

## The Commitments of the U.S Global Military Post-1945

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### Abstract

The year 1945 signaled the end of the western Eurocentric coordination of global affairs. The world was inevitably left with two superpowers, with varying ideas of how to organize human society.

**Keywords:** Global affairs; Global military obligations; Economic integration; Global military commitments

### Introduction

This subsequently led to an expansion of global military entanglements by the United States (US) across the globe which was birthed by a combination of factors but occurred primarily as a direct response to the threat posed by external entities [1,2]. Consequently, the scale of global military obligations of the United States after 1945 became unprecedented, and this became part and parcel of the machinery of the United States well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This essay will explore the motives for the expansion of USA global military commitments post 1945. First, the essay will outline and explain the origins of the post 1945 world and the gradual evolution of U.S. global military commitments; highlighting the growth of distrust and the eventual rise of insecurity, which led directly to expanded military obligations. The essay will then analyze other assertions, certain scholars hold accountable as the primary driver, and interlace it with the assertion that protection against external threats was the paramount reason, allowing one to appreciate the context of what a “security threat” meant to decision makers in the US after 1945. It will do this by drawing upon the existing literature and utilizing case studies to secure the argument satisfactorily. The essay concludes with analyzing the comprehensive picture and defending suitably the position that; the primary driver of global military commitments by the US post 1945 was not originally a direct action but a direct reaction to the emergent external threats faced by the United States.

### Origins of the Whirlpool of Distrust

To ensure an end to the ambitions of Nazi Germany, the US and the Soviet Union emerged as unlikely allies during the Second World War (WW II) to neutralise this external threat. Nonetheless, after WW II there was a deep sense of distrust amongst the two powers [1]. The end of the war signified the disintegration of “the old order” hitherto enjoyed by the great western European powers, and the world was left with two hugely influential nations in Europe, namely the United States and the Soviet Union; who pursued the same exact goal, Security. Gaddis asserts the disconcerting fact the Soviets had signed a pact with Nazi Germany in 1939 was still viewed suspiciously by the United States. He also maintains the Soviet Union harboured its own inhibitions as they had endured severe bombardment and degradation of infrastructure, and likewise suffered the most casualties during WW II; it is estimated approximately over 20 million Soviets perished. On the other hand, the US suffered zero bombardment of its mainland territory; as a result, it largely determined “where, when and in what circumstances it would fight” greatly curtailing casualties: “Just under 300,000 U.S. citizens died in all combat theatres”. It subsequently emerged as the most powerful industrial giant, responsible for 50%

of the world’s total output [1]. Furthermore, the notion of spheres of influence deducible from the agreement between Churchill and Stalin left areas “from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic” [3] open to question. This kept the USA apprehensive of the fate of Europe and the potential impact to its own security. However, the most pertinent reason for distrust was the development of the atomic bomb by the allied powers with the exclusion of the Soviet Union. Even so, Stalin had considerable knowledge of the new weapon and feigned surprise when Truman informed him at the Potsdam conference [4]. Though, the U.S. used the weapon primarily to end the war with Japan, Stalin was dismayed because the weapon put U.S. at an unfair advantage. The U.S. now owned the capability to destroy its enemies without putting boots on the ground, and this posed a crucial threat to Soviet security. Indeed, Stalin summarized this when he charged his scientists to belly up to the US, quipping “The balance has been destroyed... that cannot be” [1].

In the post 1945 world, the Soviet Union desired security for itself and for its “egalitarian” notion on how society should be structured, it believed the weight of history was on its side and anticipated a situation of competition amongst the capitalist powers that would lead to its eventual disintegration [1]. Conversely, the US was a nation governed on the principles of self-determination and economic integration and sought to project these values abroad. Congruently, from a security standpoint, the bombing of Pearl Harbour signaled to the US that it could no longer maintain the pre-war values of isolationism and unilaterality. Therefore, key decision makers came to appreciate the certainty that U.S. security could be threatened by events unfolding across the Atlantic. It was now important to engage with the rest of the world on a broader scale to ensure its security.

### The Evolution of Insecurity

Scholars have examined the rise of U.S. global military commitments through the lens of a “security dilemma” and the term was defined in 1951 as “A structural notion in which the self-help attempts of states to look after their security needs tend, regardless of intention, to lead to rising insecurity for others as each interprets

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Received January 04, 2018; Accepted February 06, 2018; Published February 09, 2018

Citation: Obinna CL (2018) The Commitments of the U.S Global Military Post-1945. J Def Manag 8: 171. doi:10.4172/2167-0374.1000171

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its own measures as defensive and measures of others as potentially threatening” [5]. Though scholars such as Jervis contend that the security dilemma influenced the rationale of both states after 1945, he further argues the term is too simplistic to understand the expansion of military commitments; he maintains that the evolution of insecurity occurred because of the varying “social systems” [6]. Mearsheimer on the other hand maintains states are driven to act to maintain security as a question of self-protection; this is because no state can say for certain the intentions of the other. Thus, according to this conceptualization, there can be no room for apprehension, as states have to increase their military capacity to deter others [7]. On the part of the US, there was no automatic inclination that the Soviet Union would take the title of prime external enemy once the threat of Germany and Japan was vanquished [8], it was a situation that evolved out of security concerns.

It is important to recognize the U.S. government had begun thinking of demobilization as early as 1943, and as soon as triumph was secured the plans of demobilization commenced. American troops were reduced from 12,209,238 military personnel at the height of the war to just over 900,000 by 1947, greatly reducing American omnipotence at the time. Within this period (1946-1947), Stalin demanded territorial concessions from Turkey, in the same manner, he delayed withdrawing troops stationed in Iran since 1942 and demanded a foothold in Libya and the Mediterranean.

U.S. decision makers were not pleased with such developments and reacted by deploying the U.S. Sixth fleet “indefinitely” in the Mediterranean and dragged the continued occupation of Iran to the United Nations Security Council in 1946 [8]. The Kremlin’s actions baffled U.S. decision makers; it was around this point that the then chargé d’affaires at the U.S. embassy in Moscow, dispatched on February 22, 1946, what is known today as the “long telegram”. This singular document influenced the formulation of U.S. assessment of “external security threats” for the next 40 years and birthed the policy of containment [2].

The period before WW II was marred by the “Great Depression” and there was a growing apprehension in the US that fascism and communism would take root in areas of economic despondency after the war. The threat was amplified by the halting of British assistance to Greece and Turkey, and an emergent communist movement in France and Italy. As a result, in 1947 the US stepped in, with Truman stating it was now U.S. policy to “assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way” [9]. In June, 1947 this was broadened to “The European Recovery Program” or colloquially termed “The Marshall plan” which was a \$13b package to aid European economic recovery [10]. Williams argues it was not an altruistic policy, but was intended squarely to augment American expansionist aims, and entrench its economic ideals as a way of boosting trade and creating a base for investment for U.S. corporations. However, the essay argues it was conducted not just to expand the “open door policy” but to solely ensure United States security. Mainly, because, in 1947, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) declared “The greatest danger to the security of the United States is the possibility of economic collapse in western Europe and the consequent accession to power of communist elements” [11]. Subsequently, events encompassing the Berlin Blockade and the imposition of a communist government in Czechoslovakia propelled the western European countries and the US to create the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), pledging the US to the first “peacetime defense of western Europe” [1]. Though economic rationale played a part in certain key decisions, one can appreciate the preponderance of countering the “external threat” of communism in crafting U.S

decisions around this period. The formation of NATO went against all advice put forth by President Washington in his farewell address (US History, 2008-2016); nonetheless the US undertook this key decision to ensure its security and that of its allies.

By August 1949, the Soviet Union had acquired its first Atomic Bomb. The repercussion for U.S. security was quite daunting. Also, in 1949, the Marxist inclined Mao Zedong successfully defeated his arch rival Chiang Kai-Shek, in the battle for China, and this stunned the world. Mao stated after his triumph, “we are firmly convinced that in order to win victory and consolidate it we must lean to one side”. In essence, this meant deferring to Stalin as leader of the global communist movement. Mao subsequently visited Moscow in December 1949. In February, Mao and Stalin signed the “Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance” [12]. The essay contends that the activities of these two nations greatly altered the balance of power and fundamentally challenged U.S. post war security. The U.S. reaction to the preceding developments was an immediate need to regain military superiority. As a result, in 1950 President Truman approved additional funding for intensified nuclear research to create a “Super bomb”. The results were highlighted when on “November 1, 1952, the U.S. detonated the world’s first hydrogen bomb” [13]. In addition, issued on April 14, 1950 and approved later in the year by the Truman administration was:

The National Security Council Paper NSC-68 (entitled “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security” and frequently referred to as NSC-68). It was a Top-Secret report completed by the U.S. Department of State’s Policy Planning Staff on April 7, 1950. The 58-page memorandum is among the most influential documents composed by the U.S. Government during the Cold War, and was not declassified until 1975 [14,15].

## Discussion

According to the report, the United States was obliged to embark on rapid military expansion of “conventional forces” and its “nuclear arsenal”, including the development of the hitherto mentioned hydrogen bomb, to counter the growing Soviet security threat. In addition, the report recommended an increase in military aid to allied nations and utilization of “covert” means to accomplish certain aims and objectives. Though the report did not give any specific numbers regarding increment, the cost of these developments was estimated to be about \$50b, effectively trebling defense spending from the \$13b originally earmarked for 1950 [14,15]. The document is quite profound because it highlights clearly the pre-eminent reason the U.S. expanded its global military commitments, the recommendations in the document eventually became the basis for military expansionism for the duration of a Soviet “external threat”.

On June, 25, 1950, buoyed by Soviet support, North Korea in an astonishing move, invaded South Korea. The US promptly responded by securing military assistance through the auspices of the United Nations Security Council and deployed its own troops to the Korean peninsula. This was quite significant as it influenced U.S. policy substantially and effectively further internationalized the external threats faced by the U.S. [16]. The early 1950’s was particularly intriguing; it was characterized by gradual proliferation of countries; birthed by the emergence of decolonization, and the popular term “domino effect” popularized by President Eisenhower [17]. The political climate increasingly began to guide global military commitments. Consequently, the emergence of nationalist conscious governments in Egypt, Iran, and Guatemala in the early 1950’s deepened trepidations. For example, by 1954 the

“threat” of communism in Vietnam had effectively created another menace to the stability of that region. As a result, in 1954 the U.S. ramped up economic and military assistance to the South Vietnamese government [18]. According to the Office of the Historian, “United States used aid packages, technical assistance and sometimes even military intervention to encourage newly independent nations in the Third World to adopt governments that aligned with the West” [14]. One can also argue that the expansion of U.S military commitments within this period was geared at promoting the American ideals of self-determination. However, the sheer scale of American military alliances during this period dwarfs such assertions. According to Best et al. United States, for its part, created the most wide-ranging alliance system in the history of the world. This included bilateral pacts with Japan (1951), the Philippines (1951), Spain (1952), Taiwan (1954), and multilateral treaty organizations, such as in 1951 the Australian-New Zealand-United States Pact (ANZUS), and in 1954 the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO). In the Middle East, the Baghdad Pact (consisting of Britain, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq), acted as the forerunner to the establishment of the American-led Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), (coupled) with the acquisition of numerous military bases from Greenland to North Africa and Japan the United States was indeed keeping a global watch on the assumed designs of the (nascent) Warsaw Pact and the (established) Sino-Soviet alliance [19].

This further elucidates this essays’ stance on the rationale behind the expansion of United States global military commitments. The wide-ranging alliances evolved to counter the ideological and military threat posed by the Soviet Union. According to Leffler and Painter, U.S. decision makers “intensified the perception of threat to prevailing concepts of national security” [12].

## Conclusion

Today, the United States is the preeminent military power, “with unparalleled naval and air forces, (and) owns a unique capacity to act militarily anywhere in the world, so as to pursue interests and to affirm what U.S. military planners explicitly call full spectrum dominance” [20]. Nonetheless, it is crucial to appreciate that such expansion of global military commitments occurred primarily as a direct reaction to the security threats posed by the Soviet Union in the post 1945 world. As discussed in the essay; the perception of a “security threat” evolved and, the assumption of superiority of United States values and ideals were also significant in steering United States global military obligations. Thus, as President Kennedy affirmed in a speech

at American University in 1963; “We are bound to many nations by alliances, (and) those alliances exist because our concern and theirs substantially overlap” [21].

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