





## RETHINKING THE “LOSS OF CHINA”: US INVOLVEMENT IN THE CHINESE CIVIL WAR, 1945-1949

NATHANIEL SHER

### Abstract

This research paper analyzes the US’ policy of “partial aid” during the Chinese Civil War. It asks why the US provided economic aid to the GMD, but not large-scale military support. US involvement in the Chinese Civil War is confounding because, on the one hand, the US demonstrated a preference for the Guomindang (GMD); the US maintained direct channels of communication with the GMD, furnished them with arms and aid, and recognized the Nationalist government as the sole legitimate government of China. On the other hand, the US refrained from providing direct ground support to the GMD, and the aid that the US did provide was insufficient to tilt the outcome of the war. Restraint is puzzling in light of not only US capabilities at the time, but also US commitments in Asia later on, from the war in Korea to Vietnam. This research paper makes use of historical records—State Department telegrams, Congressional transcripts, and Presidential memoirs—to analyze the US involvement in the Chinese Civil War. It argues that US policymakers misperceived the degree of alignment between the Chinese Communists and the Soviet Union and, as a result, allocated limited military aid to parts of the world deemed more strategic, namely in Southern Europe and Japan.

### Introduction

The study of the Cold War would be incomplete without an understanding of the causes and consequences of the Chinese Civil War.

---

The latter conflict influenced not only the development of China, but also that of the United States, the Soviet Union, and many of the non-aligned powers on China's periphery and around the world. As Chen Jian writes, the "CCP-GMD confrontation intensified the conflict between the two superpowers, contributing to the escalation and, eventually, crystallization of the Cold War in East Asia."<sup>①</sup> From Korea to Vietnam, the Chinese revolution impacted every major conflict in East Asia after 1949, and its influence can still be felt in ripples across the Taiwan Strait.

This paper seeks to examine one aspect of the Chinese Civil War, namely, the role of the United States in the conflict. Throughout the entire war period, between 1945 and 1949, the US maintained direct channels of communication with the GMD, furnished them with arms and aid, and recognized the Nationalist government as the sole legitimate government of China. By 1949, the US had provided the GMD with an estimated \$2 billion worth of economic aid—equivalent to one-eighth the amount granted to countries in Europe under the Marshall Plan.<sup>②</sup>

On the other hand, the US provided little in the way of substantive military support. In the fall of 1945, the US army airlifted GMD soldiers to Manchuria to preempt the Communist Party of China (CCP) from receiving the Japanese surrender after World War II.<sup>③</sup> Throughout the Chinese Civil War, the US provided the GMD with \$800 million worth of funds for military procurement and sent direct transfers of 97 naval vessels.<sup>④</sup> However, as infighting broke out between the Nationalists and the Communists after World War II, the US curtailed its military involvement on the mainland. The number of US troops in China declined from an

---

① Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 17.

② Dean Acheson, *Economic Assistance to China and Korea 1949-50* (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office 1974), 23.

③ John Pomfret, *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to Present* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2016), 350.

④ Acheson, *Economic Assistance*, 23; George Marshall, *Foreign Assistance Act Of 1948: Aid to China* (Digital Archives: Marshall Foundation, 1948). <https://www.marshallfoundation.org/library/digital-archive/foreign-assistance-act-1948-aid-china/> (accessed December 8, 2020); *Public Law 512* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946). <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/79th-congress/session-2/c79s2ch580.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2020).

estimated 120,000 before V-J day to less than 6,000 by the end of the Marshall Mission in January 1947.<sup>①</sup> As Marshall attempted to mediate peace between the Nationalists and the Communists, the US maintained an arms embargo on the GMD. In the fall of 1947, General Wedemeyer called for the dispatch of 10,000 military advisers to China, but his proposal was rejected in Congress.<sup>②</sup> The *China White Paper*, released by the State Department in August 1949, alleged that the US “scrupulously excluded the use of American personnel in combat operations between the Nationalist Government forces and the Communists.”<sup>③</sup>

The American role in the Chinese Civil War is confounding because, on the one hand, US actions reveal a demonstrable preference for the GMD. It is clear that the US provided exclusive economic and military assistance to the Nationalist government. On the other hand, the US refrained from providing direct ground support to the GMD, at least not enough to tilt the outcome of the war. Restraint is puzzling in light of not only US capabilities at the time, but also US commitments in Asia thereafter, from the war in Korea to Vietnam. Immediately after World War II, the US military maintained more than 100,000 soldiers in Japan and, less than one year after the Chinese Civil War, the US sent over 300,000 American troops to the Korean Peninsula.<sup>④</sup> The question is: why did the US pursue a policy of “partial aid” during the Chinese Civil War? Why did the US provide the Chinese Nationalists with economic aid, but not large-scale military support?

At all levels of government—the executive branch, the legislature, the State Department, and the War Department—the abiding American interest in China was the same: to establish a stable and independent China. Continued war in China was the last thing sought by the US, especially if

---

① Tang Tsou, *America's Failure in China: 1941-1950*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 366.

② *United States Relations with China*, 764.

③ *United States Relations with China*, 311.

④ Tim Kane, “Global U.S. Troop Deployment: 1950-2003,” *The Heritage Foundation* (2004). (accessed December 8, 2020) <https://www.heritage.org/defense/report/global-us-troop-deployment-1950-2003>.

war would prompt Soviet intervention. In December of 1945, Secretary of State Byrnes wrote to the War Department: "Our longer-range goal," he explained, "is the development of a strong, united, and democratic government in China."<sup>①</sup> From the Marshall Mission to the 1948 China Aid Act, this objective remained consistent. The China Aid Act explained that the US sought "to maintain the genuine independence and administrative integrity of China and to sustain and strengthen the principles of individual liberty and free institutions."<sup>②</sup> Above all else, US policymakers wanted to preempt China from becoming a backwater of Soviet-style communism.

As the Cold War picked up after World War II, the US began to perceive the USSR as a revisionist power, expanding its global influence at the expense of US national security interests. The center of gravity in the Cold War hardened in Europe as the Soviets increased their naval presence in the Turkish Straits, backed a communist coup in Czechoslovakia, funneled arms to the DSE in the Greek Civil War, and blockaded all ground transportation into Berlin. Rather than worry about the prospect of the Soviets gaining inroads in China, American policymakers worried that large-scale intervention on the side of the GMD would, in turn, provoke a Soviet counterattack.<sup>③</sup>

To combat Soviet influence, the US targeted its limited resources to the strategic centers deemed most at risk of Soviet encroachment. In the mind of the famous diplomat, George Kennan, China did not even top the list of regions necessary to preempt from "fall[ing] into hands hostile."<sup>④</sup> Japan and the Philippines were the only countries in the Far East seen as strategic priorities and even they were seen as secondary to the industrial centers of Western Europe. While the Truman Doctrine prescribed military support for the governments in Greece and Turkey, it allocated only

---

① *United States Relations with China*, 609.

② *Foreign Assistance Act of 1948* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1948). <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1948-04-03b.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2020).

③ Tsou, *America's Failure*, 369-371.

④ John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 29.

economic aid to the government in China.<sup>①</sup>In this way, US intervention in the Chinese Civil War should be considered in the context of American grand strategy in the early days of the Cold War. This paper argues that the US tempered its involvement in China to prevent the USSR from gaining inroads on the mainland and to allocate resources where they were needed most to counterbalance the Soviets: in Southern Europe and Japan.

### Literature Review

Following the Chinese Communist Party's victory in the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1st, 1949, debates arose in the US over the "loss of China." By the late 1940s, the Second Red Scare had taken hold in the mind of the American public and the question emerged over the US' role in China. One American Senator by the name of Joseph McCarthy stood up on the Senate floor in 1951 and lambasted George Marshall for his failed attempt to mediate peace between the GMD and CCP—a fruitless effort that was thought to have given the Communists critical breathing room to recoup after World War II.<sup>②</sup>Had American policymakers enabled the Communist victory in China? Did the US do enough to prevent the CCP from winning the war?

To clarify the actions of the US government, the State Department released a 1000-page record of the Chinese Civil War, also known as the *China White Paper*.<sup>③</sup>The *White Paper* placed the culpability for the outcome of the Chinese Civil War squarely on the shoulders of the GMD and its maladapt leader, Jiang Jieshi. In the preface to the document, Secretary of State Dean Acheson wrote:

"The reasons for the failure of the Chinese National government... do not stem from any inadequacy of American aid... [GMD] leaders had

---

① Chen Jian, *Mao's China*, 33.

② Joseph McCarthy, *America's Retreat from Victory: The Story of George Catlett Marshall* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1951).

③ *United States Relations with China*.

proved incapable of meeting the crisis confronting them, its troops had lost the will to fight, and its government had lost popular support.”<sup>①</sup>

This interpretation is shared by President Truman. In his autobiography, Truman writes, “Chiang was defeated by the loss of support among his own people and by American arms, as many of his own generals took their armies, equipped through our aid, into enemy camps.”<sup>②</sup> Critics on the right of the American political spectrum took the opposite view; they argued that Truman’s arms embargo on the GMD critically undermined the Nationalists’ capacity to wage war.<sup>③</sup> On the other side of the Pacific, the release of the *White Paper* was met with a different kind of incredulity. Mao argued that the document “openly demonstrates U.S. imperialist intervention in China.”<sup>④</sup>

Regardless of one’s interpretation of the *White Paper*, it must be agreed that the US government’s self-published history is insufficient to explain all the factors related to its China policy. The *White Paper* was released for public consumption and did not make use of the full cache of classified records. John Service, a Foreign Service Officer tasked with compiling the *White Paper*, remarked later that the administration was trying to “defend themselves, prove that they had done everything they could to support Chiang, that it was not our fault that the Communists were winning. It was Chiang’s own failings.”<sup>⑤</sup> To take the US government’s record at face value, therefore, is to overlook the areas where the policymaking community made strategic miscalculations. Most palpable, the US government did not anticipate Mao’s monumental decision to “lean to one side,” announced on June 30th, 1949.<sup>⑥</sup> As Marshall stated publicly

---

① *United States Relations with China*, 14.

② Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs: Volume 2, Years of Trial and Hope* (Michigan: Doubleday, 1955), 91.

③ Joseph McCarthy, *America’s Retreat*.

④ Mao Zedong, “Why it is Necessary to Discuss the White Paper,” *Selected Works*, August 28, 1949 [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4\\_68.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_68.htm) (accessed November 3, 2020).

⑤ Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945-1996*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 63.

⑥ Mao Zedong, “On the People’s Democratic Dictatorship,” *Selected Works*, June 30, 1949 [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4\\_65.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_65.htm) (accessed December 8, 2020).

in 1947, he knew of “no evidence that the Chinese communists were being supported by the USSR.”<sup>①</sup> If the US had known that the CCP would take a firm stand on the side of the USSR after the Chinese Civil War, its calculations during the war might have been different.

The problems of relying on the *White Paper* notwithstanding, the secondary literature on US involvement in the Chinese Civil War largely reiterates the view that the US tempered its aid due to negative perceptions of the GMD.<sup>②</sup> As William Blum puts it, the Nationalists lost the Civil War because of “the hostility of the Chinese people at large to his [Jiang Jieshi] tyranny, his wanton cruelty, and the extraordinary corruption and decadence of his entire bureaucratic and social system.”<sup>③</sup> Odd Arne Westad comes to a similar conclusion in his book, *Decisive Encounters*. He argues, “the aggressive GMD policies—administrative and fiscal—to exploit all classes of citizens for its own purposes... led to the breakdown of trust between Jiang's regime and those it had been seen to represent.”<sup>④</sup> If this interpretation of the GMD is correct, then American aid could not have fulfilled its original purpose. Without popular support, the Nationalists would have been no more capable of leading a stable and democratic country than the Communists. At one point, in 1947, the US’ reluctance to support Jiang Jieshi reached a climax when officials in the administration debated whether to send aid directly to Jiang’s opponents in the GMD—to oust him from power from within.<sup>⑤</sup>

---

① “Marshall Expects to go to Moscow,” (New York Times, 12 January 1947), 44. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/01/12/87500171.html> (accessed December 8, 2020).

② Michael Schaller, *The United States and China in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 115. Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, “Nationalist China’s Decline and Its Impact on Sino-American Relations, 1949-1950,” in *Uncertain Years: Chinese-American Relations, 1947-1950*, eds. Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrichs (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 137. Sun Tung-hsun, “Some Recent American Interpretations of Sino-American Relations of the Late 1940s: An Assessment,” *American Studies* [ROC] 12, no. 4 (1982). Odd Arne Westad, *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War: 1946-1950*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12.

③ William Blum, *Killing Hope U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II – Part I* (London: Zed Books, 2004), 22. [https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/13/130AEF1531746AAD6AC03EF59F91E1A1\\_Killing\\_Hope\\_Blum\\_William.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/13/130AEF1531746AAD6AC03EF59F91E1A1_Killing_Hope_Blum_William.pdf) (accessed December 8, 2020).

④ Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, 12.

⑤ Tsou, *America’s Failure*, 454.



Beyond the US' negative perceptions of the GDM, some historians suggest that US policy was influenced by the lack of threat perception toward the Chinese Communists.<sup>①</sup> The reasons for this analysis on the part of US policymakers included the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in 1945, which established official relations between the USSR and the GMD; the perception that Mao espoused an ideology distinct from Stalin based on "agrarian reform"; and the view that an independent government in China was possible under a joint coalition between the GMD and CCP. These views were solidified when the US recognized the Soviet Union's reticence with respect to CCP military activities; in 1949, for example, the USSR discouraged Mao from crossing the Yangtze River out of fear that a China unified under the CCP could pose a threat to the USSR's own position of international communist leadership.<sup>②</sup>

Far from opposing the CCP, therefore, the US government sought to include the Party within a democratic coalition in China. Just days before the launch of the Marshall Mission, in December 1945, President Truman described the diplomatic assignment as an effort to promote a "united and democratic China."<sup>③</sup> US policymakers on the ground in China had perceptions of the CCP that ranged from neutral to positive. John Service wrote that the Communists were "progressive" and "democratic."<sup>④</sup> John Paton Davies, an attaché in China during World War II, believed that the CCP favored "democracy, they advocate multi-party participation in politics."<sup>⑤</sup> In Secretary Byrnes' *Memorandum to the War Department*, he

---

① Michael H. Hunt, "Mao Tse-tung and the Issue of Accommodation with the United States, 1948-1950," in *Uncertain Years*. Anthony Kubek, *How the Far East Was Lost: American Policy and the Creation of Communist China: 1941-1949*, (Eschenburg Press, 2017), 1095-1096. Donald S. Zagoria, "Choice in the Postwar World (2): Containment and China," in *Caging the Bear*, ed. Charles Gatti (Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1974).

② Donggil Kim, "Stalin and the Chinese Civil War," *Cold War History*, 10, no. 2 (2010).

③ Harry Truman, "President Truman's Statement on United States' China Policy" (New York Times: December 18, 1946) <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/12/19/88398779.html?pageNumber=24> (accessed December 8, 2020).

④ Kubek, *How the Far East Was Lost*, note 852.

⑤ Paton Davies, "Communist Policy Toward the Kuomintang." Stilwell Documents, File 155. (Stanford: Hoover Institution, August 3, 1944).

described the CCP as “so-called communists.”<sup>①</sup> These perceptions were reinforced by the fact that Mao, early on, encouraged the CCP to adopt a policy of “peace, democracy, and unity.”<sup>②</sup>

Even after the Marshall Mission failed, some officials remained recalcitrant that the CCP was altogether distinct from the USSR. In January 1949, the Consul General in Beijing sent a memo to Secretary of State Marshall explaining: “The Chinese Communists are all strongly behind Mao Tse-tung. They are different from other Communists, they do not owe their position to Moscow; they are Chinese first and Communists second. There is a real chance of Mao becoming another Tito.”<sup>③</sup> Later that year, in June, after the CCP had crossed the Yangtze River and captured Nanjing, the US Consul General in Beijing continued to echo similar sentiments. He wrote to the Secretary of State: “Chou and his group may be seriously at odds with the so-called radical wing and may be straining toward Titoism.”<sup>④</sup> In retrospect, it is clear that the US government failed to make an accurate determination of the CCP’s long-term interests. China’s subsequent stand on the side of Soviets represented a major loss for the US’ strategic position in East Asia. As Kubek argues, “The implication that the Chinese Reds were not really Communists, but something of a different nature, was a tragic mistake. The fact that Russia had an overwhelming influence in Communist China had been long known.”<sup>⑤</sup>

The historical record regarding US policymakers’ perceptions and misperceptions about the CCP and the GMD is compelling. These perceptions, however, do not explain why the US took a clear, albeit restrained, stand on the side of the GMD. If the GMD was seen as corrupt

---

① Byrnes, *Memorandum*.

② Chen Jian, *Mao’s China*, 28.

③ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Volume VIII, Far East: China*, eds. Velma Hastings Cassidy et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 3 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v08/d3> (accessed November 3, 2020).

④ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Volume VIII, Far East: China*, eds. Velma Hastings Cassidy et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010), Document 429 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v08/d429> (accessed November 3, 2020).

⑤ Kubek, *How the Far East Was Lost*, note 1096.

and the CCP seen as unthreatening, why did the US provide assistance to the GMD at all?

Scholars have approached this question by probing not the internal politics of China, but the domestic politics of the United States. First, the American public had a clear affinity with the Nationalist government. Odd Arne Westad suggests, "In Congress, these sentiments—that China must be saved for the West—won increasing support as the Cold War took hold, although the number of congressmen and senators who saw themselves as members of an activist pro-Jiang 'China Lobby' was relatively small."<sup>①</sup> Beyond the halls of Congress, many in the American public approved of sending aid to the Nationalists on the grounds that it was they that helped the allies fight against Imperial Japan in World War II.

At the same time, the domestic political climate also constrained US policy in China. After three and a half years of fighting in World War II, the American public had grown weary of war. When Nazi Germany surrendered in May 1945, members of the armed forces began to call for military demobilization and Congress drafted proposals to draw down American forces in Europe and Asia.<sup>②</sup> This political backdrop is thought to have influenced President Truman's dubious decision to drop the bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, which brought World War II to an unconditional conclusion at the cost of untold Japanese civilians.<sup>③</sup> In 1945, General Marshall argued before Congress that there was "no relationship whatsoever between the rate of demobilization and any future plans of the army," particularly in Asia.<sup>④</sup> The last thing the American public had an appetite for was to embark on another costly war, let alone in a country as ostensibly insignificant as China was thought to be at the time.

---

<sup>①</sup> Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, 186-187.

<sup>②</sup> R. Lee, "The Army 'Mutiny' of 1946." *The Journal of American History*, 53 no. 3 (1966). 555-571.

<sup>③</sup> Michael Pearlman, *Unconditional Surrender, Demobilization, and the Atomic Bomb* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1997). <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA473544.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2020).

<sup>④</sup> George Marshall, "War Department: Press Branch." (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, September 20, 1945). [http://www.virginiamemory.com/reading\\_room/this\\_day\\_in\\_virginia\\_history/september/20](http://www.virginiamemory.com/reading_room/this_day_in_virginia_history/september/20) (accessed December 8, 2020).

Nevertheless, there was pushback in Congress for a more assertive policy in China. In 1948, Republican legislators threatened to withhold US aid to Western Europe if the Truman administration did not commit more resources to China.<sup>①</sup> During the 1947 debate in Congress to send aid to Europe, one of the foremost representatives of the “China bloc,” Walter H. Judd argued, “[W]e have got to win in Asia, too, or we will ultimately lose in Europe. I cannot myself vote to put some \$20,000,000,000 into holding the line on one front and then ignore another front equally vital to our future.”<sup>②</sup> In other branches of government, there was an equal interest in sending aid to the GMD. In his *Memorandum to the War Department*, Secretary Byrnes advocated for sending 10,000 officers to China to provide logistical support to the GMD, conditioning such aid on internal reform within the Nationalist government.<sup>③</sup> Around the same time, in 1948, President Truman’s Republican challenger, Thomas Dewey, criticized Truman’s weak stance on China. On the campaign trail, Dewey argued, “I do not know whether it [aid] would be 50 percent or 80 percent effective, and I doubt if anyone knows. Of one thing I am sure, it would be immensely more effective than nothing.”<sup>④</sup>

In this way, the domestic political environment both constrained and enabled US aid to China. On the one hand, the US sought to draw down its forces after World War II. On the other hand, Republican factions at home criticized Truman’s weak stance on China. These disagreements notwithstanding, there remained a consensus that the US should not engage in direct hostilities with the CCP. As Tsang Tsou argues, “none of Marshall’s critics advocated the use of American ground forces in China.”<sup>⑤</sup> Internal debates about the US’ China policy help explain why the US did

---

① Westad, *Decisive Encounters*, 186.

② Walter H. Judd, *Hearings on Emergency Foreign Aid*, 80th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington D.C.: Governing Printing Office, 1947), 239.

③ *United States Relations with China*, 802-809.

④ Leo Egan, “Dewey Asks Aid to China at Once to Halt Communists” (New York Times, November 25, 1947), 18. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1947/11/25/104380050.html?pageNumber=1> (accessed December 8, 2020).

⑤ Tsou, *America’s Failure*, 476.

not provide the GMD with substantive military support. They do not explain, however, why the US provided partial aid to the GMD, that is, why the US provided economic aid without military support. To address this question, it is necessary to assess the US' broader strategic calculations in the early days of the Cold War.

### The "Loss of China" Reconsidered

The nature of US involvement in the Chinese Civil War was defined by the US' unambiguous preference for the GMD. At the outset of the Marshall Mission, Truman told Marshall that the United States should support GMD troop movements into Manchuria regardless of whether or not the Nationalists blocked a political settlement with the CCP.<sup>①</sup> Later, in 1947, General Wedemeyer wrote to Marshall, "a China dominated by Chinese Communists would be inimical to the interests of the United States in view of their openly expressed hostility."<sup>②</sup> Many historians have misinterpreted the benign intentions of the Marshall Mission as an example of the US' inaccurate threat perception of the CCP. The reality was that the US sought to use a negotiated settlement in China to strengthen the GMD's position. John Carter Vincent, a Foreign Service Officer who played an outsized role in the formulation of the Marshall Mission, made an argument much to this effect in 1952. Vincent explained, in testimony before the Institute of Pacific Relations, that the Marshall Mission was intended to "support the Nationalist Government of China by bringing about a cessation of civil war and bringing into the Government all of the dissident elements... by taking them in on a minority basis." Much in the same way that "the Communists came into the Government of France at the end of

---

① *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1945, Volume VII, Far East: China*, eds. Ralph R. Goodwin et al. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1969), 761. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945v07/d761> (accessed December 8, 2020)

② Wedemeyer, *Report in United States Relations with China*, 773.

the war," American policymakers believed that the CCP would "eventually [get] kicked out" of a coalition government in China.<sup>①</sup>

After the Marshall Mission had failed, the US government tempered its military support for the GMD—not because of their aversion to the Nationalist government—but because the administration worried that direct intervention would provoke the Soviets. In August 1946, Marshall informed Jiang that the eruption of a Civil War in China would be "an ideal opportunity for the Communists to expand and for the USSR to support the Chinese Communists."<sup>②</sup> Moreover, in the wake of World War II, the US was forced to allocate limited strategic resources to where they were needed most. As Marshall argued in a testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1948:

"We cannot afford, economically or militarily, to take over the continued failures of the present Chinese government to the dissipation of our strength in more vital regions where we now have a reasonable opportunity of successfully meeting or thwarting the Communist threat."<sup>③</sup>

It was not only the fact of GMD "failures" that precluded military aid, but also that there existed more "vital regions" in terms of US security interests. In the same hearing before Congress in February 1948, Marshall elaborated, "In Greece you have a force which is being supported, according to the report by the United Nations Commission, by bordering states. Now in China we have no concrete evidence that it is supported by Communists from the outside."<sup>④</sup> Were the USSR to take a firm stand on the side of the CCP, US policymakers still did not believe that China would become a strategic liability. Marshall argued, "China does not itself possess the raw material and industrial resources which would enable it to become a first-class military power within the foreseeable future."<sup>⑤</sup>

---

① John S. Service, *Hearings on the Institute of Pacific Relations*, 82d Cong., 1st and 2d sess. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951-52), 1714.

② *United States Relations with China*, 176.

③ Marshall, *Foreign Assistance Act Of 1948*.

④ Marshall, *Foreign Assistance Act Of 1948*.

⑤ Marshall, *Foreign Assistance Act Of 1948*.

Ultimately, Congress agreed to grant \$570 million in economic aid to the GMD under the China Aid Act without authorizing the use of American armed forces in China. Later, after the CCP had taken control of the mainland, George Kennan continued to stress that Communist China posed no threat to the US. He argued, "It has been my own thought that the Russians are perhaps the people least able to combine with the Chinese in developing the resources of China and producing anything which in a physical sense would be dangerous to us."<sup>①</sup>

In retrospect, the failings of the US government during the Chinese Civil War do not stem from the misperceptions of the interests and intentions of the GMD or the CCP, as has often been argued. Nor can US restraint be attributed solely to domestic calls for demobilization after World War II. Instead, the US government's failure lies in the fact that officials did not foresee the liability that an emboldened Communist China would become to American national security interests. It was not only China's decision to "lean to one side" in 1949 that took the administration by surprise, but also China's decision to intervene in the Korean War in 1950 and, later, develop rapidly during the First Five-Year Plan. Even though China would part ways with the USSR in the late 1950s, as some American officials had predicted, the damage had already been done. The People's Republic of China became a powerful force to be reckoned with and, as a result, the Cold War's center of gravity shifted from Europe to East Asia.

---

<sup>①</sup> George Kennan, *Hearings on the Institute of Pacific Relations*, 82d Cong., 1st and 2d sess. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951-52), 1558.

## References

- [1] Acheson, Dean. *Economic Assistance to China and Korea 1949-50*. Washington, D.C: US Government Printing Office 1974.
- [2] Arne Westad, Odd. *Decisive Encounters: The Chinese Civil War: 1946-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- [3] Blum, William. *Killing Hope U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II – Part I*. London: Zed Books, 2004.
- [4] Borg, Dorothy and Waldo Heinrichs eds. *Uncertain Years: Chinese-American Relations, 1947-1950*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- [5] Bernkopf Tucker, Nancy. *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945-1996*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- [6] Bernkopf Tucker, Nancy. *Uncertain Years: Chinese-American Relations, 1947-1950*, eds. Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrichs. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- [7] Chen, Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- [8] Cohen, Warren. *America's Response to China: An Interpretive History of Sino-American Relations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971.
- [9] Davies, Paton. "Communist Policy Toward the Kuomintang." *Stilwell Documents*, File 155. Stanford: Hoover Institution, August 3, 1944.
- [10] Egan, Leo. "Dewey Asks Aid to China at Once to Halt Communists." *New York Times*, November 25, 1947, 18.
- [11] Davies, Paton. "Communist Policy Toward the Kuomintang." *Stilwell Documents*, File 155. Stanford: Hoover Institution, August 3, 1944.
- [12] Gaddis, John L. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- [13] Gatti, Charles, ed. *Caging the Bear: Containment and the Cold War*, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1974.
- [14] Government Printing Office, *Economic Assistance to China and Korea 1949-50*. Washington, D.C: US 1974.
- [15] Government Printing Office, *Foreign Assistance Act of 1948*. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1948. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1948-04-03b.pdf> (accessed December 8).
- [16] Government Printing Office, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, Volume VIII, Far East: China*, eds. Velma Hastings Cassidy, Francis C. Prescott, Ralph R. Goodwin, and Herbert A. Fine. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2010.
- [17] Government Printing Office, *Hearings on Emergency Foreign Aid, 80th Cong., 1st sess.* Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1947.





- [18] Government Printing Office, *Hearings on the Institute of Pacific Relations*, 82d Cong., 1st and 2d sess. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1951-52.
- [19] Government Printing Office, *Public Law 512*. Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/statutes-at-large/79th-congress/session-2/c79s2ch580.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2020).
- [20] Kane, Tim. "Global U.S. Troop Deployment," 1950-2003, The Heritage Foundation (2004).
- [21] Kim, Donggil. "Stalin and the Chinese Civil War," *Cold War History* 10, no. 2 (2010).
- [22] Kubek, Anthony. *How the Far East Was Lost: American Policy and the Creation of Communist China: 1941-1949*. Eschenburg Press, 2017.
- [23] Lee, R. "The Army 'Mutiny' of 1946." *The Journal of American History*, 53 no. 3 (1966). 555-571.
- [24] Mao Zedong, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship," *Selected Works*, June 30, 1949 [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4\\_65.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_65.htm) (accessed December 8, 2020).
- [25] Mao, Zedong, "Why it is Necessary to Discuss the White Paper," *Selected Works*, August 28, 1949 [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4\\_68.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_68.htm) (accessed November 3, 2020).
- [26] Marshall, George. *Foreign Assistance Act Of 1948: Aid to China* (Digital Archives: Marshall Foundation, 1948).
- [27] Marshall, George. "War Department: Press Branch." Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, September 20, 1945.
- [28] McCarthy, Joseph. *America's Retreat from Victory: The Story of George Catlett Marshall*. New York: Devin-Adair, 1951.
- [29] New York Times, "President Truman's Statement on United States' China Policy." *New York Times*: December 18, 1946. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1946/12/19/88398779.html?pageNumber=24> (accessed December 8, 2020).
- [30] New York Times, "Marshall Expects to go to Moscow." *New York Times*, 12 January 1947, 44.
- [31] Jian, Chen. *Mao's China and the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- [32] Pearlman, Michael. *Unconditional Surrender, Demobilization, and the Atomic Bomb*. Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1997. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA473544.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2020).
- [33] Pomfret, John. *The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom: America and China, 1776 to Present*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2016.
- [34] Schaller, Michael. *The United States and China in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- [35] Sun, Tung-hsun, "Some Recent American Interpretations of Sino-American Relations of the Late 1940s: An



- Assessment," *American Studies* [ROC] 12, no. 4 (1982).
- [36] Truman, Harry S. *Memoirs: Volume 2, Years of Trial and Hope*. Michigan: Doubleday, 1955.
- [37] Tsou, Tang. *America's Failure in China: 1941-1950*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.
- [38] Tung-hsun, Sun. "Some Recent American Interpretations of Sino- American Relations of the Late 1940s: An Assessment," *American Studies* [ROC], 12, no. 4 (1982).
- [39] U.S. Department of State. *United States Relations with China: With Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949*. Washington, D.C: Department of State Publication 3573—Division of Publications—Office of Public Affairs, 1949.