy.

Truman certainly knew Stalin would not accept an American presence in Manchuria, so raising the issue was probably designed to soften up the Soviet leader in his negotiations with Chiang Kai-shek, then under way. Indeed, the negotiations had reached an impasse over the Soviet demand for sole control of the port of Darien.

As Stalin had conditioned Soviet entry into the war on the satisfactory negotiation of a treaty with China, Truman sought to lend support to Chiang. On the 23rd, he sent him a message stating: “I asked that you carry out the Yalta agreement but I had not asked that you make any concession in excess of that agreement.”<sup>21</sup> Truman was clearly playing both sides of this negotiation, indicating to Chiang not to cave in to Soviet demands for control of Darien, and to Stalin that the United States might have to get involved, if the Russians tried to steamroll the Chinese.

The Americans sought to ascertain precisely when the Russians would be ready to invade Manchuria. The Soviet reply was that they would be ready by mid-to-late August, which was two-to-three weeks later than Stalin had mentioned to Hopkins. In fact, as noted above, Stalin had ordered his armies to be prepared to attack by August 1. Suspicious, the Joint Chiefs alerted MacArthur that events were moving far more rapidly than anyone expected. On July 21, they

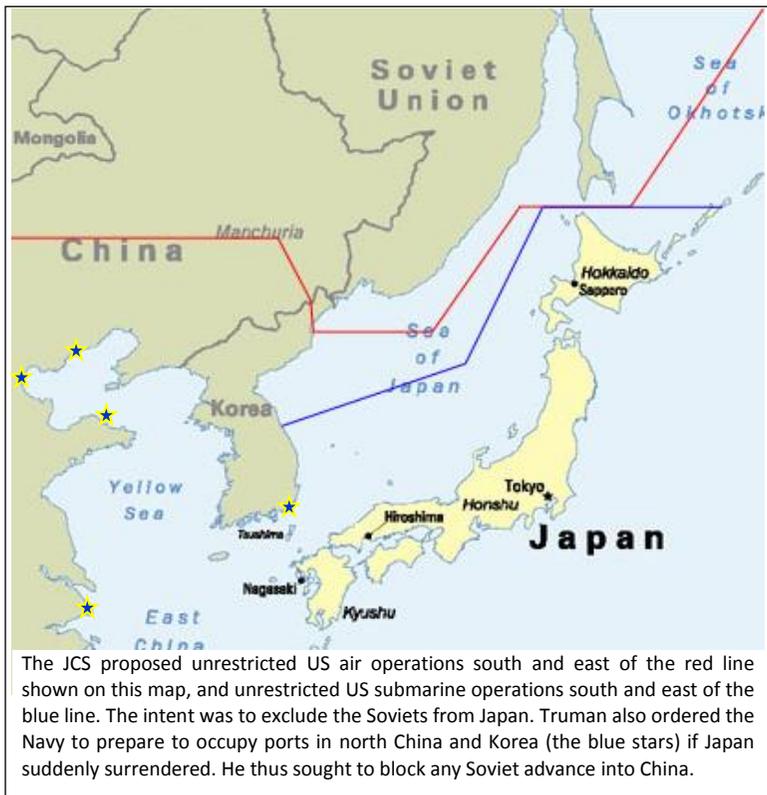
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<sup>20</sup> “Truman-Stalin Meeting, 17 July 1945,” Bohlen notes, *Foreign Relations of the United States, Potsdam*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1945), 1586-87.

<sup>21</sup> “The President to the Ambassador in China (Hurley),” 23 July 1945, *FRUS-Potsdam*, 1241.

sent him a message stating that it might “prove necessary to take action within the near future on the basis of Japanese capitulation, possibly before Russian entry.”<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, in the context of delimiting areas of operations for their respective forces, the Joint Chiefs of Staff sought to exclude the Soviets from Japan. On July 24, posing five questions to the Soviet chiefs regarding areas of naval and air operations, the U.S. side declared unlimited access for U.S. naval forces in the Sea of Japan and Sea of Okhotsk, drew a line around the Japanese home islands, and divided Korea.



Starting at the thirty-eighth parallel extended, they drew a line from the parallel up to forty-five degrees north of the forty-fifth

<sup>22</sup> Ray Cline, *Washington Command Post* (Washington: GPO, 1951), 348.

parallel to the La Perouse Strait, which separates Sakhalin and Hokkaido. The U.S. Navy would operate to the east of this line and the Soviet Navy to the west of it. Finally, the U.S. Air Force was to be free to roam over all of Manchuria up to the Outer Mongolian border.<sup>23</sup> Needless to say, the Russians were not happy with these limitations and sought to revise them.

The same day, July 24, after their plenum meeting, Truman “sauntered casually around to Stalin” without his interpreter and “mentioned” to him that the United States now possessed a “new weapon of unusual destructive force.”<sup>24</sup> Stalin displayed no surprise, saying simply that he was “glad to hear it and hoped we would make ‘good use of it against the Japanese.’” Shortly afterward, in his quarters, Truman “made the decision” to drop the atomic bombs on Japan, ordering the first bomb to be dropped “after about 3 August.”<sup>25</sup>

Truman’s *coup de main* came two days later. Without informing or consulting the Russians, the President released the Potsdam Declaration on the evening of July 26. The most striking aspect of the declaration was the absence of Stalin’s name on it. Coming out of a conference where the President, Stalin, and Churchill had been conferring for over a week, it strongly suggested that there had been a disagreement among the Big Three. Churchill had left the conference, it was said, to await the election results in Britain. But other explanations were possible. The Potsdam Declaration was signed by Truman, Churchill, who had left, and Chiang Kai-shek, who had not attended. As for Stalin, the implication was that he had declined to sign the declaration in order to uphold his treaty commitment to Japan.

Of course, we know now, Stalin fully expected to sign the declaration and, in fact, had prepared his own draft for consideration.<sup>26</sup> But Truman had good reasons for issuing the declaration without his signature. To include it would have conferred considerable legitimacy on the Soviet violation of the Neutrality Treaty and Stalin’s demand to participate in the occupation of Japan. More

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<sup>23</sup> “Entry of the Soviet Union...” 92-93. On August 10, 1945, seventeen days later, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel drew the same line dividing Korea.

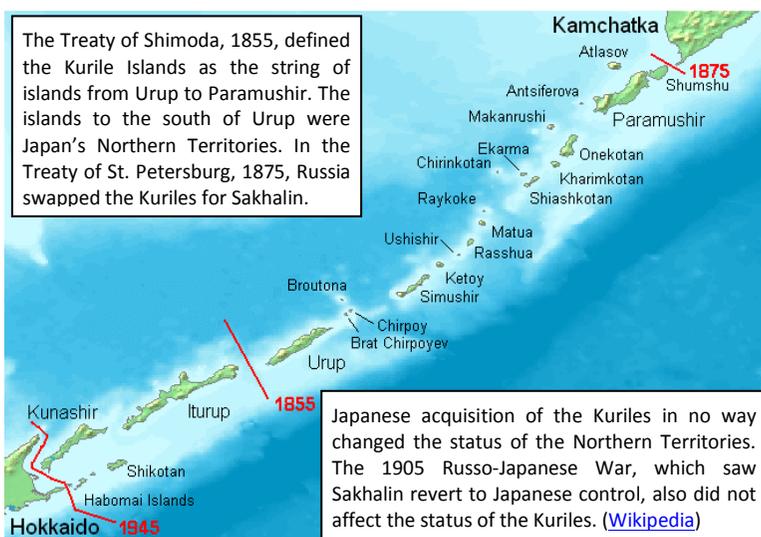
<sup>24</sup> Mee, *Meeting at Potsdam*, 191-92.

<sup>25</sup> Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. I, 458, 463.

<sup>26</sup> Hasegawa, 160-61.

importantly, the omission of Stalin’s signature fed the Japanese hope that the Russians were going to adhere to the Neutrality Treaty and mediate Japan’s surrender after the decisive battle with the Americans.

The Potsdam Declaration thus contained a number of subtle, but different offers to a variety of constituencies. Promising to carry out the terms of the Cairo Declaration, the signers said “Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and such minor islands as we determine.” The clear inference was that *if* Japan surrendered to the United States, Japan would not be crushed and dismembered the way Germany was, but kept intact.



Yet, in this very sentence lay a scrap for Stalin, which was the omission of any mention of Japan’s Northern Territories (Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and Habomai). The Northern Territories were not the “minor islands” referred to in the Declaration, but historically distinct Japanese territory, separate from the Kurile Islands. Omitting them from the Declaration left their status ambiguous.

Finally, there was yet another element missing from the Declaration and that was the Emperor himself, who was not mentioned. The last sentence in the document stated: “We call upon

the *Government* of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all the Japanese *armed forces*, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action.” Referring only to the government of Japan and speaking of unconditional surrender only in the context of Japan’s armed forces implied that the Emperor was a distinct entity apart from the government and would receive separate consideration.

There were, in fact, four powerful messages in the Potsdam Declaration. To the Japanese military that counted on Soviet neutrality and mediation in their last-ditch stand strategy, the absence of Stalin’s signature reinforced their view. To the so-called Japanese peace faction the promise of retaining the *Kokutai* intact conveyed an equally powerful attraction to accept U.S. terms. To the Emperor the omission of his name signaled that he would continue to reign if he could bring about surrender. Finally, to Stalin, there was the suggestion that the Northern Territories were not considered to be Japanese sovereign territory.

Truman, in my view, was counting on the responses that he got—indecision from Japan and prompt action from the Soviet Union. Interpreting the Japanese response, *mokusatsu*, which means to kill with silence, as a rejection of the surrender terms, gave Truman the opportunity he needed to strike. Taking every precaution, however, that same day of the 26th, the JCS ordered MacArthur and Nimitz to coordinate plans “in the event of Japanese governmental surrender.” In such an event JCS sought the immediate naval occupation of Shanghai, Pusan, Chefoo, Chingwangtao, and Taku by U.S. Marines. This was, ostensibly “to facilitate the reoccupation of the country by Chinese forces,”<sup>27</sup> but primarily intended to establish blocking positions to limit the expected Soviet advance into Manchuria, Korea, and North China.

Stalin had counted on his inclusion in the Declaration as the way of overriding his treaty obligation under the Neutrality Pact. We know that because that was the way he phrased his draft. The key part of the Soviet draft declared, “the United States, China, Great Britain,

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<sup>27</sup> “JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF to MACARTHUR, NIMITZ info SPAATZ, AGWAR, NAVY DEPT.” July 26, 1945. From the Nimitz “Graybook” [online](#), p. 3497.

and the Soviet Union consider it their duty to take joint, decisive measures immediately to bring the war to an end.”<sup>28</sup>

But Stalin faced a second impediment, one of his own making, and that was his demand that Chiang Kai-Shek sign a treaty with the Soviet Union before Moscow would join in the war against Japan. This condition was not stipulated in the Yalta agreement, which said only that the Soviet Union expressed its “readiness to conclude...a pact of friendship and alliance” with China, not that Soviet entry into the war was contingent upon it. In fact, neither issue would stand in the way of a unilateral Soviet declaration of war against Japan.

Stalin was undoubtedly shocked at how easily Truman had outmaneuvered him, but prepared a countermove. On July 29, he sent Molotov to the plenary session in his place, explaining that he had a “cold.” Molotov passed on Stalin’s proposal that the allies “address a formal request to the Soviet government for its entry into the war,” on the grounds that Japan had rejected the Potsdam Declaration. Truman, taken by surprise, but averse to pulling Stalin’s chestnuts out of the fire, deferred a reply.

After thinking about it for two days, Truman responded, parrying Stalin’s ploy. On July 31 he sent Stalin a message, saying that as soon as the Soviet Union had reached agreement on a treaty with China, he would invite the Soviets into the war against Japan, based on articles 103 and 106 of the proposed United Nations Charter and the Moscow Declaration of 1943. As soon as he received word from Stalin that a treaty had been signed, he said, he would mail him a “form letter” requesting Soviet entry into the war.<sup>29</sup> These were terms that Stalin could hardly accept, because they took the initiative for entry into the war away from him and placed it in the hands of Chiang Kai-Shek and Truman.

Shortly after Potsdam, as the Soviet negotiations with the Chinese were about to resume, Truman fired another salvo. On August 5, he instructed Harriman to tell Stalin that the Chinese had met the terms of Yalta Agreement and the Russians should not insist on more. The agreement called for Darien to be “internationalized,” and Port

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<sup>28</sup> Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, 444-445.

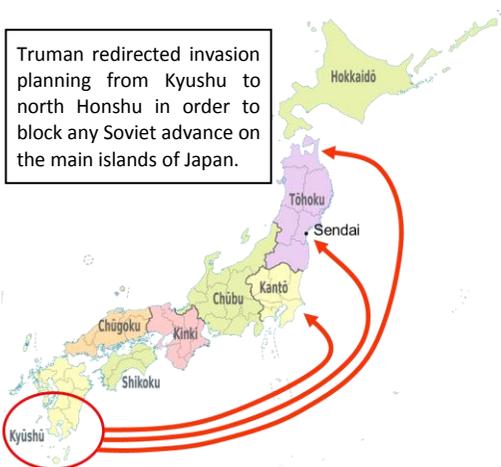
Arthur “leased” to the Russians, but Moscow sought to include Dairen into the Soviet military zone on the Liaotung peninsula.<sup>30</sup>

Truman proposed that the two countries issue a joint statement affirming the Open Door in Manchuria. The President preferred “free port” status for Dairen under Chinese administration, but would not object to supervision of the port by an international commission composed of Soviet, American, British, and Chinese representatives.<sup>31</sup> Truman’s note encouraged Chiang to string out the negotiations, but he caved in to Stalin’s demand to control Dairen on August 15, the day of Japan’s surrender.

### *Endgame in the Far East*

Events now moved rapidly. Assuming early Soviet entry after the atomic attack, Truman moved to redirect American power away from Kyushu to landings in “extreme northern Honshu,” in an attempt to block any Soviet advance into the main islands. On August 4, the Joint

War Plans Committee had issued a report on “Alternatives to Olympic.” Due to *Ultra* signals intercepts of a heavy reinforcement of Kyushu “considerably in excess of that previously estimated,” the planners wanted theater commanders, MacArthur and Nimitz, to “make alternate plans and submit timely recommendations.” It concluded: “Operations against extreme northern Honshu, against the



<sup>30</sup> Herbert Feis, *The China Tangle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 330.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

Sendai area, and directly against the Kanto Plain are now under intensive study here.”<sup>32</sup>

The day after the bombing of Hiroshima, Marshall sent MacArthur an “eye’s only” message seeking his views.<sup>33</sup> MacArthur replied three days later after the bombing of Nagasaki, and after the Soviet Union had entered the war, supporting the invasion of Kyushu. He disputed the signals intelligence evidence as being overstated, insisting that “airstrikes would cut off Japanese reinforcement,” and rejected all other alternatives as “not feasible.”<sup>34</sup>

MacArthur, of course, was not privy to Truman’s change of strategy, which sought to prevent a Soviet invasion of Japan, but he was correct to question the intelligence about Kyushu. The evidence for the buildup was a largely *SIGINT*-driven event supported by sporadic aerial reconnaissance.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the intercepts were almost entirely from Army Signals Intelligence, not naval intelligence. According to Holmes, “very little of this [Kyushu defense] planning was reflected in the radio traffic intercepted by FRUPac.”<sup>36</sup> Finally, while the Japanese were making every effort to reinforce Kyushu, it was very difficult to credit reports that they had managed to redeploy four entire divisions from Manchuria and Korea to Kyushu since the spring, after the U.S. Navy had placed a blockade around Japan.<sup>37</sup>

Marshall himself, during the Combined Chiefs meeting of July 24 discussed above, declared in response to Soviet queries about Japanese ability to reinforce Manchuria from Japan that “no troops

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<sup>32</sup> “Alternatives to Olympic,” Joint War Plans Committee, August 4, 1945, in MacEachin, *The Final Months of the War With Japan*, Document 17, appendix to enclosure “A.”

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 35 and Edward Drea, *MacArthur’s Ultra: Codebreaking and the war against Japan, 1942-1945* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 222-23.

<sup>35</sup> Major Mark Arens, *V Amphibious Corps Planning for Operation Olympic and the Role of Intelligence in Support of Planning* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff College, 1995), 6. In Chapter 3, Estimate of the Enemy Situation, Arens notes “as of August 1 1945, limited aerial photography, some visual air sightings, and a few prisoner of war interrogation reports were available to U.S. planners concerning Japanese dispositions on Kyushu. However, communications intercepts provided the bulk of the Japanese order of battle data.”

<sup>36</sup> W.J. Holmes, *Double-Edged Secrets: U.S. Naval Intelligence Operations in the Pacific during World War II* (New York: Berkeley, 1979), 232.

<sup>37</sup> Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 85, makes the even more highly dubious claim that the Japanese had transferred sixteen divisions from Manchuria to the home islands by April.

could be moved from Japan to Manchuria.” As a result of submarine operations, mining, shore bombardment and carrier strikes on ports, he said, “Japan has been compelled to stop all operations at sea.”<sup>38</sup>

One could not have it both ways. The Japanese were obviously attempting to strengthen their defenses, but contrary to SIGINT reports, could not move troops from the mainland to Japan. The answer appears to have been radio deception regarding troop movements, unit strength, and dispositions – a common SIGINT practice. Indeed, this may be an instance of radio deception by both sides. Not only were the Japanese attempting to portray a stronger defense than existed, Truman may have been doing the same.

In this analysis, Truman sought to redirect Olympic to prevent a Soviet lodgment on the main islands. Thus, it was not beyond the realm of possibility that the American side was itself inflating the size of the Japanese buildup in Kyushu in order to justify changing plans. That radio intercepts regarding the greater-than-estimated buildup began from July onward lends credence to this interpretation.<sup>39</sup>

The August 6 atomic attack on Hiroshima fatally compromised the first part of *Ketsu-go*, the plan for decisive battle against the United States, even though high Japanese military officials argued for its continuation by denying the bomb’s significance.<sup>40</sup> The Emperor, however, directed urgently that Japan move to activate the second part of the plan, the request for Soviet mediation.

The Japanese had been attempting to ascertain Moscow’s attitude toward mediation since Potsdam, hoping that the omission of Stalin’s name from the Declaration meant that the Soviet Union would remain neutral. But Ambassador Sato could meet only with Vice Foreign Commissar Alexander Lozovsky, who was sympathetic but uninformative. Finally, Sato arranged to see Molotov upon his return from Potsdam, at five p.m. on the eighth. As soon as Sato entered his office, the Soviet foreign minister cut the ambassador off before he

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<sup>38</sup> FRUS *Potsdam*, 347-350.

<sup>39</sup> Drea, *MacArthur’s Ultra*, 213ff.

<sup>40</sup> Robert J.C. Butow, *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 153-54.

could present his request for mediation, and, instead, shocking him, read the formal Soviet declaration of war against his country.<sup>41</sup>

The Soviet declaration of war compromised *Ketsugo* in its entirety. Thus, it was neither actual Soviet entry into the war, nor the atomic destruction of Nagasaki on the 9th that produced Japan's decision to surrender, but the Soviet *declaration* of war. The Soviet declaration not only destroyed the Japanese assumption of a one-front conflict, but also portended Japan's dismemberment, and prompted acceptance of the Potsdam terms the next day, August 10. In their response, however, the Japanese still clung to the hope of preserving Hirohito's "prerogatives as a sovereign ruler."

In Washington, after some internal argument about the kind of response to make – Stimson, Leahy, Grew, and Forrestal urged agreement to retain the Emperor – Secretary Byrnes drafted the following reply to the Japanese.

From the moment of surrender the authority of the Emperor...shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied powers....The ultimate form of government of Japan shall, in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration, be established by the freely expressed will of the Japanese people.<sup>42</sup>

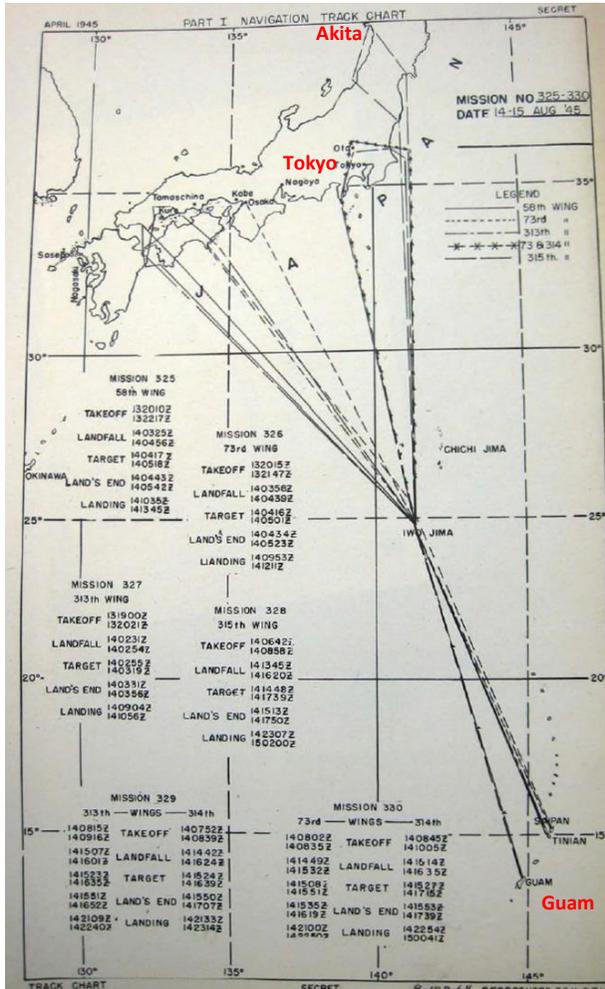
As Frank notes, Byrnes' reply, "implied much but...promised nothing." The ball was back in Japan's court and the continued refusal of Japan's military high command to acknowledge defeat persuaded Truman to increase the pressure, in part because the Russians were moving fast.

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<sup>41</sup> Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 189-91.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 301-02.

The next day, August 11, Truman ordered MacArthur and Nimitz to make “advance arrangements...to occupy the Port of Dairen and a port in Korea [Seoul] immediately following the surrender of Japan if those ports have not at that time been taken over by Soviet forces.”<sup>43</sup> Second, he ordered the resumption of air strikes against Japan, but reoriented them away from urban incendiary bombing to strikes on petroleum and transportation systems.<sup>44</sup>



<sup>43</sup> “JCS message No. WARX 48004 to MacArthur and Nimitz,” August 11, 1945, CCS Decimal File 386.2. Japan sec. 3, RG 218, National Archives.

<sup>44</sup> Frank, *Downfall*, 303-05.

Then occurred one of the most random and complicated sequences of the war, which led to Japan's surrender. On the 14th, after a four-day hiatus, 20th Air Force carried out a one thousand-plane attack on six targets; two were in western Honshu, at Iwakuni and Osaka, to interdict the rail link to Kyushu; and three were against similar targets northwest of Tokyo, at Tokoyama, Kumagaya, and Iseaki.<sup>45</sup> But it was the sixth attack, carried out by the 315th Bomb Wing, which was moreover unmentioned in all accounts of the war, save one that triggered what was probably the most bizarre sequence in history.

The 315th's mission was the last and longest bombing mission of the war. Its target was Japan's remaining functioning oil refinery at Akita and the adjacent port of Tsuchizaki located on the west coast of "extreme northern Honshu," some 280 miles from Tokyo. Akita was the obvious location for Soviet forces were they to attempt an amphibious landing on Honshu.<sup>46</sup> Essentially, Akita was the Soviet gateway to Tokyo.

As noted above, *Project Hula* and the Soviets' own resources in the Far East gave them adequate amphibious lift. By the 14th, Soviet forces were in Vladivostok and Nakhodka and were about to take the ports of Rajin and Chongjin on the northeast coast of Korea. They had already invaded Sakhalin and were fighting their way to the southern tip of the island, which was only twenty-seven miles across the La Perouse Strait from Hokkaido.<sup>47</sup>

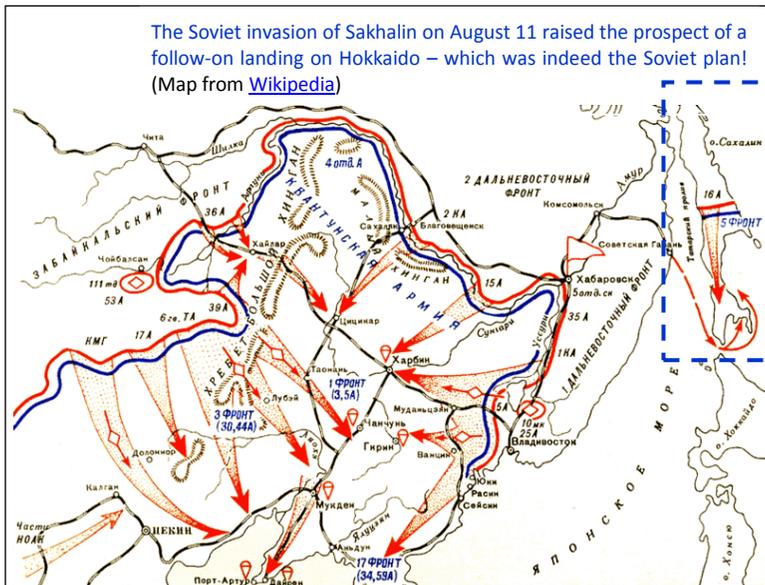
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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>46</sup> Jim Smith and Malcolm McConnell, *The Last Mission* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 186-87. Map on previous page is from the [20th Air Force Mission Report](#).

<sup>47</sup> Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 256.

As 143 B-29s flew over Tokyo on their way to Akita around midnight on the 14th, Tokyo defense command imposed a blackout on the capital. The blackout occurred just as a few fanatical right-wing officers were attempting a coup d'état. They hoped to prevent surrender by finding and destroying the Emperor's pre-recorded surrender speech. In the dark, however, they were unable to locate it, and by morning of the 15th, their plot was quashed and the surrender announcement played on national radio.<sup>48</sup> The 315th's successful air strike on Akita not only demonstrated Truman's willingness to use American power to block a Soviet attempt to invade Japan, but also *inter alia* facilitated the surrender of Japan, and perhaps even saved the Emperor himself.



Although Japan had now surrendered, the Russians continued operations. For Truman, therefore, the problem remained to prevent them from gaining a foothold in Japan proper and limiting their advance in Korea. Issuing General Order No. 1 the day following the surrender announcement, MacArthur declared that all Japanese forces “in the main islands of Japan, minor islands adjacent thereto, Korea south of 38-00 north and the Philippines shall surrender to the

<sup>48</sup> Smith and McConnell, *Last Mission*, 227ff.

Commander in Chief, United States Army Forces in the Pacific.”<sup>49</sup> Curiously, both the Northern Territories and the Kurile Islands had been omitted from the list.

Stalin did not miss this. In a message to Truman the next day, he offered what he called a few “corrections.” While accepting the dividing line for Korea, he insisted, “all the Kurile Islands... have to come into possession of the Soviet Union.” He also wanted Japanese troops in “the northern part of the Island Hokkaido” to surrender to Soviet troops. In closing, Stalin hoped that his “modest suggestions would not meet with any objections.”<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Molotov was attempting to obtain Ambassador Harriman’s agreement to a “joint Supreme command consisting of General MacArthur and Marshal Vasilevski.” Harriman peremptorily rejected the proposal.<sup>51</sup>

Truman’s reply to Stalin of the 18th was equally firm. While he agreed to modify General Order No. 1 “to include all the Kurile Islands” to be surrendered to Soviet forces, he rejected Stalin’s request regarding Hokkaido. It was his “intention,” he said, that Japanese forces on “all the islands of Japan proper” surrender to General MacArthur. Japan was to remain undivided and under American control. Furthermore, the United States “desires air base rights...on some one of the Kurile Islands.”

Stalin peevishly replied on the 22nd. He “did not expect such an answer from you” on the Hokkaido matter and as for a “permanent” base in the Kuriles, his answer was “no” because “it was not provided for” in either the Yalta or Potsdam conferences. Indeed, the Soviet leader spoke of the base request as something “laid before...a conquered state” and he did not “believe that the Soviet Union could be included among such states.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Nimitz “Graybook” [online](#), p. 3457.

<sup>50</sup> Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, 485-486. The JCS had planned on having Admiral Nimitz accept surrender of all Japanese forces in the Kurile Islands south of Onkotan Island, which would have meant all of the Kuriles, except for Paramuschir and Shumshu close to Kamchatka. See “Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” August 14, 1945, *FRUS-VI, The British Commonwealth, The Far East* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1969), 657-58.

<sup>51</sup> “The Ambassador to the Soviet Union (Harriman) to the Secretary of State,” August 22, 1945, *Ibid.*, 689.

<sup>52</sup> Truman, *Memoirs*, Vol. 1, 486-487.

Truman's reply was conciliatory, but with a twist. You "misunderstood my message," he said. He had not demanded a *permanent* base, but simply that one would be useful "during the occupation of Japan." Furthermore, he "was not speaking about any territory of the Soviet Republic, I was speaking of the Kurile Islands, Japanese territory, disposition of which must be made at a peace settlement."<sup>53</sup> Referring issues to a "peace settlement" for disposition was a tactic Truman had used to great effect during the Potsdam conference precisely to avoid settling issues.

If Truman sought to keep the status of the Kuriles unsettled, Stalin did not fall for the trap. In his reply of August 30, he avoided comment about a peace settlement. Admitting that he had "misunderstood" Truman, he said "of course" the United States could use an air base on the Kuriles on an "emergency" basis, but the Soviet government expected "reciprocity" for landing rights on one of the Aleutian Islands.

Truman observed that Stalin had tried several different venues that would "bring to Japan the kind of divided rule which the circumstances and necessities of the military situation had forced upon us in Germany."<sup>54</sup> These were all rejected.

But, it seems, Stalin had the last laugh, or perhaps it was a chuckle. Or, perhaps the laugh was not his. On September 3, following the surrender ceremony aboard the USS *Missouri*, Stalin ordered Soviet forces to take control of Japan's Northern Territories. He claimed that they were simply the *southern* Kuriles, and, as the Kuriles were to be "handed over" to the Russians as part of the Yalta agreement, the Soviets had every right to them. This was a fiction in which both the United States and the Soviet Union thenceforth indulged, but not the Japanese. Of course, as noted above, the historical record is quite plain in stating that the Northern Territories were never considered part of the Kurile Island chain.

Perhaps U.S. ambiguity about the definition of the Kuriles was more calculated than uninformed. Soviet possession of Japan's

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 487.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 488-489.

Northern Territories would become an obstacle to the full normalization of Russo-Japanese ties from 1945 to the present.

*Conclusion*

Truman used the atomic bomb to put in place a geopolitical structure that insured long-term American dominance of the Pacific. In doing so, he significantly altered FDR's strategy, and insured American control over Japan and southern Korea. But he adhered to FDR's solution for China and the hand over of the Kuriles to the USSR.

The results, from the strategic point of view, were a long lasting structure that continues to the present day. Japan remains territorially integrated and a staunch ally. Korea remains divided, but the Republic of Korea is also a staunch ally. The Northern Territories remain in Russian hands and continue to be an impediment to full Japan-Russian relations. The one part of the strategy that failed was FDR's brilliant compromise over China, which fell apart in early 1946, leading to civil war and Communist victory. But even that outcome was not as obvious as it seems. FDR's objective was China's territorial integrity, not rule by a particular party, and on that count, at least, the China outcome, too, succeeded.

