Cabinet paper on the Soviet position in Korea, 31 August 1950

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ANNEX

Korea

[1.] In any realistic view, it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of Korea. The domination of the whole Korean peninsula has been an objective of Russian foreign policy since Czarist days and it may be taken as axiomatic that it will remain so. Korea’s contiguous land frontiers with both the great Communist States of the world, the fact that the Soviet Union disposes of a substantial body of ruthless and disciplined Korean Communists who have undergone years of training in the Soviet Union, and the extreme political immaturity and irresponsibility of the Korean people as a whole, give the Soviet Union obvious and decided advantages in the achievement of their purposes. It can be assumed that the Soviet Union will only cooperate in any United Nations proposals for Korea in so far as she believes that she will be able to further her own designs by doing so. Indeed, the Soviet Union will be implacably opposed to the establishment of a genuinely democratic and independent Government of a unified Korea. Any new democratic State established at the end of the present hostilities in a part or the whole of Korea will, therefore, need a protracted period of tutelage and protection and will be a constant prey to attempts at internal subversion.

2. It is of the first importance that the impressive degree of unanimity over Korea in the United Nations should be maintained and that at every phase, action should command the widest possible measure of support from the Governments and peoples of al non-Communist States, especially those in Asia. It follows, therefore:

(a) That the United Nations should endeavour to make arrangements for Korea which are palpably just and reasonable even though they may prove in practice difficult of attainment.

(b) That if these arrangements are in fact frustrated, it should be clear to the world who is responsible.

3. It is most desirable in the interests of preserving the maximum degree of unanimity in the United Nations that some early statement should be made, setting out the broad objectives of the United Nations in Korea. It will, of course, be difficult to make detailed plans for the political future of Korea until a later stage in the fighting. Much might, for example, depend on whether the North Korean armies suffer almost total destruction in the South, or whether substantial forces succeed in retiring in reasonably good order beyond the 38th parallel. In the former case, it is conceivable that in the absence of more direct Soviet intervention, the administration in North Korea might disintegrate of itself.

4. A statement of objectives would be unlikely to achieve its purpose unless it envisaged something more than the mere restoration of the authority of the present Government even though this was set up under United Nations auspices and a return to the previous precarious *status quo*. A limited objective of this kind would satisfy neither world opinion nor the Korean people. In any case, the United Nations can hardly abandon their declared objective of working for the establishment of a unified and democratic Government. The statement might perhaps, therefore, take the form of a resolution in the General Assembly recommending that as soon as the military situation permits all possible steps should be taken to implement previous Assembly resolutions on the subject and to secure the holding under United Nations auspices of elections in Korea on a national basis with a view to the establishment of a unified, independent and democratic Korean Government. It would be more appropriate for such a resolution to be passed in the General Assembly than in the Security Council, since the Assembly has hitherto been responsible for political arrangements in Korea. Moreover, a resolution in the Assembly provides clearer evidence of wide support for a policy than does a resolution in the Security Council, and there is, of course, the important added advantage that a resolution in the Assembly could not be vetoed by the Soviet Union. The general question of the nature of a possible resolution in the Assembly is further discussed in paragraph 6 below.

5. A resolution on the above lines would not necessarily commit the United Nations to the view that United Nations forces should eventually pass beyond the 38th parallel and occupy the whole of North Korea, which is a question which will have to be left for later decision in the light of the developing military and political situation. But it would emphasise the continuing desire of the United Nations to bring about the unification of Korea on a democratic basis, and if, in the event, this proves impossible of attainment, the responsibility will be made clear.

6. Whatever decision may eventually be reached on the question whether the United Nations forces should proceed beyond the 38th parallel, there may be doubt whether such action (apart of course from such minor incursions as may be necessary in the course of military operations conducted from the south) could be justified on the basis of the Security Council Resolution of 27th June. Action under this Resolution is for the purpose of repelling the armed attack on the Republic of Korea, and consequently action beyond the 38th parallel would be legitimate for this purpose. But permanent occupation would be another matter. In the view of many members of the United Nations, the Republic of Korea derives its legality from the elections held in 1948 under the supervision of a United Nations Commission, and has no title to sovereignty in those parts of Korea where it proved impossible to hold elections, and where, therefore, it has no claim to be representative. It is known that President Syngman Rhee considers that his Government is the Government of all Korea and is fully entitled to exercise jurisdiction throughout the peninsula. If these pretensions were to be accepted, there would be no necessity for new elections; but they are, in fact, unlikely to find favour with many members of the United Nations, and any proposal based on them would be calculated to cause a split in the ranks of the democratic Powers. Indeed, if there is to be any question of United Nations forces operating on any extensive or semi-permanent basis beyond the 38th parallel, it is considered essential that such action should only be taken *after* some statement of general objectives has been made on the lines discussed in paragraph 4 above to recall the recommendation contained in the Security Council Resolution of 27th June[[1]](#footnote-1) and to carry it a stage further by recommending that the necessary steps should be taken, under the aegis of the United Nations forces, to promote conditions of stability and security in which the required rehabilitation of the whole area can be begun.

7. The Soviet Union would view the United Nations military operations in North Korea as an attempt to extinguish by force the satellite “People’s Republic” she has established there. Soviet reactions to such operations cannot be foreseen, but the risks of Soviet (or possibly Chinese) intervention would be increased, since Soviet prestige would suffer if she were to stand by and let her satellite be destroyed. It is believed that the Soviet Union wishes to avoid provoking a major war, but she might none the less pour in an increased supply of arms and equipment and arrange for the despatch of increased numbers of “advisers”. She might even arrange for the despatch of a “volunteer” force, perhaps composed of Russians or Chinese or both, to aid the North Koreans. The resulting situation, which would be much like that which developed during the Spanish Civil war, would be full of explosive possibilities.

8. It is conceivable that irrespective of any intention on the part of the United Nations forces to penetrate North Korea, the Soviet Union may decide, once it has become clear that the North Korean offensive has failed either –

(a) to reoccupy Korea without warning down to the 38th Parallel (a move which could not fail to intensify the dangers of the situation, and might even lead to war); or

(b) to propose in the United Nations that since United States forces are now back in South Korea Soviet forces should reoccupy the North to assist in restoring peace.

Such moves might be accomplished by specious and plausible unification proposals designed to ensure the establishment of a Communist State throughout Korea. These possibilities make it all the more important that the United Nations should clarify their objectives in Korea, if only in general terms, at the earliest possible moment.

9. If the Soviet Union were to reoccupy North Korea, there would be a period during which Korea would again be under joint military occupation, this time with Soviet forces in the North and United Nations forces in the South. Soviet occupation authorities would, in so far as this might be practical in the light of the outcome of present hostilities, endeavour to utilise this period to rearm and re-equip the North Koreans. Once they had done this they might be able to withdraw and a situation would result in which the unification of Korea would only be possible if the United Nations were themselves prepared to take the initiative in resuming hostilities. Such a step would, of course, be unthinkable and the situation would be very much what it was before the North Korean attack. In view of the sharp reaction of the United Nations to North Korean aggression, the Soviet Union might well decide to forego any further overt assault on South Korea. But South Korea would, as before, be subject to continuous attempts at internal subversion.

10. Another possibility is that the Russians may resuscitate the proposal originally adopted at the Moscow Conference in December 1945, for a Four-Power Trusteeship for Korea. The four Trustee Powers were the Soviet Union, China, United States and the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom having reserved the right to invite Australia to take its place. If, as would appear to be the appropriate procedure, the Soviet Union were to address such a proposal to the other great Powers concerned, the grounds of rejection would be clear, viz.; that the problem of Korea had become a matter for discussion by the United Nations. If the Soviet Union were to introduce a proposal into the United Nations seeking United Nations endorsement for the revival of the Four-Power Trusteeship proposal, the best grounds for rejection might be that this was an inappropriate and retrograde step, since the Koreans had already had an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity [ENDS].

[TNA, CAB 129/193]

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1. UN Security Council resolution 83, adopted 27 June 1950, recommended that the United Nations support the Republic of Korea in repelling the attack from the North. It passed by a vote of 7 to 1, with the Yugoslav delegate delivering the only vote against it; the Soviet delegate did not attend the session. See Stueck, *The Korean War,* 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)