

Korean War in 1950 (NSC)

Set in September 1950. Five years after World War II, the Korean Peninsula is under threat of falling to a communist regime.

Case Overview

Set in September 1950. At the conclusion of World War II, Korea—formerly under Japanese control—was divided at the thirty-eighth parallel into a U.S.-occupied south and a Soviet-occupied north. Although the division was meant to be temporary, by 1948 both countries had declared independence. North Korea became a Soviet-supported communist state; South Korea was supported by the United States. Two years later, North Korea invaded South Korea in an attempt to bring the entire peninsula under its control. After several weeks of fighting, U.S. and South Korean forces were defending an area called the Pusan perimeter, in the southernmost portion of the peninsula. General Douglas MacArthur, who was commanding U.S. and allied forces as part of a UN mission, was also making plans for a landing at Inchon, near the South Korean capital of Seoul, in order to surprise North Korean troops and recapture Seoul.

Anticipating the possible success of the Inchon landing, President Truman has convened National Security Council members to advise him on whether to extend the U.S. military intervention north of the thirty-eighth parallel in an attempt to unify the Korean Peninsula. As the dividing lines of the emerging [Cold War](#) start to solidify, the United States will have to weigh whether intervention in North Korea is worth a potential conflict with another [great power](#).

Guide

Global Literacy

Global literacy is the ability to understand and engage effectively in today's interconnected world. Today's interdependent global economy and geopolitical landscape connect America's interests more than ever to the actions and interests of other countries and their citizens. To ensure students understand this interconnected world, they need to be globally literate. [Learn more about global literacy.](#)

The United States plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining international order. This is particularly true in an increasingly globalized world. The range of foreign policy issues that require its attention is vast. The United States must consider foreign policy issues from conflicts in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Syria to tensions with Iran and North Korea; from long-standing alliances to complex, evolving relationships with Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa. Issues on the agenda range from the stability of global finance to the promotion of economic opportunity in low-income countries; and from climate to health to nuclear proliferation to terrorism. The United States has a vested interest in myriad world affairs. Further, issues such as immigration, trade, cybersecurity, climate change, and global health underscore the fading distinction between domestic and international matters.

U.S. leaders use a range of tools to pursue a foreign policy to safeguard national security and achieve U.S. goals:

- diplomatic: consultations and negotiations, treaties, defense and security agreements, resolutions at global and regional bodies such as the United Nations, and public diplomacy to promote U.S. views and culture
- economic: trade and investment agreements, tariffs, sanctions, embargoes, development assistance, loans for the purchase of U.S.-manufactured products, and sales of arms, equipment, and technology
- military: missile strikes, nuclear deterrence, ground force deployments, ship and submarine patrols, blockades, unilateral or partnered military exercises, foreign military training, and special operations forces
- unconventional actions: undertaken by the U.S. government and its proxies, such as training and assisting foreign intelligence services, supporting armed nonstate actors, private security contracting, and cyberwarfare

Effective policymaking requires a deft combination of these tools. To accomplish this, policymakers must clearly define U.S. interests. Policymakers then gauge the interests, resources, and motivations of foreign governments and nonstate actors. The U.S. intelligence community supports policymakers by collecting and analyzing a vast range of information, including satellite images, communications records,, and other data.

Foreign policy successes and failures are often associated with presidential decisions. Less explored is the decision-making system that helps the president make those critical choices and coordinate their implementation. This guide will help you understand the system through which the United States creates and implements its foreign policy.

To learn more about the NSC, check out these readings:

- [“What is the National Security Council?”](#) YouTube video, 2:28, posted by CFR Education, August 28, 2023.
- [“National Security Council,”](#) The White House.
- David J. Rothkopf, [“Presidents and the National Security Council,”](#) Interview by Bernard Gwertzman, Council on Foreign Relations, November 12, 2008.

Interagency Process

Regardless of the scale of the problem, a successful foreign policy–making process starts by defining interests and goals. Policymakers and their advisors then formulate policy options to meet those goals and consider each option’s strengths and weaknesses. This process is challenging. In the best of times information can be unreliable or incomplete or an adversary’s intentions can be unclear. Often a decision’s consequences can be unknowable. Leaders frequently have to choose from a list on which every option is imperfect. Adding to this uncertainty is the complexity of the U.S. government’s foreign policy machinery. Numerous agencies—each with its own interests and biases—seek to influence how policy is decided and carried out. It takes considerable effort to run a process capable of producing sound policy decisions.

The National Security Council (NSC) plays a critical role in this effort. Its mission is to help the president effectively use a variety of instruments—military, diplomatic, or otherwise—to forge policies that advance U.S. national security goals.

The NSC was created by the National Security Act of 1947. This act defined the NSC as an interagency body intended to “advise the president with respect to the integration of domestic, foreign, and military policies relating to the national security.” The period after World War II was an age of expanded American interests and responsibilities. The NSC was expected to provide a place where the heads of federal departments and agencies could cooperate to develop recommendations for policies that would advance U.S. aims. The NSC and its staff were also meant to manage the policymaking process. This ensured that the president would receive a full range of advice and opinion from the departments and agencies involved in national security.

The NSC has evolved significantly over the years. The NSC has adapted to the preferences of successive presidents and the challenges they faced. Variables such as the attendees, the frequency of meetings, the manner in which information is passed to the president, the importance of consensus, and the relative dominance of the NSC over other government institutions have changed over the decades.

The NSC has evolved to comprise various interagency committees and a large staff to prepare analysis and coordinate policymaking and implementation. The NSC is at the center of the interagency process. This process is one through which relevant government agencies address foreign policy issues and help the president make and execute policy choices.

I. National Security Advisor

The national security advisor (formally assistant to the president for national security affairs) is at the heart of the NSC structure. The national security advisor's role is twofold: to offer advice to the president and to coordinate and manage policymaking. Because they have direct access to the president and do not represent a cabinet department, national security advisors are in a unique position. From this neutral perch they drive foreign policy decisions, manage the actors involved, and mitigate conflict throughout the decision-making process.

II. National Security Council Staff

The NSC staff consists of individuals from a collection of agencies that support the president, the vice president, and the administration. NSC staff members are generally organized into directorates that focus on regions or issues. The size and organization of the staff vary with each administration.

The NSC staff provides expertise for the variety of national security policy matters under consideration. It manages numerous responsibilities, including preparing speeches, memos, and discussion papers and handling inquiries from Congress on foreign policy issues. Staff members analyze both immediate and long-standing issues and help prioritize the agenda.

III. Committee Structure

Committees are at the core of policy deliberation and policymaking in the NSC. They fall into four categories:

- The highest level is the National Security Council itself. Formal NSC meetings are chaired by the president and include individuals named by the National Security Act of 1947 as well as other senior aides the president invites.
- The Principals Committee (PC) comprises cabinet-level officials who head major government departments concerned with national security, such as the secretaries of state and defense. The national security advisor traditionally chairs the Principals Committee.
- The Deputies Committee (DC) includes the deputy leaders of the government departments represented on the principals committee and is chaired by the deputy national security advisor.
- Interagency Policy Committees (IPCs) cover a range of regional areas and issues. Each committee includes officials who specialize in the relevant area or issue at one of the departments or agencies in the interagency system. IPCs are generally chaired by senior directors on the NSC staff. Much of the day-to-day work needed to formulate and implement foreign policy across the U.S. government happens at the IPC level.

This committee structure tackles both immediate crises such as an outbreak of conflict and enduring issues such as climate change. IPCs conduct analysis on an issue, gather views on it and its importance from various departments, formulate and evaluate policy options, and determine what resources and steps would be required to carry out those options. The Deputies Committee manages the interagency process up and down. It decides what IPCs to establish, and gives them specific assignments. It also considers information submitted by the IPCs before relaying it to the Principals Committee or the full NSC.

The Principals Committee is the highest-level setting, aside from the NSC itself, for debating national security issues. It consists of the heads of the NSC's component agencies. The Principals Committee is essentially all the members of the NSC except the president and vice president. Formal NSC meetings, which the president chairs, occur whenever the president sees fit. They consider issues that require the president's personal attention and a direct presidential decision.

The goal of this committee structure is to foster consensus on policy options or highlight where and why consensus cannot be reached. If officials at one level agree on an issue, it does not need to go to senior officials for a decision. This practice reserves the president's time and that of members of the Principals Committee for the most complicated and sensitive debates.

When a crisis erupts issues sometimes do not follow the usual path up from the IPCs. In these cases, NSC staff members and officials in government departments and agencies generally draft papers drawing on their expertise, available intelligence, and any existing contingency plans. Policy options are then debated and decided at the appropriate level. The policymaking process can also deviate from this model based on the preferences of each president.

For the purposes of this NSC simulation, you will role-play the NSC meeting with the assumption that the committees described have already done their jobs. Any critical information has already been passed to the highest-level decision-makers.

Presidential Decisions

When the president makes a policy decision, it can take the form of a verbal instruction recorded and shared with relevant departments and agencies. The president can also issue formal decisions in documents that lay out the administration's policy and explain its rationale and goals. These documents have gone by [different names under different presidents](#). President Joe Biden issues national security memoranda and national security study memoranda. President Donald Trump issued national security presidential memoranda.

The president can also issue an executive order (EO). EOs are a more formal and public declaration of policy. In contrast, national security directives are generally directed internally to federal departments and are often classified. In the past, presidents have [issued EOs](#) for such purposes as facilitating sanctions against foreign individuals and establishing new offices in government departments to carry out foreign policy aims. For federal agencies, both national security directives and executive orders carry the full force of law.

Departments and Agencies

Although many executive branch departments and agencies are involved in foreign policy, the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the intelligence community form the core of the foreign policy bureaucracy. The Department of the Treasury, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Department of Justice often play crucial roles as well.

Department of State

The Department of State conducts the United States' relations with other countries and international organizations. It maintains U.S. diplomatic presence abroad. The Department of State also issues visas for foreigners to enter the country, aids U.S. citizens overseas, and manages other programs to promote American interests. The [secretary of state](#) is the president's principal foreign affairs advisor and has a keen understanding of the United States' international relations. They are also well informed on the relationships between foreign countries, and the behavior and interests of their governments.

Department of Defense

The Department of Defense carries out U.S. defense policy and maintains U.S. military forces. It includes the U.S. [Army](#), [Navy](#), [Marine Corps](#), and [Air Force](#), as well as an array of agencies related to defense. The department employs more than two million military and civilian personnel and operates military bases around the world. The [secretary of defense](#) is the head of the department and the president's principal defense policy advisor. They also stay up-to-date on the security situation in foreign countries and the possibilities and implications of U.S. military involvement. The [chairman of the joint chiefs of staff](#) is the highest-ranking member of the U.S. armed forces and the president's top military advisor.

Intelligence Community

The U.S. intelligence community consists of eighteen agencies and organizations, including the [Central Intelligence Agency](#) (CIA), [National Security Agency](#) (NSA), and [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI), which gather and analyze intelligence.

Each of these agencies has its own mission; for example, the NSA focuses on signals intelligence (information gathered from communications and other electronic signals) and the [Defense Intelligence Agency](#) on military information. The [director of national intelligence](#) is the president's principal advisor on intelligence issues. They oversee this network of agencies with the aim of ensuring that they work together and deliver the best possible information to U.S. policymakers.

Department of the Treasury

The Department of the Treasury carries out policy on issues related to the U.S. and global economies and financial systems. The [secretary of the treasury](#) serves as one of the president's chief economic advisors and is responsible for addressing a range of economic concerns. The Treasury's ten bureaus, which include the [U.S. Mint](#) and the [Internal Revenue Service](#), do much of the department's work, which ranges from collecting tax to printing currency and executing economic sanctions.

Department of Homeland Security

Created soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security works to counter and respond to risks to American security. It focuses on issues such as terrorism prevention, border security and immigration, disaster response, and cybersecurity. Familiar agencies within the department include [U.S. Customs and Border Protection](#), the [U.S. Secret Service](#), and the [Transportation Security Administration](#). The [secretary of homeland security](#) oversees the department and advises the president on relevant issues.

Department of Justice

The Department of Justice investigates and prosecutes possible violations of federal law. The Department of Justice represents the U.S. government in legal matters and works more broadly to prevent and respond to crime. Agencies such as the [FBI](#) and the [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) are part of the department, as are divisions focusing on particular areas of law, such as national security and civil rights. Leading the department is the [attorney general](#), who offers legal advice to the president and the heads of other departments.

Case Notes

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

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Instructions

How to Run a CFR Simulation Role-Play

The Issue

On June 25, 1950, Soviet-backed North Korea invaded U.S.-backed South Korea. North Korea sent its forces across the agreed boundary at the thirty-eighth parallel in an attempt to bring the entire peninsula under its control. In response, President

Harry S. Truman approved U.S. military action to help South Korea. Truman and others believed what was at stake was not simply U.S. interests in Asia but also the confidence of U.S. allies everywhere in U.S. willingness to stand up to communist aggression. The military action was in accordance with UN Security Council [Resolution 83](#)—advanced by the United States—which authorized the use of force to “repel the armed attack.”

After several weeks of fighting, U.S. and South Korean forces were defending an area called the Pusan perimeter, a zone of southeastern South Korea around the port of Pusan, against North Korea’s southward advance. General Douglas MacArthur, who was commanding U.S. and allied forces as part of the UN mission, was also making plans for a landing at Inchon, near the South Korean capital Seoul.

A successful Inchon landing would mean the prospect of swiftly liberating South Korea. Truman faced a weighty decision. Should the United States simply restore the prewar status quo, pushing North Korea’s military back to the thirty-eighth parallel? Or should U.S. forces, leading UN forces in what Truman called a “police action,” advance into North Korea and try to unify the peninsula? On September 1, 1950, [Truman pledged](#) U.S. help for the Koreans “to be free, independent, and united.” But there was no consensus among administration officials. Likewise, members of Congress questioned how far U.S. involvement should extend.

A U.S. move into North Korea would therefore bring the risk of war with the [Soviet Union](#), China, or both. It would also carry the possibility of a unified peninsula, at peace, under leadership friendly to the United States. Merely restoring the status quo would reduce the risk of war with the communist powers. It would also preserve a hostile North Korean leadership and leave the peninsula divided. This could serve as an open wound, and potential battleground, in the intensifying [Cold War](#).

DECISION POINT—*Set in 1950.*

President Truman has convened National Security Council (NSC) members to advise him on whether to extend the U.S. military intervention north of the [38th parallel](#) in an attempt to unify the Korean Peninsula. The president has made clear that this decision depends on the success of the Inchon landing and victory in South Korea. It is also clear that NSC members will need to consider a few critical questions. First, what is at stake in the conflict? Is it just a Korean national issue, fueled by North-South rivalry, each side seeking to lead a unified nation, or could the conflict become a major flash point in the Cold War? Second, what are the chances of Soviet or Chinese intervention if the United States invades North Korea? Finally, does reunifying Korea offer a better prospect of a durable peace than stopping at the thirty-eighth parallel would?

Background

Slightly smaller than the United Kingdom, the Korean Peninsula juts southward from China between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan. The peninsula’s northern edge shares a long border with China and a short one with Russia. East of the peninsula is a maritime boundary with Japan.

For much of the early twentieth century, Korea was a [protectorate](#) of Japan. Japan seized control of the peninsula—which had been ruled for centuries by the Choson dynasty—in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95). Japan maintained its control despite [challenges from Russia](#) and frequent domestic uprisings. [Japan’s grip](#) on the peninsula was tight politically, economically, and culturally. Japanese authorities outlawed social and political organizations. They also banned the teaching of the Korean language, and forced the population to speak Japanese and adopt Japanese names. Japan did industrialize the peninsula, building highways, railroads, and factories. However, much of this effort was gradually directed toward military use by an [increasingly aggressive imperial Japan](#).

By the late 1930s, Japan was well into its campaign of conquest throughout East Asia. In 1931, it invaded and seized Manchuria, a resource-rich region in northeast China, and renamed it Manchukuo. It followed up in 1937 with a full-scale invasion of China, starting the [Second Sino-Japanese War](#). In 1936 and 1937, Japan formalized its friendship with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy by signing the Anti-Comintern Pact. This created the [alliance](#) that would come to be known as the Axis powers.

When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Japan saw an opportunity to seize European colonies and grow its empire. However, it faced growing economic [sanctions](#) from the United States and its Western allies, who were worried about Japan's imperial expansion. On December 7, 1941, the Japanese carried out a surprise military strike on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The attack was intended to avoid an extended conflict by debilitating the U.S. fleet. Instead it brought the United States into World War II.

During the war, Japan brutally exploited Korea's people. It drafted more than 240,000 men into the military, as soldiers and civilian employees. More than [five million men and women were conscripted](#) to work in war-related industries under dangerous conditions. In addition, some 670,000 were forcibly brought to Japan. Hundreds of thousands died. But the most notorious abuse involved the so-called comfort women. Up to two hundred thousand Korean [women were kidnapped](#) to serve as sex slaves in military brothels, or comfort stations, for Japanese soldiers. Japan [contests its responsibility](#) for the treatment of these women to this day.

By early 1945, the war in the Pacific was entering its final phase. U.S. leaders started to think about how to handle the territories Japan had acquired since beginning its expansionist campaign in the late nineteenth century. At the Yalta conference in [Crimea](#) in February, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who were allies against Nazi Germany in the war in Europe, agreed to establish an international [trusteeship](#) for Korea following Japanese surrender. This agreement, though, was only a general framework. The precise arrangements for governing a postwar Korea were not finalized.

The [Soviet Union](#) declared war on Japan on August 8, 1945. Shortly thereafter, Soviet forces invaded Korea and Manchuria. U.S. military leaders feared that, if the Soviet Union ended up occupying Korea in the course of the conflict, it would never cede control. This concern spurred the U.S. government to finalize a formula for administering the peninsula. U.S. officials hurriedly proposed the thirty-eighth parallel as a demarcation line between U.S. and Soviet forces, cutting the peninsula almost in half. This line was intended as a temporary operational boundary that would hinder Soviet ambitions and prevent confusion among military forces operating in Korea.

The order came down on August 17, 1945, two days after Japan's surrender ended World War II. (Japan had surrendered days after the United States dropped [atomic bombs](#)—the only two ever used in combat—on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, devastating the two cities and killing some 170,000 people.) The Soviet Union would accept the Japanese surrender of weapons and troops and take control of the territory north of the thirty-eighth parallel. South of the parallel, these tasks would fall to the United States.

Temporary peace was thus brought to the Korean Peninsula after the end of the war. The political and economic situation remained complex and unstable. [U.S. troops landed](#) in Korea on September 8, 1945, following the Soviet troops, who had arrived the previous month. Because Korea had been a Japanese colony since 1910, no Korean government was in place ready to reclaim authority. The political scene was fragmented as various leaders jostled for power. One of these was Kim Il-sung, a military leader with close connections to the Soviet Union who would become the first leader of North Korea. Other contenders were ultranationalists oriented more toward the West. This camp included Syngman Rhee, who had earned a doctorate at Princeton University and, with U.S. backing, would become the first leader of South Korea.

Korea's economy, meanwhile, was suffering. When the Japanese departed after World War II, many companies were left without managers, capital, and other resources. This led to unemployment and shortages of vital goods. The peninsula's division at the thirty-eighth parallel did not help. Korea's heavy industry and energy production were concentrated in the north. This left the south's primarily agrarian economy dependent on electricity transmission and transport of other essentials. This, along with the return of millions of Koreans from elsewhere in the region, caused significant social unrest and protests against the U.S. military government in the south.

At first, the United States and the Soviet Union shared a vision for a united, independent Korea. The foreign ministers of the World War II allies, meeting in December 1945 in Moscow, agreed that Korea would have a five-year trusteeship. Attempts to fulfill this vision stumbled. A joint U.S.-Soviet commission met occasionally in 1946 and 1947 but was unable to establish a Korean government because the United States and Soviet Union disagreed on who should participate.

Meanwhile, the division on the peninsula remained stark. The south was disorganized, afflicted by economic instability, political differences among Koreans, and uncertain U.S. policy. In the north, by contrast, the Soviet Union smartly

consolidated control. It created administrative bodies and a North Korean Workers' Party that united various left-wing groups. At the same time, Soviet-encouraged land reform. This redistributed land from Japanese and Korean landowners to poor farmers. At the same time, it drove thousands of former landowners and Japanese collaborators into the southern part of the peninsula.

Failing to make progress with Moscow on an acceptable path for Korean independence, the Truman administration took the issue to the UN General Assembly in September 1947. World leaders had [established the United Nations](#) just two years earlier, vesting in it their collective hopes of preventing a third world war. In the General Assembly, the United States continued to advance the vision of a united, independent peninsula. In November 1947, the General Assembly adopted [UN Security Council Resolution 112](#), which asserted “that the national independence of Korea should be re-established and all occupying forces then withdrawn at the earliest possible date.” To facilitate this plan, the resolution established the UN Temporary Commission on Korea. This resolution would pave the way for elections for a national assembly. This assembly was to set up a government that would assume full administrative responsibilities and work with the United States and Soviet Union to clear Korea of occupying troops.

Despite the commission, the Korean Peninsula moved no closer to unified [governance](#). Instead, politics continued to evolve separately on either side of the thirty-eighth parallel. Rhee, by now an influential, U.S.-backed nationalist leader, favored independence as soon as possible—even though a declaration of independence would have effect only in the south as long as the United States and the Soviet Union remained at loggerheads. In a UN-supervised election in May 1948 for a constitutional assembly in the south, Rhee came out in front. Under his leadership, the assembly adopted a constitution outlining a presidential system of government. The Republic of Korea, which remains the official name of South Korea, was proclaimed on August 15, 1948. Rhee took office in Seoul as its first president.

North of the thirty-eighth parallel, the Soviet Union refused to admit the Temporary Commission. Four days after the proclamation of the Republic of Korea, authorities in the north cut power transmission to the south, further reinforcing the peninsula's division. Less than a month later, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the official name of North Korea, was born, its capital in Pyongyang. Its first leader, Kim Il-sung, claimed jurisdiction over the entire peninsula. By the end of 1948, he had solidified control over the north's administrative structures, military forces, and Communist Party.

The United States kept military forces in South Korea until 1949, but its support for Rhee's government was half-hearted. U.S. officials were unsure of Seoul's political future and doubted its strategic value. The United States declined to commit to defending South Korea even though it had made such commitments to Japan and the members of the new [North Atlantic Treaty Organization \(NATO\)](#) in the immediate post-World War II years. (In a [speech](#) on January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson did not include Korea in what he described as a U.S. defensive perimeter.) The South Korean government established its own army in September 1948. However, a rebellion by some army units the following month, and a purge thereafter, left the force weak. By 1950, it had fewer than one hundred thousand soldiers and lacked advanced equipment such as tanks, heavy weapons, and combat aircraft.

The contrast with North Korea was stark. Although the Soviet Union had withdrawn its forces in late 1948, focusing instead on increasing its control in Eastern Europe, it continued to provide training and arms to North Korean forces. With this assistance, by mid-1950 Pyongyang had built up a force of 150,000 to 200,000 troops. The North Korean People's Army had fearsome Soviet weapons, including tanks and fighter planes, at its disposal.

Fueled by his military might and ambitions to control the entire peninsula, Kim Il-sung sought Stalin's support for an invasion of the south. At first, Stalin resisted. In spring 1950, however, [he relented](#) and approved Kim's plan. Kim also sought support—at Stalin's encouragement—from the Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who had recently emerged victorious in the Chinese [civil war](#) and successfully pushed nationalist forces offshore to Taiwan. Early on the morning of June 25, 1950, North Korean soldiers crossed the thirty-eighth parallel. The Korean War began. The main offensive was aimed at the South Korean capital, Seoul, which fell in only three days.

The United States, under Truman, responded both diplomatically and militarily. On the diplomatic front, it immediately secured UN Security Council [Resolution 82](#), calling for the invasion to halt. [Resolution 83](#), passed two days later, on June 27, called on UN member states to provide “such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary.” The Soviet Union, as a permanent member of the Security Council, could have vetoed these resolutions. However, the Soviet Union had been

[boycotting Security Council meetings](#) after the defeat of its proposal to replace the nationalist Chinese delegation holding the council's permanent seat with a delegation from Mao's communist China.

Truman initially gave military equipment to the South Korean army. Truman also deployed U.S. aircraft and ships. As South Korea's military faltered, he allowed limited U.S. ground troops to [enter the fight in early July](#). On July 7, UN Security Council [Resolution 84](#) put the United States in command of all military operations to assist the South Koreans. Under MacArthur's command, the UN mission initially struggled. The disorganized, ill-equipped South Korean army was no match for the invading North Koreans. U.S. personnel, still recovering from World War II, had to contend with equipment shortages, [refugees](#) fleeing the fighting, and even a lack of water.

By the end of the summer, about two months after the war began, [more than eighty thousand U.S. troops](#) were in Korea. They were fighting alongside some ninety thousand South Korean troops and a 1,600-man British contingent. These allied forces held only the [Pusan perimeter](#) in southeastern South Korea—North Korean soldiers had overrun the rest of the peninsula. Communist control, which the United States had sought to limit since the closing months of World War II, now threatened all of Korea.

To reverse the turn of events, MacArthur was planning a risky landing of forces at Inchon, an area on the west coast of South Korea near Seoul. He aimed to cut off enemy supply lines behind the North Korean troops, which had advanced farther south. The aim was to divide the enemy forces and break their hold on Seoul, enabling South Korea's government to eventually regain control. The Inchon landing would be an amphibious assault: troops would arrive by sea and proceed on to land. This plan echoed the [D-Day](#) landings on the beaches of Normandy, in France, on June 6, 1944. Those assaults were costly but spectacularly successful and turned the tide against Nazi Germany in the European theater of World War II.

Should the Inchon landing succeed, the liberation of South Korea would be at hand. With that could come an opportunity to unify the peninsula, as U.S. leaders had envisioned since the surrender of Japan. But realizing this opportunity would require invading North Korea, which could bring the United States into conflict with the Soviet Union, China, or both.

Role of the United States

Inside the Truman administration, arguments over what the United States should aim to do in Korea began almost as soon as the North Koreans invaded the south. Perhaps the most critical question was whether and how China or the [Soviet Union](#) would intervene if the United States tried to reunify the Korean Peninsula.

On the one hand, Truman was cautious. He sought to ensure that the United States would not overcommit to Korea or slip into conflict with Moscow. As he wrote in his memoir *Year of Decisions*, "Every decision I made in connection with the Korean conflict had this one aim in mind: to prevent a third world war and the terrible destruction it would bring to the civilized world. This meant that we should not do anything that would provide the excuse to the Soviets and plunge the free nations into full-scale all-out war." On the other hand, administration officials recognized a potential opportunity to deal a devastating blow to global [communism](#) and reunify Korea under a democratic, U.S.-backed government.

The initial U.S. goal, in the opening weeks of the conflict, was simply to drive the North Koreans back to their own territory. Truman agreed with an early suggestion by Secretary of the Army Frank Pace that U.S. military operations north of the thirty-eighth parallel should be strictly limited. He authorized military operations with the specific goal of restoring that parallel as the border.

Many administration officials, though, advanced the view that U.S. aims should go further. John Allison, director of the State Department's Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, was among them. In a July 1, 1950, memo to Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk, [Allison wrote](#), "I am convinced that there will be no permanent peace and stability in Korea as long as the artificial division at the [38th parallel](#) continues." Other major State Department figures, including advisor John Foster Dulles, generally shared a desire to pursue full unification of the peninsula. They were more cautious than Allison, however, and feared war with the Soviet Union or China.

Military leaders, for their part, were eager to proceed north of the thirty-eighth parallel, though their foremost goal was not necessarily to reunify the peninsula. Instead, it was to devastate the North Korean military so that it could not invade South Korea again. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Omar Bradley [wrote](#) in his autobiography "*A General's Life*" that this was the military's "unanimous" position: "We believed that MacArthur should not be restrained at the 38th parallel."

This view certainly pleased MacArthur, who had ambitions of occupying and reunifying the entire peninsula. In mid-July, just weeks after the war began, [MacArthur told](#) other military leaders, "I intend to destroy and not to drive back the North Korean forces. I may need to occupy all of North Korea." On August 8, W. Averell Harriman, special assistant to the president, met MacArthur in Tokyo. MacArthur, [in Harriman's telling](#), was confident that elections could be held in both North and South Korea following a military victory—and that MacArthur had "no doubt of an overwhelming victory for the non-Communist parties" in both the South and the North.

The opposite view—that the United States should limit itself to pushing the North Koreans back—was less widespread during the summer of 1950. Some officials, though, did counsel restraint. This perspective came most notably from the State Department's policy planning staff, a unit intended to provide analysis that goes beyond day-to-day issues. George Kennan, who had established the staff and served as its first director, was one of the loudest voices warning of the potential risks of intervention north of the thirty-eighth parallel. Kennan's successor as director of the policy planning staff, Paul Nitze, and other members of the unit shared Kennan's skeptical view. A [July 22 draft memo](#) prepared by the one staff argued: "The disadvantages of a failure to attain the complete independence and unity of Korea after the North Korean forces have been driven back to the 38th parallel must be weighed against the risk of a major conflict with the USSR or Communist China that such a settlement might well involve." In other words, stopping U.S. action at the thirty-eighth parallel would be bad, but war with the Soviets or Chinese could be worse.

Preparation and Role-Play

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

CFR Education simulations can be run for several days or weeks and include background readings, videos, and assignments to help students understand the situation and their roles.

[Instructions](#)

[Video: How to Run a CFR Simulation Role-Play](#)

Roles Overview

Print these [custom placards](#) for use during your simulation. If you need to edit them, make a copy to your Google Drive.

Roles

President

The president is the head of state and commander in chief of the U.S. Armed Forces. They preside over National Security Council (NSC) meetings and listens to the advice and information presented by others. The president is not expected to be an expert on any single subject, but instead draws on the expertise of the NSC to analyze options and choose what they feel is the best policy to advance U.S. interests.

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The president's goals are to

- select one or more policy options after considering the opinions and recommendations of NSC members; and
- balance and promote U.S. interests, with an eye toward both immediate goals and long-term foreign policy strategy.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the [38th parallel](#), what should its military and political goals be?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and [nonstate actors](#) who want to do the United States harm?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the 38th parallel?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- How can the president best articulate a decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?

Vice President

The vice president must be ready at a moment's notice to assume the presidency if the commander in chief is unable to perform their duties. Vice presidents can play a relatively active role on the National Security Council (NSC), serving as a general advisor and freely advocating their own positions during meetings. In particular, the president may ask the vice president to serve as an independent voice, untethered to any of the agencies represented by other NSC participants. The president may also ask about the interaction between the issue at hand and the domestic political situation, including in Congress.

The vice president's goals are to

- provide advice to the president on any topic, including those overlooked by other NSC participants; and
- understand the range of views in Congress and work to build congressional and public support for the president's chosen approach.

Issues for Consideration

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and [nonstate actors](#) who want to do the United States harm?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the [38th parallel](#)?

- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What is the range of attitudes in Congress on the situation in Korea and the ultimate U.S. goals there?
- What is the range of attitudes in the media and among the U.S. public toward Korea and the U.S. goals there?
- How can the president best articulate a decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?

Secretary of State

The Department of State maintains the U.S. diplomatic presence around the world, conducting foreign relations and using an on-the-ground perspective to generate country-specific knowledge. As head of the department, the secretary draws on this knowledge to present an authoritative view of the United States' bilateral relationships, the relationships between foreign countries, and the behavior and interests of foreign governments.

The secretary of state's goals are to

- serve as the president's principal foreign policy advisor; and
- analyze how policy options will affect the interests, reputation, and relationships of the United States.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and [nonstate actors](#) who want to do the United States harm?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the [38th parallel](#), and how should this affect consideration of the policy options?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- How, if at all, might the State Department's diplomatic efforts be required to support various policy options in this case? What, if any, diplomatic steps would be useful to support either policy option?

Secretary of Defense

The secretary of defense is the principal defense policy advisor to the president, under whose direction they exercise authority over the Department of Defense. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, the secretary analyzes the security situation in the relevant region and explains the likely implications of U.S. military involvement, both for the immediate crisis and for the United States' overall strategic position. [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use](#).

The secretary of defense's goals are to

- understand the options for and feasibility of any military action, as well as its possible outcomes; and
- identify ways to prevent the deterioration of a crisis to the point where it mandates U.S. military intervention.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the [38th parallel](#), what should its military and political goals be?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the 38th parallel?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What are the military capabilities and interests of the countries that are involved or could become involved in the conflict in Korea?
- What would be the implications of a military deployment into North Korea, whether quick or extended, for U.S. military capacity in other parts of the world?
- If undertaken, what might a U.S. military intervention north of the 38th parallel require? What kinds of capabilities and assets could the U.S. military deploy? Would the intervention feature only Korean ground forces or American ground forces as well?

Secretary of the Treasury

The Department of the Treasury carries out policy on issues related to the U.S. and global economies and financial systems. The secretary of the treasury, as head of this department, serves as one of the president's chief economic advisors. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, they analyze the economic dimensions of foreign policy issues and weigh the potential impact of policy options on U.S. economic concerns, including growth, trade and investment, and the position of the U.S. dollar.

The secretary of the treasury's goals are to

- serve as a senior presidential advisor on economic policy; and
- determine how foreign policy options might affect the U.S. economy and financial system, the global economy, and economic relations between the United States and others.

Issues for Consideration

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the [38th parallel](#), and how should this affect consideration of the policy options?

- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain communism in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- How can the president best articulate a decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?
- What, if any, economic interests does the United States have in Korea and the broader northeast Asian region?
- What might be the financial costs and broader impact on the U.S. economy of a U.S. military intervention in North Korea?

National Security Advisor

The national security advisor (NSA) has a special role in crisis management, serving as the “honest broker” for the national security policy process. Although the president makes final decisions, the NSA is responsible for ensuring that they have all the necessary information, that a full range of viable policy options has been articulated, that the prospects for success and failure have been identified, that any legal issues have been addressed, and that all members of the National Security Council (NSC) have had the opportunity to contribute.

The national security advisor's goals are to

- facilitate the president's consideration of issues by keeping the NSC discussion on track and guiding it toward concrete policy options; and
- build trust as an honest broker among the other NSC participants.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the 38th parallel, what should its military and political goals be?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and nonstate actors who want to do the United States harm?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the 38th parallel?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain communism in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What are the most important factors for the president to consider when making a decision? What types of analysis would be the most useful for other members of the National Security Council to present?

Chief of Staff

The chief of staff oversees the Executive Office of the President, which provides the president with support to govern effectively. This post has traditionally been home to many of the president's closest advisors. In National Security Council

(NSC) meetings, the chief of staff ensures that the president has the necessary analysis on the full range of factors relevant to the case, including the U.S. political situation. They also guide the process of implementing and communicating presidential decisions.

The chief of staff's goals are to

- highlight the domestic implications of U.S. foreign policy choices; and
- develop strategies to carry out the president's policy and communicate it to U.S. and international audiences.

Issues for Consideration

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and [nonstate actors](#) who want to do the United States harm?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the [38th parallel](#), and how should this affect consideration of the policy options?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What is the range of attitudes in Congress on the situation in Korea and the U.S. goals there?
- What is the range of attitudes in the media and among the U.S. public toward Korea and the U.S. goals there?
- How can the president best articulate a decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?

Director of Central Intelligence

The U.S. intelligence community consists of agencies and organizations that gather and analyze intelligence to help policymakers formulate and implement U.S. foreign policy. In addition to administering the Central Intelligence Agency, the director of central intelligence oversees this network of agencies. They focus on providing the latest relevant information to National Security Council (NSC) members and articulating the capabilities and interests of the intelligence community.

The director of central intelligence's goals are to

- provide complete, accurate, and up-to-date information to the NSC on the situation under discussion; and
- serve as the principal advisor to the president and the NSC on intelligence matters.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the [38th parallel](#), what should its military and political goals be?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the 38th parallel, and how should this affect

- consideration of the policy options?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain communism in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What are the military capabilities and interests of the countries that are involved or could become involved in the conflict in Korea?
- What would be the implications of a military deployment into North Korea, whether quick or extended, for U.S. military capacity in other parts of the world?
- If undertaken, what might a U.S. military intervention north of the 38th parallel require? What kinds of capabilities and assets could the U.S. military deploy? Would the intervention feature only Korean ground forces or American ground forces as well?

Attorney General

The attorney general is the head of the Department of Justice and the chief lawyer of the U.S. government. The department represents the United States in legal matters, including by prosecuting violations of federal law. In National Security Council (NSC) meetings, the attorney general gives the president advice and opinions on the legal aspects of policies under consideration.

The Attorney General's goals are to

- consider the legal elements and implications of U.S. foreign policy options; and
- ensure that any policies decided by the NSC are in compliance with domestic and international law.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the 38th parallel, what should its military and political goals be?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis? How should these various interests influence a U.S. response?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What are the legal considerations surrounding the potential deployment of U.S. military forces into North Korea and an effort to reunify the Korean Peninsula? What are the roles of the president and Congress on this issue?
- What, if any, obligations and opportunities does the United States have stemming from existing UN General Assembly and UN Security Council resolutions regarding Korea?
- Are there particular legal questions surrounding U.S. military participation in a multilateral military operation?

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) is the highest-ranking member of the U.S. military and the principal military advisor to the president, the secretary of defense, the National Security Council (NSC), and the Homeland Security

Council. The CJCS does not exercise command authority over U.S. troops. Instead, they work with the heads of the U.S. military services to provide advice to the president and other senior leaders.

The CJCS's goals are to

- serve as the president's military advisor on the NSC; and
- advise the president on specific military options and the corresponding risks, benefits, and implications.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the [38th parallel](#), what should its military and political goals be?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the 38th parallel?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What are the military capabilities and interests of the countries that are involved or could become involved in the conflict in Korea? How should this knowledge affect consideration of various U.S. responses to the crisis?
- What would be the implications of a military deployment into North Korea, whether quick or extended, for U.S. military capacity in other parts of the world?
- If undertaken, what might a U.S. military intervention north of the 38th parallel require? What kinds of capabilities and assets could the U.S. military deploy? Would the intervention feature only Korean ground forces or American ground forces as well?

U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations

The role of the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations (UN) is to advance U.S. foreign policy interests in the bodies and forums of the UN system. Reporting to the secretary of state, the permanent representative helps formulate and articulate the U.S. position on all political and security matters under discussion at the UN. At National Security Council (NSC) meetings, they outline policy steps available to the United States at the UN and advises NSC participants on the positions and actions of other UN member states.

The U.S. permanent representative to the UN's goals are to

- advise the president and secretary of state on the diplomatic actions the United States can or should take at the UN; and
- promote the United States' interests and values at the UN.

Issues for Consideration

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and [nonstate actors](#) who want to do the

United States harm?

- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the [Soviet Union](#)?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- How might the State Department's diplomatic efforts be required to support various policy options in this case?
- Are there particular legal questions surrounding U.S. military participation in a [multilateral](#) military operation?
- What interests do other major UN member states, especially the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, have in Korea, and what policy preferences might they have in the current situation?
- What is the role of the United Nations, particularly the UN Security Council, in the crisis and in U.S. policy steps so far? What additional steps might be available to the United States through the United Nations, based on the policy option the president adopts?
- How important is it for the United States to receive the backing of the UN Security Council for any military intervention north of the [38th parallel](#)? Why?

General Advisor to the President

The general advisor offers analysis and recommendations that are unconstrained by the interests of any department or agency. They are tasked with providing a comprehensive assessment of the situation at hand and ideas for policy options that serve U.S. interests.

The general advisor's goals are to

- understand the breadth of the issue and outline its stakes for the United States; and
- advise the president on the range of policy options proposed by all NSC members.

Issues for Consideration

- How does the situation in Korea as presented in this case threaten U.S. national security? Where does it fit in the broader range of national security concerns facing the United States?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this crisis?
- If the United States were to intervene militarily north of the [38th parallel](#), what should its military and political goals be?
- How could either policy decision in this case, and its outcome, affect the perception of American power and leadership among the United States' allies and friends? Among governments and [nonstate actors](#) who want to do the United States harm?
- What kind of relationship does the United States have with the [Soviet Union](#) and the People's Republic of China? How might these countries react to possible U.S. intervention north of the 38th parallel?
- What kind of relationship does North Korea have with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China? How might this affect the outcome of a U.S. decision to proceed north of the 38th parallel, or not to do so?
- Can the United States reconcile its desire to unify Korea and contain [communism](#) in the region with its desire not to provoke China or the Soviet Union?
- What are the risks and potential benefits for the United States of pursuing unification of the Korean Peninsula or of confining itself to pushing the North Korean military out of South Korea?
- What is the range of attitudes in Congress on the situation in Korea and the U.S. goals there?
- What is the range of attitudes in the media and among the U.S. public toward Korea and the U.S. goals there?
- How can the president best articulate a decision and communicate it to the American people and the world?

Guide to the Memorandum

All National Security Council (NSC) members except the president will write a position memo before the role-play. You can find more details about writing position memos under Student Resources. The president will write a presidential directive after the role-play. More details about that are also under Student Resources.

What is a memorandum?

- A memo is a formal, succinct written message from one person, department, or organization to another. It is an important form of formal, written communication in the workplace. A memo is generally short, to the point, and free of flowery language and extraneous information. A memo is typically informative or decision-oriented and is formatted in a way that helps readers quickly grasp the main points.
- In the NSC, memos consider, coordinate, and articulate policy options. They help analyze, evaluate, advocate, and channel those policy options and decisions within the bureaucracy.
- Memos also function as historical record. Many memos related to NSC discussions and presidential decisions are filed in government archives. Some are later declassified and released to help people understand how policy was devised at a given time in U.S. history.

Guide to the Role-Play

- There is no right or wrong way to participate in a role-play, but the better prepared you are, the more likely you will be able to advance a position effectively, and the more you and your peers will get out of the experience.
- Be patient during the role-play. Do not hold back from sharing your perspective, but be sure to give others a chance to do the same.
- Where there are competing interests, make the judgment calls that you would make if you were a government official, as informed by your earlier consideration of potential trade-offs. Ensure that the consequences of various decisions are carefully weighed.

Round	Timing	Objectives	Procedural Notes
One:	2 to 3 minutes per participant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present initial positions to the president. 2. Investigate the nuances of the positions through questioning. 3. Clarify the central questions to be debated. 	Each participant presents their position statement. If time permits, the president may ask questions to understand each NSC member's position and bring out the essential questions they wish to debate.
Two	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarify the obstacles, risks, opportunities, and threats. 2. Evaluate the various positions on their merits. 	This is the debate portion of the role-play, when participants can defend their recommendations against others' and identify potential areas of compromise agreement.
Three	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Narrow the options to a few comprehensive and well- focused strategies that the president prefers. 2. Provide the president with clear recommendations (from NSC members), perhaps as a consensus or through a vote. 3. Arrive at a final presidential decision. 	This round should start with the president's stating one to three preferred options to be fleshed out.

Wrap-up

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

CFR Education simulations can be run for several days or weeks and include background readings, videos, and assignments to help students understand the situation and their roles.

[Instructions](#)

[Role-Play How-To Video](#)

The Debrief

After the debate and deliberation close, the president will announce his or her decision, to be later finalized in the form of a written presidential directive. If time permits, you will participate in a debrief following the president's announcement.

Be active in this debrief. The role-play might seem to be the most challenging part of the experience, but the debrief is equally important. It will reinforce what you learned during the role-play exercise and refine your analytical skills. It will also force you to step out of your role and to view the case from a personal perspective. You will have the opportunity to discuss any

challenges you encountered as you worked through the discussion with your peers and how you felt about the final presidential decision.

The debrief will close with a reflection on the complexities and challenges of crafting foreign policy. This should help clarify your understanding of what you learned and answer any lingering questions. This exercise will also assist you in completing your final assignment, a written reflection.

What Actually Happened

In September 1950, the National Security Council issued Report 81/1, entitled “United States Courses of Action with Respect to Korea,” which outlined the council’s official recommendation on the question of whether to invade North Korea. It concluded that “the United Nations forces have a legal basis for conducting operations north of the [38th parallel](#)” and that

the UN Commander should be authorized to conduct military operations, including amphibious and airborne landings or ground operations in pursuance of a roll-back, north of the 38th parallel for the purpose of destroying the North Korean forces, provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea.

On September 15, UN forces landed at Inchon, backed by naval and air bombardment. The landing was an extraordinary success. It stunned the North Korean forces and forced them into withdrawal. By the end of September, South Korean and UN troops had recaptured Seoul and officially restored the South Korean government under Syngman Rhee. On October 1, General Douglas MacArthur officially demanded North Korea’s surrender. Receiving no reply, he authorized South Korean forces to advance across the border. UN forces followed closely behind once they received authorization. This authorization came on October 7, with a UN General Assembly resolution [calling](#) on UN forces to take “all appropriate steps . . . to ensure conditions of stability throughout Korea.”

Within the first few weeks of their attack, UN forces moved rapidly northward. Facing little resistance from the retreating North Korean soldiers, UN and South Korean forces advanced swiftly and captured Pyongyang on October 19. But things did not continue as smoothly. On October 25, Chinese forces began operations against South Korean forces. It would be more than a month before the United States acknowledged that China was mounting a full-scale intervention in Korea. By then, UN forces were being pushed south, their gains since crossing the thirty-eighth parallel quickly reversed. Seoul fell for the second time in January 1951. Three months later, Truman fired MacArthur.

After a series of bloody attacks and counterattacks, UN and Chinese forces met at the thirty-eighth parallel in a stalemate in the spring of 1951. For the next two years of fighting, they only made moderate gains and losses of ground around the parallel. On July 27, 1953, China, North Korea, and the UN Command signed an [armistice](#), bringing an end to the fighting. Though the [agreement](#) was meant to establish a ceasefire “until a final peaceful settlement is achieved,” no settlement was ever agreed on. To this day, the two Koreas are still officially at war, and the thirty-eighth parallel has become the most heavily militarized border in the world.

The effects of the war were acutely felt on the peninsula, where more than [two million](#) were killed—as many as [70 percent](#) of them civilians. The United States [dropped](#) more explosives on North Korea during the three-year conflict than in the entire Pacific theater during World War II. As a result of the bombing, an estimated 85 percent of buildings in the country were destroyed.

How was the decision made?

The burgeoning [Cold War](#) was the most important factor in Truman’s deliberations over crossing the thirty-eighth parallel. The president sought to make a decision that would strengthen the United States’ position in relation to the [Soviet Union](#), and, to a lesser extent, Communist China. Ultimately, as scholar Bruce Cumings [notes](#), “nearly all of Truman’s high advisers decided that the chance had come not only to contain Communist aggression, but to roll it back.”

Compounding this were assessments by the intelligence community that the risk of a Soviet or Chinese response was low. The widespread belief was that while there had been indications of Chinese intent to intervene, these indications had likely been bluffs. Secretary of State Dean Acheson summed up these feelings in a CBS interview in September 1950, [calling](#) the prospect of a Chinese intervention “sheer madness.”

Moreover, MacArthur was strongly in favor of crossing the parallel, saying in July, “I may need to occupy all of North Korea.” The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) held a similar view, [writing](#) to the secretary of defense in September that “after the strength of the North Korean forces has been broken . . . subsequently operations must take place both north and south of the 38th parallel.”

On September 11, 1950, Truman approved a National Security Council policy statement [recommending](#) that a course of action in Korea “would be influenced by three factors: action by the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists, consultation with friendly members of the United Nations, and the risk of general war.” On September 15, the day of the Inchon landing, Truman approved a JCS directive based on this policy statement, which authorized military operations beyond the thirty-eighth parallel if there was no indication or threat of entry of Soviet or Chinese Communist forces. On September 27, following the immense success of the Inchon landing, the JCS sent new instructions to MacArthur. His military objective was now “the destruction of the North Korean Armed Forces,” for which he was authorized to conduct military operations north of the thirty-eighth parallel.

What did the decision mean?

Though largely forgotten by—or unknown to—many in the West, the Korean War’s effects have shaped geopolitics and reverberated through history. The war cemented [alliances](#) and rivalries that endure today, ushered in policies that would characterize many years of the Cold War, and finalized the thirty-eighth parallel as an enduring dividing line on the Korean Peninsula.

Solidification of Alliances and Rivalries

The Soviet Union and China continued to economically and politically support North Korea throughout the Cold War, as the United States did South Korea. Two months after the armistice was signed in 1953, the latter pair cemented their alliance with the Mutual Defense Treaty Between the United States and the Republic of Korea, establishing a powerful military alliance underwritten by American nuclear weapons.

Despite the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these relationships are still largely in place today. Today, South Korea [hosts](#) over twenty thousand American troops, and North Korea maintains relatively close, though sometimes fraught, relationships with Russia and China.

Cold War Policies

The Korean conflict heralded many of the hallmarks of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. One of those was the concept of limited war—a war in which limited resources, forces, and tactics are used in service of goals significantly short of total destruction of the enemy. Because the United States and the Soviet Union were both wary of triggering a general—and quite possibly nuclear—war, they became involved in limited [proxy](#) conflicts during the Cold War. The Korean War would be followed by similar conflicts in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Hand in hand with this policy was the doctrine of containment, which advocated for “containing” the spread of [communism](#) within national borders (and which had served as Truman’s primary rationale for entering the Korean War). In many ways, the Korean War became a blueprint for how the Cold War would be fought.

An Enduring Division

Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Korean War is the enduring division of the Korean Peninsula. Since its establishment as an arbitrary administrative boundary in 1945, the thirty-eighth parallel has remained the dividing line between North and South Korea.

Since the armistice was declared, relations between North and South Korea have ranged from conciliatory to combative. Particularly in the last few decades, the peninsula has seen a few near brushes with war. In 2006, after years of development, North Korea ratcheted up the tension by testing its first nuclear weapon. (South Korea remains under the U.S. [nuclear umbrella](#), meaning that the United States has pledged to defend South Korea from any nuclear attack). According to scholar Bruce Cumings, North Korea's generals "are still fighting the war. For them it has never ended."

Was it a good idea?

Many accounts of the Korean War frame the decision to cross the thirty-eighth parallel as a mistake. Bruce Riedel of the Brookings Institution [calls](#) it "by far the worst military debacle the U.S. armed forces suffered in the entire twentieth century" and a "catastrophic intelligence failure . . . that cost the lives of thousands of Americans." Similarly, historian Warren Cohen [writes](#) that the Truman administration, "in its moment of triumph . . . succumbed to one of the most treacherous temptations confronting any victor, the temptation to expand war aims."

Journalist and U.S.-China relations scholar John Pomfret argues that the United States' biggest mistake was in underestimating the potential for Chinese involvement; [he reports](#) that General Matthew Ridgeway, who had led operations in Europe during World War II, noted that General MacArthur "'simply closed his ears' to the growing presence of Chinese troops in Korea." Similarly, scholar Robert Farley [argues](#) that "the initial Chinese victories in late fall of 1950 resulted from a colossal intelligence failure on the part of the United States. These failures ran the gamut from political, to strategic, to operational, to tactical. . . . The United States also misunderstood the complex relationship between Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang, treating the group as unitary actor without appreciating the serious political differences between the countries."

Other scholars, however, are more sympathetic to the decision's historical context. Scott A. Snyder of the Council on Foreign Relations argues that "it would have been difficult to imagine that any commander . . . would have made the decision to simply halt in the face of what looked like an open field up to the China and North Korea border." Historian William Stueck also defends the decision, [arguing](#) that by the time the threat of Chinese intervention became credible, the decision to advance had already gained too much momentum: "to delay action would have disappointed expectations in the United States in the midst of a congressional election campaign, would have compromised a clear military advantage, and would have constituted an apparent loss of nerve in the face of Communist pressure tactics."

In sum, scholars debate whether the decision to cross the thirty-eighth parallel represents a failure to assess intelligence and understand Chinese and Soviet motivations or a calculated decision to consolidate victory and demonstrate commitment to broader foreign policy goals. But the legacy of the war remains certain: the lasting division between North and South Korea has remained a critical foreign policy challenge to this day.

Reflecting on the Experience

The following questions are proposed to guide the discussion in the in-class debrief. This is not an exhaustive list and may vary depending on how your role-play exercise unfolded. If your class or group does not hold a debrief, these questions will nonetheless help you reflect on the role-play and write your policy review memo:

- Which issues received adequate attention during the role-play? Which, if any, received excessive attention or were left unresolved?
- Did the group consider long-term strategic concerns, or was it able to focus only on the immediate issue and the short-term implications of policy options?
- Which U.S. interests did the group or the president prioritize in the presidential directive and why? Were you comfortable with this prioritization?
- What techniques did you use to convince others that your policy position was the best option? What were successful strategies employed by others?
- What were the most significant challenges to your position? Did any make you rethink or adjust your position?

- Did your points cause anyone else to change their arguments or position?
- What political, economic, and other issues arose that you had not previously considered?
- If you could go back, what would you have done differently in presenting and advocating your point of view?

Written Reflection

The written reflection is your final assignment in the simulation. In the debrief discussion after the role-play, you and your peers went beyond the role you played and thought about the issue from a variety of perspectives. Now that the National Security Council discussion and debrief are behind you, you can consider whether you personally support your recommended policy given the full spectrum of arguments and considerations that arose. Shedding your institutional role and writing from a personal point of view, you will craft a policy review memo that outlines and reflects on the policy options discussed, incorporating and critiquing the president's decision where appropriate.

If you played the role of president in the simulation, your memo should still reflect your personal opinion. You can comment on the course of action you ordered as president, further justify it, write more extensively on the options you dismissed, or suggest and support alternate options.

No matter which role you played originally, take into account all you have learned. Your instructor or facilitator will want to see whether and how your understanding of the issue and of the policymaking process has evolved from that expressed in your position memo.

More details about the written reflection are available under Student Resources.

Student Resources

Fuel a lively classroom discussion with simulations that put your students in the shoes of either the National Security Council or the UN Security Council.

CFR Education simulations can be run for several days or weeks and include background readings, videos, and assignments to help students understand the situation and their roles.

[Instructions](#) [How-To Video](#)

Reading List

Essential Resources

Note: since this is a historical role-play, you should only use and reference documents and information from before the fall of 1950.

- [“The Korean War Case Study,”](#) YouTube video, 5:20, posted by CFR Education, June 18, 2019.
- Dean Acheson, [Remarks Before the National Press Club](#), January 12, 1950.
- [“Implementation of Soviet Objectives in Korea,”](#) Office of Reports and Estimates 62, Truman Papers, Nov. 18, 1947.
- [Intelligence Estimate Prepared by the Estimates Group, Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State, June 25, 1950, in Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII](#), ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 148–154.

- [President Harry S. Truman's Address Before a Joint Session Of Congress](#), March 12, 1947.
- [President Truman's Statement on Korea](#), June 27, 1950.
- ["The Situation in Korea,"](#) Office of Reports and Estimates 5/1, Truman Papers, January 3, 1947.
- ["The Truth About Korea,"](#) Truman Papers, around 1950.
- ["The United Nations at War,"](#) *New York Times*, July 10, 1950.
- United Nations Security Council, [Resolution 82](#), Resolution of June 25, 1950.
- [YOUTUBE PLAYLIST](#)

Additional Resources

- ["Truman, Disaster: Truman Acts To Halt Communist Aggression \(31 Dec 1947\),"](#) YouTube video, 3:09, posted by AP, July 21, 2015.
- ["Korean War Begins - 1950,"](#) YouTube video, 2:44, posted by AP, June 25, 2017.
- ["First Films from the Korean War \(1950\),"](#) YouTube video, 3:04, posted by British Pathé, April 13, 2014.
- [Memorandum by the Director of the Office of Northeast Asian Affairs \(Allison\) to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs \(Rusk\).](#) July 1, 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII*, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 272.
- [Draft Memorandum Prepared in the Department of State for National Security Council Staff Consideration Only,](#) August 23, 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII*, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 635–639.
- [Intelligence Estimate Prepared by the Estimates Group,](#) Office of Intelligence Research, Department of State, June 25, 1950, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Korea, Volume VII*, ed. John P. Glennon (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 148–154.

How to Conduct Research and Use Sources

Research and Preparation

- Draw on the case notes, additional case materials, and your own research to familiarize yourself with
 - the goals of the NSC in general and of this NSC meeting in particular;
 - the U.S. interests at stake in the case and their importance to national security;
 - your role and your department or agency, including its purpose and objectives in the government and on the NSC;
 - the aspects of the case most relevant to your role;
 - the elements that a comprehensive policy proposal on the case should contain; and
 - the major debates or conflicts likely to occur during the role-play. You need not resolve these yourself, of course, but you will want to anticipate them in order to articulate and defend your position in the NSC deliberation.
- Set goals for your research. Know which questions you seek to answer and refer back to the case notes, additional readings, and research leads as needed.
- Make a list of questions that you feel are not fully answered by the given materials. What do you need to research in greater depth? Can your peers help you understand these subjects?
- Using the case materials, additional readings, and discussions with your peers, weigh the relative importance of the U.S. interests at stake in the case. Determine where trade-offs might be required and think through the potential consequences of several different policy options.
- Conduct your research from the perspective of your assigned role, rather than the particular perspective of the person who currently inhabits that office. Make sure to consider the full range of U.S. interests at stake in the case, whether diplomatic, military, economic, environmental, moral, or otherwise. This will help you strengthen your policy position and anticipate and prepare for debates in the role-play.
- Consider what questions or challenges the president or other NSC members might raise regarding the options you propose and have responses ready.

Sources

- Consult a wide range of sources to gain a full perspective on the issues raised in the case and on policy options. Seek out sources that you may not normally use, such as publications from the region(s) under discussion, unclassified and declassified government documents, and specialized policy reports and journals.
- Remember: Wikipedia is not a reliable source, but it can be a reasonable starting point. The citations at the bottom of each entry often contain useful resources.
- Just as policymakers tackle issues that are controversial and subject to multiple interpretations, so will you in your preparation for the writing assignments and role-play. For this reason, evaluate your sources carefully. Always ask yourself:
 - When was the information produced? Is it still relevant and accurate?
 - Who is writing or speaking and why? Does the author or speaker have a particular motivation or affiliation that you should take into account?
 - Where is the information published? Determine the political leanings of journals, magazines, and newspapers by reading several articles published by each one.
 - Who is the intended audience?
 - Does the author provide sufficient evidence for their analysis or opinion? Does the author cite reliable and impartial sources?
 - Does the information appear one-sided? Does it consider multiple points of view?
 - Is the language measured or inflammatory? Do any of the points appear exaggerated?
- Take note of and cite your sources correctly. This is important not just for reasons of academic integrity, but so that you can revisit them as needed.
- Ask your teacher which style they prefer you use when citing sources, such as Modern Language Association (MLA), Chicago Manual of Style, or Associated Press (AP).

How to Write a Position Memo

- The first memo everyone (except the president) writes is called a position memo. It is written from the perspective of your assigned role. It presents a set of policy options for consideration by the NSC and recommends one of them to the president. The recommendation, or position, outlined in this memo is the one you will present during the role-play. (Keep in mind you may change your position as a result of the role-play discussion.)
- The position memo will help your fellow NSC members consider the issue efficiently and facilitate decision-making by the president. Equally important, it will help you clarify your understanding of the case by forcing you to identify the essential facts and viable policy options.
- If you have been assigned a specific role, remember that you are writing from the point of view of the department, agency, or office you represent, and not directly mimicking the policies or opinions of the person currently in that office (unless your instructor says otherwise). If needed, return to your case role description to understand the interests and position of your institution as well as goals of your role. Using the perspective of your institutional position, you will outline a set of options to address the crisis. Make sure you take into account the pros, cons, and ramifications of each policy option as it pertains to your role, institution, and as it is informed by your reading of the case materials and further research. Also, anticipate critiques of your proposed policy and incorporate your response into the memo. Doing so will help you prepare for the role-play.

Note: If you are assigned the role of president, you will not write a position memo. Instead, you will write a two-page presidential directive (PD) at the conclusion of the role-play. You will address the PD, which will follow a memo format, to the NSC members and inform them of your final decision regarding the policy option or options to be implemented (see below).

If your teacher has chosen to assign you the role of general advisor to the president, you will not need to write the position memo from a particular institutional position. Instead, you will have the flexibility to approach the issue from your own

perspective, incorporating a comprehensive assessment of the crisis into your argument.

Click [here](#) to see a sample of a position memo.

How to Write a Presidential Directive

The format of the presidential directive is simpler than that of a position memo. A directive contains a record of the policy option or options that the president has chosen as well as the accompanying orders to various parts of the government with details on how to carry out these decisions.

- Start with a short paragraph describing the purpose of the memo. Everyone you are writing to was in the NSC meeting, so only brief context is needed.
- Explain in numbered paragraphs the decisions you have made, why you have made them, and any details regarding how you want the decisions carried out.
- Explain the communications strategy for the decision, considering both relevant foreign governments and the public. Also, consider that you may wish to keep certain elements of the decision secret from the public.
- Include any additional details before you sign.
- Be sure to include all the information necessary for NSC members to understand and carry out your intentions.

Click [here](#) to see a sample presidential directive.

How to Prepare for Role-Play

During the simulated NSC meeting, you will meet to debate and discuss U.S. policy options in response to the issues outlined in the case. Consistent with the NSC's mission to advise the president, you should raise the issues that are most important for the president to consider. This will enable them to make the most informed decision on policy options. Though you may or may not agree with this decision, your responsibility as an NSC member is to provide the best possible analysis and advice from the perspective of your role.

Role-play Guidelines

1. Stay in your role at all times. (Keep in mind that your role refers to the perspective and duties of the agency or department you represent, and not the specific person currently holding office of the role.)
2. Follow the general protocol for speaking.
 1. Signaling to Speak
 1. The National Security Advisor (NSA) will administer the meeting and should decide on a speaking order. Wait to be called on by the NSA.
 2. If you would like to speak out of turn, signal to the NSA, perhaps by raising a hand or a placard, and wait until the NSA calls on you.
 2. Form of Speech
 1. All NSC members (like the president in the following example) can be addressed as Mr./Madam/[Mx.](#) President or simply President [last name]. Before you begin the role-play, share which title you would like to use, and make sure to respect the title your fellow NSC members choose to use as well.
 2. Do not exceed predetermined time limits. If you exceed these limits, the NSA will cut you off.

3. Frame your comments with a purpose and stay on topic. Remember that you must advise the president so that they can reach a decision on a precise policy question.
3. Listening
 1. Take notes while others are speaking.
 2. Refrain from whispering or conducting side conversations.
 3. Applause and booing are not appropriate. Your words will be the most effective tool to indicate agreement or disagreement.

How to Write a Written Reflection

Guidelines

- **Subject (one short paragraph):** Offer a brief statement about the significance of the issue as it relates to U.S. [foreign policy](#) and national security. Provide just enough information about the crisis so that the reader can understand the purpose and importance of your memo. Be sure to include an initial statement of whether you agree or disagree with the president's decision.
- **Options and analysis (one paragraph per option):** Present and analyze the options discussed during the debate, deliberation, or debrief. Discuss their drawbacks, benefits, and resource needs. Be sure to acknowledge any weaknesses or disadvantages of the proposed options.
- **Recommendation and justification (several paragraphs):** Identify and explain your preferred policy option or options in more detail. Here, you can explain why you personally favor one or more of the recommendations that you initially presented or the president chose, or different options entirely. If you choose to support the options you presented in your position memo, make sure to justify why you feel yours is still the best position.
- **Reflection (one to two paragraphs):** Discuss how your position and the presidential directive are similar; if they are not, discuss how they are different. Use this section to give your thoughts on what the president should have included in their directive, or what you would have done differently. Remember, this is from your point of view; you are no longer advocating on behalf of a department or agency.

Click [here](#) to see a full example of a written reflection.

Korean War in 1950 (NSC)

Educator Simulation Guide

Global Literacy

Global literacy is the ability to understand and engage effectively in today's interconnected world. Today's interdependent global economy and geopolitical landscape connect America's interests more than ever to the actions and interests of other countries and their citizens. To ensure students understand this interconnected world, they need to be globally literate. [Learn more about global literacy.](#)

Case Overview

Set in September 1950. At the conclusion of World War II, Korea—formerly under Japanese control—was divided at the thirty-eighth parallel into a U.S.-occupied south and a Soviet-occupied north. Although the division was meant to be temporary, by 1948 both countries had declared independence. North Korea became a Soviet-supported communist state; South Korea was supported by the United States. Two years later, North Korea invaded South Korea in an attempt to bring the entire peninsula under its control. After several weeks of fighting, U.S. and South Korean forces were defending an area called the Pusan perimeter, in the southernmost portion of the peninsula. General Douglas MacArthur, who was commanding U.S. and allied forces as part of a UN mission, was also making plans for a landing at Inchon, near the South Korean capital of Seoul, in order to surprise North Korean troops and recapture Seoul.

Anticipating the possible success of the Inchon landing, President Truman has convened National Security Council members to advise him on whether to extend the U.S. military intervention north of the thirty-eighth parallel in an attempt to unify the Korean Peninsula. As the dividing lines of the emerging [Cold War](#) start to solidify, the United States will have to weigh whether intervention in North Korea is worth a potential conflict with another [great power](#).

Decision Point

President Truman has convened National Security Council (NSC) members to advise him on whether to extend the U.S. military intervention north of the [38th parallel](#) in an attempt to unify the Korean Peninsula. The president has made clear that this decision depends on the success of the Inchon landing and victory in South Korea. It is also clear that NSC members will need to consider a few critical questions. First, what is at stake in the conflict? Is it just a Korean national issue, fueled by North-South rivalry, each side seeking to lead a unified nation, or could the conflict become a major flash point in the [Cold War](#)? Second, what are the chances of Soviet or Chinese intervention if the United States invades North Korea? Finally, does reunifying Korea offer a better prospect of a durable peace than stopping at the thirty-eighth parallel would?

Learning Goals

CFR Education extended simulations use a variety of pedagogical tools to create an effective, meaningful, and memorable learning experience for students that builds their global literacy. Students will develop crucial skills such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. Students will complete authentic assessments that feel relevant: instead of five-

paragraph essays and book reports, students will write policy memos and participate in a role-play of a meeting of a foreign policy-making body. There are no right or wrong answers in actual policy deliberations, and there are none here, either; students will walk away from this experience with an appreciation for the complexity of policy questions.

In this simulation, students will learn about the National Security Council, as well as meeting these learning outcomes specific to this simulation:

- Students will understand the factors that led to the Korean War as well as the broader context of the [Cold War](#) policy of containment.
- Students will consider the complexities of the U.S. decision-making process during the Korean War.
- Students will evaluate the potential benefits and drawbacks of pursuing Korean unification through military action.

Concepts and Issues

Concepts

- [Alliances](#)
- Dispute resolution
- Interests versus values
- U.S. military options
- [Civil war](#)
- [Great power](#) rivalry
- Balance of power
- [International law](#)

Issues

- U.S. support for democratic [governance](#)
- Costs, benefits, and risks of military interventions
- U.S. interests in East Asia
- The UN Security Council and the U.S. role at the United Nations
- Early flash points in the [Cold War](#)
- Security and diplomacy in Northeast Asia
- Chinese and Soviet support of North Korea

Policy Options: Educator's Guide

This section presents context, potential benefits and drawbacks, and other information about the policy options outlined in the case that you may find helpful as you guide the role-play and assess students.

Inside the Truman administration, arguments over what the United States should aim to do in Korea began almost as soon as the North Koreans invaded the south. Perhaps the most critical question was whether and how China or the [Soviet Union](#) would intervene if the United States tried to reunify the Korean Peninsula.

On the one hand, Truman was cautious. He sought to ensure that the United States would not overcommit to Korea or slip into conflict with Moscow. As he wrote in his memoir *Year of Decisions*, “Every decision I made in connection with the Korean conflict had this one aim in mind: to prevent a third world war and the terrible destruction it would bring to the civilized world. This meant that we should not do anything that would provide the excuse to the Soviets and plunge the free nations into full-scale all-out war.” On the other hand, administration officials recognized a potential opportunity to deal a devastating blow to

global [communism](#) and reunify Korea under a democratic, U.S.-backed government.

The initial U.S. goal, in the opening weeks of the conflict, was simply to drive the North Koreans back to their own territory. Truman agreed with an early suggestion by Secretary of the Army Frank Pace that U.S. military operations north of the thirty-eighth parallel should be strictly limited. He authorized military operations with the specific goal of restoring that parallel as the border.

Many administration officials, though, advanced the view that U.S. aims should go further. John Allison, director of the State Department's Office of Northeast Asian Affairs, was among them. In a July 1, 1950, memo to Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Dean Rusk, [Allison wrote](#), "I am convinced that there will be no permanent peace and stability in Korea as long as the artificial division at the [38th parallel](#) continues." Other major State Department figures, including advisor John Foster Dulles, generally shared a desire to pursue full unification of the peninsula. They were more cautious than Allison, however, and feared war with the Soviet Union or China.

Military leaders, for their part, were eager to proceed north of the thirty-eighth parallel, though their foremost goal was not necessarily to reunify the peninsula. Instead, it was to devastate the North Korean military so that it could not invade South Korea again. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Omar Bradley [wrote](#) in his autobiography "*A General's Life*" that this was the military's "unanimous" position: "We believed that MacArthur should not be restrained at the 38th parallel."

This view certainly pleased MacArthur, who had ambitions of occupying and reunifying the entire peninsula. In mid-July, just weeks after the war began, [MacArthur told](#) other military leaders, "I intend to destroy and not to drive back the North Korean forces. I may need to occupy all of North Korea." On August 8, W. Averell Harriman, special assistant to the president, met MacArthur in Tokyo. MacArthur, [in Harriman's telling](#), was confident that elections could be held in both North and South Korea following a military victory—and that MacArthur had "no doubt of an overwhelming victory for the non-Communist parties" in both the South and the North.

The opposite view—that the United States should limit itself to pushing the North Koreans back—was less widespread during the summer of 1950. Some officials, though, did counsel restraint. This perspective came most notably from the State Department's policy planning staff, a unit intended to provide analysis that goes beyond day-to-day issues. George Kennan, who had established the staff and served as its first director, was one of the loudest voices warning of the potential risks of intervention north of the thirty-eighth parallel. Kennan's successor as director of the policy planning staff, Paul Nitze, and other members of the unit shared Kennan's skeptical view. A [July 22 draft memo](#) prepared by the one staff argued: "The disadvantages of a failure to attain the complete independence and unity of Korea after the North Korean forces have been driven back to the 38th parallel must be weighed against the risk of a major conflict with the USSR or Communist China that such a settlement might well involve." In other words, stopping U.S. action at the thirty-eighth parallel would be bad, but war with the Soviets or Chinese could be worse.

Running the Simulation

CFR Education extended simulations are project-based learning activities. Project-based learning (PBL) [leads to](#) better learning outcomes and improves skills, and is more fun than traditional instructional methods. The website that students will navigate throughout the simulation is divided into several parts:

In the **NSC Guide**, students will learn about the National Security Council, the body they will be simulating. Included are details on its history, how it works, who its major players are, and more. There is also a video interview with experts who have served on the body.

In the **Case Notes**, students dive into the actual situation they will be trying to solve in their simulation. At the beginning is a clear decision point: the question that students will debate during the role-play. This is followed by detailed background material and a discussion of the role that the United States plays.

Preparation and Role-Play includes details on the various roles students could take on, guidelines for the memorandum they will write (the student playing the role of president has a slightly different task), as well as an outline of how the discussion will flow during the role-play.

The **Wrap-Up** is an important part of the project and includes reflection questions and guidelines for reflecting in a class discussion and in a second memorandum. For historical cases, this section also includes a short description of how the decision point was addressed by policymakers in real life.

The simulation also includes **Student Resources**, which include a reading list to support research, additional directions and exemplars for writing assignments, and other tips students may find helpful.

Tips for Role-Play

Once students have read the simulation and prepared their position memos, here is how we recommend structuring the role-play:

Round	Timing	Objectives	Procedural Notes
One	2 to 3 minutes per participant	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present initial positions to the president. 2. Investigate the nuances of the positions through questioning. 3. Clarify the central questions to be debated. 	Each participant presents their position statement. If time permits, the president may ask questions to understand each NSC member's position and bring out the essential questions they wish to debate.
Two	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarify the obstacles, risks, opportunities, and threats. 2. Evaluate the various positions on their merits. 	This is the debate portion of the role-play, when participants can defend their recommendations against others' and identify potential areas of compromise agreement.
Three	30 to 60 minutes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Narrow the options to a few comprehensive and well-focused strategies that the president prefers. 2. Provide the president with clear recommendations (from NSC members), perhaps as a consensus or through a vote. 3. Arrive at a final presidential decision. 	This round should start with the president's stating one to three preferred options to be fleshed out.

Tips for the National Security Advisor

In Round 1, call on everyone for their opening statements, keeping to a strict time limit—if students have more to say, they can say it in Round 2. The president doesn't have a specific time limit, but you should keep things moving by not letting the president get bogged down on one issue or policy option.

In Round 2, students do not need to follow a prescribed speaking order; you can call on them as they raise their placards. Work to include everyone and prevent anyone from dominating. As debate goes on, remind students they can change their minds. If it will help move things along, help students see when they are agreeing with each other without realizing it. Feel free to pose questions or propose discussion topics if you feel that certain issues are not receiving adequate consideration. Ultimately, it's up to you to judge when Round 2 has run its course and it is time to move on to Round 3. You will want to move on when all policy options have been discussed and all of the president's questions have been answered. The room does not need to come to a consensus—every option just needs to have a fair airing.

In Round 3, ask students to make a final case for their positions. If, during the course of the discussion, some students seem to have coalesced into blocs, you could ask one student to present on behalf of the bloc. If consensus seems possible, you could work toward it; if not, just make sure each option has been clearly presented to the president. Remember, the NSC is not democratic and is an advisory, not decision-making, body. There is no vote, and the president does not need to choose the most popular option.

Tips for the President

Before Round 1, review all the position memos, if you can. During Round 1, as students are presenting their opening statements, you can ask questions to clarify or help draw out the differences between one policy option and another. Try not to get too deep in the weeds, though—that is what Round 2 will be for.

In Round 2, you can take a more active role. If you have concerns about a policy option, ask questions; if some policy options seem stronger than others, say so. If an element of the issue is not being discussed, raise it.

In Round 3, once you have heard all the policy options, it is all down to you. You should choose whichever policy option you think is best, or combine the strongest elements of several different options. Remember, the NSC is not democratic and is an advisory, not decision-making, body. There is no vote, and you do not need to choose the most popular option. Your decision must be made and announced before the wrap-up discussion, although the written presidential directive can come later.

Tips for Online Classes

We suggest conducting the role-play in three rounds, and that three-round structure is a helpful way to approach chunking the role-play for online learning as well. You can conduct each round synchronously or asynchronously.

In round one, participants present their positions.

- In a synchronous meeting, you can go through opening statements using videoconferencing software, allowing for live clarifying questions.
- However, this is probably the easiest round to conduct asynchronously. You could disseminate positions in writing by having participants share their position memos or write a summary for the purpose of the role-play. You could also have participants record a video of themselves delivering their opening statement and disseminate it for all to watch.

In round two, participants debate the various policy options.

- In a synchronous setting, you can simply run a full-class discussion for round two. If you need more structure or want to prod reticent participants, consider starting by randomly assigning students to breakout rooms, assigning each breakout room one policy option. After working through pros and cons, representatives from each breakout room can share out to kick off the general discussion.
- In an asynchronous setting, consider a discussion forum, with a thread for each policy option. Coach the National Security Advisor and President to be active in the forum, raising questions and responding to points.

In round three, debate begins to coalesce around the policy options that the president favors.

- This round can be approached similarly to round two, but the president should set the topics for breakout rooms or forum threads.

Flashpoints

This case offers no suggested flashpoints.

Case Assessment

1. What interests did the United States have at stake in the Korean Peninsula in 1950? In East Asia more broadly? How would you prioritize these interests in your role?
2. When and why was the Korean Peninsula divided at the thirty-eighth parallel? Who divided the peninsula, and for what purpose?
3. What was the nature of the relationships between the [Soviet Union](#) and North Korea, and the Soviet Union and the United States in 1950? How might this affect the Soviet Union's reaction to a U.S.-backed invasion of North Korea?
4. What diplomatic and military actions did the United States take immediately following North Korea's invasion of South Korea? What U.S. interests and rationale influenced these actions?

NSC Assessment

1. What are the four categories of tools available to U.S. leaders crafting foreign policy, and what is the range of specific tools in each?
2. What is the interagency process and how is it related to the NSC system?
3. What are the various committees in the NSC system and how do they interact to drive U.S. policymaking and implementation?
4. What are the responsibilities of the national security advisor (NSA)?
5. What are the major departments and agencies involved in the U.S. national security and foreign policy-making process? What are their responsibilities?

Writing Assignments

Each CFR Education extended simulation involves writing assignments that help students think through policy options and reflect on their learning experience.

In NSC cases, there are three types of writing assignments.

- Before the role-play, everyone but the president writes a position memo.
- After the role-play, the president writes a presidential directive.
- As part of the wrap-up, everyone writes a written reflection.

Simulations (on the student-facing side) have instructions for written assignments, and samples for each of these writing exercises. You can also find sample rubrics below.

Samples:

- [NSC position memo](#)
- [NSC presidential directive](#)
- [NSC written reflection](#)

Rubric

Below are sample rubrics for your use in assessing the writing students will do as part of this extended simulation.

These are single-point rubrics. Jennifer Gonzalez, who writes the blog [Cult of Pedagogy](#), has a great [explainer](#), but the bottom line is that single-point rubrics are relatively easy for students to digest but still have all the advantages of giving structure to instructors' feedback.

NSC Position Memo Rubric

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Subject and Background paragraphs

- Briefly explains the significance of the issue in the context of U.S. foreign policy
- Clearly identifies the central question
- Does not summarize the case

Objectives bullet points

- Lists several objectives of the department the writer represents
- Objectives are grounded in knowledge of the role of the department
- Objectives help to shape the analysis of options described in the next section

Options and Analysis paragraphs

- Lists all options mentioned in the case
- Lists other potential options
- Analysis considers advantages, disadvantages, and trade-offs

Recommendation and Justification paragraphs

- Clearly identifies a preferred option or options
- Supports the choice with appropriate analysis
- Explains why other options are less preferable
- Written with the president as the intended audience

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Purpose

- Provides context for the memo
- Is succinct

Decisions

- Clearly states the decisions made
- Explains the decisions convincingly
- Details how to implement them

Communications strategy

- Contains an effective strategy for relevant foreign governments
- Contains an effective strategy for the public

NSC Written Reflection Rubric

CONCERNS

What needs improvement

CRITERIA

What is expected

ADVANCED

What is excellent

Subject paragraph

- Is brief
- Places the issue in the larger context of U.S. foreign policy
- Clearly states whether the writer agrees or disagrees with the president's decision

Options and Analysis paragraph

- Discusses each option that came up during the role-play in discrete paragraphs
- Weighs the advantages and disadvantages of each option
- If options from the position memo are discussed, those options contain additional analysis

Recommendation and Justification paragraph

- Makes a clear recommendation based on the writer's personal position
- Supports the recommendation effectively

Reflection paragraph or paragraphs

- Reflects on and critiques the president's decision
- Is written from a personal point of view, not that of the assigned role

Downloadable rubrics are available here:

- [NSC position memo](#)
- [NSC presidential directive](#)
- [NSC written reflection](#)