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Re-examining Co-Rea

A constructivist realist view of the US decision to
cross the 38th parallel during the Korean War.

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Abstract

This case study examines the American decision to cross the 38th parallel into North Korea in October 1950 during the Korean War. In the early stages of the war the southern and UN forces were pushed back, but with an amphibious landing at Inchon the tides changed and eventually the 38th parallel was crossed. The study employs constructivist realism to shed new light on the motivations and societal and structural factors at play at the time. It finds that the main reasons for the decision to cross into the north was anti-communist societal fears, misguided advice and intelligence, geopolitical considerations based on recent history and individual motivations from president Truman himself. This can help explain why the United States decided to cross the 38th parallel despite the risks involved.

Keywords: Korea, Korean War, United States, Harry S. Truman, 38th parallel, Constructivist realism

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1. Introduction and background

The story of the Korean War is well known and equally well studied. It is also highly relevant as it is technically still ongoing. As with most important historical events though, the developments have come to be explained by some generally agreed upon factors. In the realm of political science and in the context of the Cold War, this usually means that it has been analyzed through the lens of one of the established schools of thought, such as realism, liberalism or constructivism. In this essay I do not intend to dispute the findings that generations of scholars before me have found. Instead I am going to re-examine the American decision to cross the 38th parallel by using the lens of constructivist realism. This hybrid theoretical approach has been popularized in recent years by Samuel Barkin and it attempts to broaden the understanding of politics by combining the insights of realism and constructivism. Through this approach I can contribute new insights into the conflict that continues to impact the Korean peninsula to this day.

1.1 Historical background

The Korean War is a classic Cold War conflict. After the Second World War, the Japanese occupation of the country ended and just like Germany and Austria, Korea was split into different occupation zones. In this case, the United States and the Soviet Union were the only two occupying states, and their respective zones were delineated by the 38th parallel north (Hybel, 2014, p. 56). Korea had no historical precedence for a division, and prior to the Japanese annexation the country had been united since the days of the three kingdoms in the 10th century (Armstrong, 2020). Despite this the relationship between North and South quickly soured in the years after the war. This was due to the respective patrons not being able to reach their goal of general elections for a unified state and instead setting up competing puppet regimes. South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK) was made a capitalist state under Syngman Rhee, a Korean nationalist who had spent most of his adult life in the US. The state had the trappings of a western-styled democracy with capitalism, elections and courts, but for all intents and purposes it was a dictatorship under Rhee, and he was not shy to use force on his own citizens (Roberts, 2000, p. 10). North Korea, officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), was set up as a communist state with former guerrilla leader Kim Il-Sung at the helm. His state was by no means a democracy

either, but it was more well-organised and its survival was staunchly guaranteed by the Soviets (Roberts, 2000, p. 11). Both leaders had ambitions to lead a unified Korea, and Kim Il-Sung had asked Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong for support in achieving this (Roberts, 2000, p. 11). He received massive shipments of weapons and supplies and eventually got the green light for an invasion of the south (Roberts, 2000, p. 11). This proved a huge initial success, with the southern army in a major rout, but in the end victory would elude him.

Globally the Cold War was developing, and the United States did not initially pay much attention to the situation on the Korean peninsula, being preoccupied with the Chinese Civil War, Indochina and Eastern Europe (CIA Daily summaries, 1949-1950). President Harry S. Truman had been Franklin D. Roosevelt's last vice president. He assumed the presidency at the latter's death in 1945 and was immediately faced with important and difficult decisions, being in the middle of a world war. In 1948 he had been reelected and was focused on containing the rising power of the Soviet Union and the communist world (Nojeim, 2006). When Kim Il-Sung in the summer of 1950 launched his invasion of the South, both the US itself and the American-backed southern regime was caught off guard (Matray, 1979, p. 317). All of a sudden it looked like the whole of Korea was heading for communist control, adding insult to injury after the communist victory in China the year before (Nojeim, 2006). Voices were raised throughout the US that something had to be done before another state was lost. The American embassy in Moscow captured the concern of the American political establishment when it communicated its concern to president Truman with these words:

“... the defeat of the Republic of Korea would have grave and unfavorable repercussions for the US position in Japan, Southeast Asia, and in other areas as well, and expresses the view that the US is obligated to make clear to the world without delay that the US is prepared to assist the Republic of Korea maintain its independence by all means at US disposal, including military assistance and vigorous action in the UN Security Council. The Embassy believes that any delay on the part of the US “could suggest” to the USSR the possibility of precipitating with impunity immediate action against Indochina and other points along the boundary of the Soviet sphere.” (CIA Daily summaries, 1950-06-26)

The US subsequently intervened in the conflict under the auspices of the United Nations and forced the North Korean military back towards the starting point of their offensive, the 38th parallel. The UN was a young organisation in 1950 in which the United States had massive

influence, but involving the UN made the intervention a global and international affair, strengthening the legitimacy of this action (Hybel, 2014, p. 60). The Soviet Union was a part of the Security Council with the power to veto this decision, but fortunately for the United States they were boycotting the UN at this time due to the Chinese seat still belonging to the Republic of China and not the communist government (Malkasian, 2001, p. 16). Restoring the status quo on the peninsula was the stated goal of the intervention in Korea according to UN Security Council resolution 82, and now debate arose whether the US and its allies should stop and try to negotiate, or if they should press on beyond the parallel in the hopes of defeating North Korea once and for all (UN, 1950). This would be a risk-laden move, as the north-aligned powers of Communist China and the Soviet Union possibly could intervene too in that case. There was also much concern from other UN nations about the legitimacy of pressing on (CIA Daily summaries, 1950-09-22, 28), but despite all this, Truman and the United States decided to continue the war and cross into North Korea. The result was the feared Chinese intervention, three more years of war and thousands upon thousands of casualties on all sides.

1.2 Purpose and research question

In this essay I intend to apply a fairly new theory on a fairly old case. By thus doing I hope to find new insight on historical events as well as to expand the empirical base for the theory. Political science, like all sciences, is cumulative, and adding new perspectives and theoretical frameworks serves to constantly improve the overall understanding of both the theory and the empirical events. In regards to the empirical I have chosen to focus on the decision to cross the 38th parallel by the United States, as it carries a moral implication with it. If they would have stopped after driving the North Koreans from the south, the intervention would have been about restoring the status quo. What happened instead made the intervention closely connected to US foreign policy and their attempts to contain the Soviet Union, and as thus it is of importance to the historical narrative of the Cold War. I have chosen to use the United States as my unit of analysis and not the United Nations, partly because the armed contingent was under US command, but mainly because Harry Truman, the US president, was the only actor with the power to decide the course of action. This is of course an important statement, as on paper the US did not at all “control” the UN, but in reality they definitely held a great

deal of power over the organisation, especially when the Soviet Union boycotted the Security Council (Nojeim, 2006). My research has indicated that at least the US themselves saw the decision as being up to them to take. I have thus decided to not go into great depth on the particular issue of power dynamics between the US and the UN to instead focus entirely on the American leadership. In this way I adhere to the realist view that international organisations have little power of their own in international relations. (Barkin, 2012, p. 134)

My research question is thus:

- How can constructivist realism explain the US decision to advance beyond the 38th parallel during the Korean War?

2. Theory

2.1 Constructivist realism

Constructivist realism might sound like a contradictory set of ideas. Constructivism and realism are often seen as being antipodes in international relations theory, with conflicting methods, perspectives and models (Barkin, 2012, p. 2). However, this is not necessarily the case. Barkin argued in his 2010 book “Realist Constructivism: Rethinking International Relations Theory” that much more common ground than is commonly regarded can be found between the two schools. He focuses on the classical version of realism which he argues is more sound and compatible with constructivism (Barkin, 2012, p. 5). Instead of seeking to limit our analysis to one set of rules and theories we should be broad and look for the similarities between different approaches. His central points of concord between constructivism and classical realism are three-fold. Both schools recognize that historical contingency is crucial for developments in the present, that international relations have a social basis and that there is a need for reflexivity, to allow for different rules and moral structures in different circumstances (Barkin, 2012, p. 166). Barkin claims that these similarities exist between constructivism and *classical* realism, not neorealism, and argues that neorealism is lacking because of the loss of these aspects. He also emphasizes in the book that this hybridization is not a new paradigm and that it is not applicable to all questions of political science, but that it can favorably be applied to questions of “...social construction of public policy, particularly foreign policy...” (Barkin, 2012, p. 7). My study concerns the social inputs and contexts that made the United States cross the 38th parallel, and thus Barkin’s hybrid approach of constructivism coupled with realism suits very well as the underlying theoretical framework of this study.

That constructivist realism is a hybridization means that it attempts to reconcile and combine two schools of thought in order to improve our understanding of politics. A combined theory can cover aspects that one school misses. For example many modern day political scientists focus on the social aspects of my event in a constructivist vein. They discuss the views of Truman’s closest circle of advisors, of general MacArthur in command of the military contingent and of the general public (Hybel, 2014). Many academics during the Cold War

however concerned themselves in a realist fashion with balances of power, power politics and general formulas for war-making (Schnabel, 1972). The benefits of the constructivist realist approach is that these approaches can be synergized into a more all-encompassing explanation.

The main tenets of constructivist realism is as previously mentioned the historical contingency, the social logic of international relations and the understanding of reflexivity. Barkin draws these three arguments both from classical realism and contemporary constructivism. International relations takes place in a historical continuum, where past experiences and events have an important part in the contemporary political environment. Something that would be prudent in one situation might be inconceivable in that same country ten years later. It implies that a historical understanding is necessary for a complete picture of the event or question in study (Barkin, 2012, p. 37). The logic of the social indicates that foreign policy decisions are made by social beings in a social context, and that people do not operate on a purely logical level, as is claimed by rational choice theory. The culture of a country, the people in leadership and the trends and ideas surrounding the decision-maker, all of this and more affect the final outcome (Barkin, 2012, p. 51). Barkin also highlights the reflexive nature of politics, inherent in both schools but not in contemporary realism. Reflexivity concerns the inevitable outcome that we as scholars will see cases through our own lenses of values and circumstances, and that the actors themselves saw it through their own lenses, shaped by their time and place. This means that their morality and their objectives must be understood from an appropriate contextual perspective, not from our own (Barkin, 2012, p. 88). Just like the other two points, it is essentially grounded in the ontological belief that general rules and models do not work for politics and international relations as they do for science. Both constructivists and classical realists agree that every situation in politics is unique. There can be trends and similarities, but we can not analyse events simply by using universal laws of political science. This means that analysts can combine these two schools in their research and reach new, deeper conclusions.

Additionally, I will be using some other specific terms in this study that might need defining. One important concept is that of agency. I will be discussing agency in primarily constructivist terms. According to Alexander Wendt agency means that individuals act with purpose and free will, and that they have the capacity to impact the socially constructed contexts that they exist in, may it be either by reinforcing it through their actions or by

restructuring it (Barkin, 2012, p. 101). By using this definition I allow for people to contradict the overarching structures and norms in their society while still holding that it shapes their options, wishes and perspectives. I will also briefly discuss the defensive and offensive variants and modern realism. In doing this I refer to the ideas of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer respectively, focusing on their ideas on the main motivation of states in international relations, that being fear and greed primarily (Heydarian Pashakhanlou, 2018).

2.2 Literature review

There has been much written about the Korean War within the field of political science, mainly in a general sense of the conflict or its consequences, but in doing so the authors have inescapably dealt with the crossing of the parallel too. Alex Roberto Hybel in his work “US Foreign Policy Decision-Making from Truman to Kennedy” analysed the Korean War with the framework of foreign policy decision making (FPDM), discussing how president Truman decided both to intervene initially and to cross the 38th parallel. Hybel focuses on FPDM, and theorizes the decision from this set of ideas (Hybel, 2014). When it comes to the constructivist side of my theoretical framework, Steven Casey’s book “Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953” is relevant. He analyses the social aspect of the war and the US policy and argues that there was great popular support for taking the fight to North Korea itself even before Truman’s decision (Casey, 2008, p. 100). The intelligence that Truman based this on is scrutinized in Bruce Riedel’s article “Catastrophe on the Yalu: America’s intelligence failure in Korea”, which illustrates how the CIA and the American intelligence community at large misjudged communist China and the Soviet Union and urged Truman to cross the parallel (Riedel, 2017).

When it comes to more political science-related texts, Michael J. Nojeim wrote about the crossing of the 38th parallel from a decidedly constructivist viewpoint in “US Foreign Policy and the Korean War”. He demonstrates what important people in the US leadership thought about the issue and motivates the president’s subsequent commitment to complete victory by the social context he operated in (Nojeim, 2006). In an article written on behalf of the OAH (Organisation of American Historians) regarding the Korean War, Priscilla Roberts claims that the 38th parallel was crossed because “the momentum of victory was difficult to resist,

generating a sense of ‘hubris’” among the American leadership (Roberts, 2000). James I. Matray argues on the other hand in his article for OAH, “Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea”, that the decision was not due to the momentum of victory, but part of a global strategy. He also judges the decision to cross the parallel a decisive mistake on Truman’s part (Matray, 1979, p. 333). The scholar most famously concerned with the Korean War however, is arguably Bruce Cumings. He argues that the drive north was part of a broader, pre-existing strategy in Washington of “rollback”, that communism should be fought wherever possible, which is the typical realist explanation, hinging on ideas of great power competition in the bipolar world of the Cold War (Cumings, 2017). The Korea Institute of Military History suggests however in its history of the war that more agency should be awarded to the Korean people itself. It mentions the will of the ROK soldiers to advance north and the argument by ROK president Syngman Rhee in conversation with general MacArthur that he could not stop his soldiers from crossing the 38th parallel (Korea Institute of Military History, 1997, p. 751).

In my study I will be using multiple of these works as sources, along with primary materials such as CIA rapports, UN resolutions and speeches from relevant actors. The CIA made daily summaries for the president to read during this time, with updates on what was going on in the world. They are now organized into long documents with two months worth of summaries in each and when applicable I will be referring to the specific date that the summary was written in my text. Secondary sources are generally less reliable in studying historical events, but with critical review and cross-referencing they too can be of great use in a study such as this. Overall, I have tried to use as many sources as possible, both in order to understand the event and the decision, but also to learn and discover what has been written about this in the past and what I can contribute. My sources are mostly western and primarily American, which can be a problem in that certain perspectives are lost, but since the aim of my study is to understand and examine the *American* decision, it is quite appropriate to utilise sources and materials from the US.

3. Method and timeline

3.1 Method and operationalisation

I will be structuring the analysis of this essay in three parts, each based on the commonalities between constructivism and classical realism according to Barkin (2012, p. 166). These three are historical contingency, the logic of the social and reflexivity. I will be using this structure in order to produce a clear argument for the constructivist realist perspective of this event. My study is in essence a case study conducted with the aid of a particular theory with the intention of shedding new light on an old topic. A case study concerns a single case in an intensive and comprehensive manner (Bryman, 2016, p. 60). This suits the objective of my study well, as I seek a detailed understanding of the event in question. However, in some ways it will involve a comparative element too, as one of the secondary intentions of this study is to compare with and improve upon prior academic interpretations of the event in question, the crossing of the 38th parallel. In order to achieve the objectives, the operationalisation of the essay is as follows.

In the first part of the analysis I examine the event through the lens of historical contingency. I discuss historical developments and trends that affected the decision such as World War 2 and the nascent Cold War, with particular focus on the idea of containment and its motivation in not repeating the mistakes of appeasement during the interwar era. I also employ the idea of balance of power and its realist repercussions and explanations.

In the second part I cover the social co-construction of president Truman's world in September and October 1950. In order to understand the structures and information affecting him I bring up public opinion, pressures from different leaders such as general MacArthur and ROK president Syngman Rhee and the information and intel available to Truman in reaching the decision.

Lastly in the third part I nuance the context and the reflexive aspects of the event. I begin by introducing the idea of individual agency on the part of Harry Truman by discussing his

private political motivations. Next I discuss the established morality of American foreign policy at the time and briefly raise the failings of traditional accounts of the decision to factor in agency and the unique aspects of the situation.

There are of course other aspects I could study or analyse such as the economic and military capabilities of the US or the official speeches and statements, but for the purposes of this essay I have decided on these three categories. In choosing to do a qualitative case study I can delve deep into the factors affecting the decision and really employ the constructivist realist perspective. A comparative study with for example the decision to commit troops to Vietnam later could have offered a more generalisable conclusion, but since a core aspect of both constructivism and classical realism is the reflexivity and uniqueness of every situation I felt that a more focused study was preferable in this case (Barkin, 2012, p. 88).

3.2 Timeline

Before I start the analysis a short timeline might be prudent. In 1945 the Second World War ended and Harry S. Truman became the president of the United States. During the following years the Cold War slowly emerged and conflict arose between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1948 both South and North Korea was founded and Truman won that year's presidential election, and in 1949 the Chinese Civil War ended with a communist victory (Nojeim, 2006). 1950 is the main year in question, with a specific focus on late summer and early autumn. North Korea invaded the south on the 25th of June with great success. That same day the United Nations published Resolution 82, which criticized and condemned the North Korean aggression, and two days later Resolution 83 followed, which proposed that states should send troops or any kind of assistance necessary to uphold the independence of South Korea (UN, 1950). Later, with American soldiers in Korea the tide turned. The 15th of September marked the start of the Battle of Inchon, where American troops landed behind northern lines near Seoul. This coupled with added pressure elsewhere meant that in time the attackers were forced back across the 38th parallel (Hybel, 2014, p. 71). Finally, on the 9th of October the UN forces officially crossed the parallel themselves in force after much consideration, the contents of which will now follow (Korea Institute of Military History, 1997, p. 782).

4. Analysis

4.1 Historical Contingency

Classical realism and constructivism agree that when it comes to international politics and foreign policy decision making, an understanding of the relational history behind the actors, the context and the decisions is necessary to truly understand the course of events. One big challenge exists in narrowing it down to what really affected the studied events and made it unique. I will try to isolate some key factors that made up the setting of the advance into North Korea by UN troops in the fall of 1950. My main points will be the early Cold War setting, the recent World War and the even more recent developments in China.

The Korean War was in its nature a conflict formed by the Second World War. Realists would traditionally and reasonably point to the emergence of a bipolar power balance in the world as a whole as well as in East Asia, with the US and the USSR on separate sides (Roberts, 2000). Before 1945 any issues on the Korean peninsula would be a Japanese affair, perhaps with some Soviet or Chinese involvement, but certainly not any American involvement. Five years later in 1950, the United States committed the full might of its armed forces to supposedly defend the freedom of Korea (Matray, 1979, p. 317). This was an extraordinary development that can only be properly understood in the context we have come to know as the Cold War. The Cold War is textbook realism, where two superpowers of fairly equal power are balancing each other by supporting proxies, such as the two Korean governments. Faced with a subsequent possibility of defeating the rival Soviet-sponsored proxy for good and tipping the scales more in their favour, the American decision in question can be easily understood from a fundamental realist perspective. Defensive realism would be appropriate to understand the initial American commitment, as it focuses on the fear of losing power and the need to ensure the status quo (Heydarian Pashakhanlou, 2018). Offensive realism on the other hand would be suitable for explaining the decision to cross the parallel, as it focuses on greed and that states try to maximise relative power at all opportunities (Barkin, 2012, p. 128). Studying the response and considerations of the US to this war makes it clear that they to a large extent did think in realist terms. The Truman Doctrine is a perfect example of this, as it aimed to “contain” the global power of the Soviet Union by resisting its advances and supporting states and groups doing the same (Nojeim, 2006). It was motivated

by the need to defend the global position of the United States and its political and economic model, in a decidedly Waltzian manner. To ensure their survival, states must balance other powers according to Waltz, and this is exactly how Truman framed his doctrine. In these terms it might be clear why the US intervened, since they officially followed the doctrine of containing advances, but the fact is that they tried to do more than that in Korea.

Constructivist thinking might provide another explanation. It centers around a belief that social realities and experiences constitute what is appropriate and logical in a society, and that there are no universal political truths or laws (Barkin, 2012, p. 26). In this case, the social fabric of the United States had quickly turned anti-communist in the late 40's, and the public opinion skewed heavily in support for a further advance by the UN forces (Casey, 2008). This development was to a large extent the result of senator Joseph McCarthy, who in March 1950 had accused a number of state officials in the US of being secret communists (Casey, 2008). In line with this scare the media and the news turned decidedly anti-communist as well. Add to this reports from the Chinese Civil War, where the communists had driven the US-aligned nationalists in exile to Taiwan, the establishment of Soviet puppet states in most of Eastern Europe and communist risings and movements in nations as diverse as Greece, Indochina and Indonesia meant that the public and the leadership alike were deeply scared (Nojeim, 2006). The apparently sudden explosion of communism worldwide from being just in the Soviet Union to the current situation alarmed the US. Thus the recent history greatly affected the parameters that Truman could work within.

The preferred response to this perceived communist aggression stemmed partly from previous experiences too. When Germany had begun to expand and claim ever more territory in the 30's, the US did nothing, and when Japan did the same, the US had done essentially nothing again. As a result of this, they were caught unaware in Pearl Harbor, and seeking to avoid a repeat of that blunder they would not be similarly passive to the spread of communism. US senator William Knowland said in a speech the day after the initial invasion of South Korea that :

"Korea today stands in the same position as did Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria and Czechoslovakia of an earlier date. In each of those instances a firm stand by the law-abiding nations of the world might have saved the peace..." (Montgomery & Johnson, 1998, p. 95)

We even have strong indications from Truman himself that he thought along these lines. In his memoir he wrote that:

“In my generation this was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier.” (Hybel, 2014, p. 67)

Historical contingency informs us of the effects these past developments and experiences had on the actors involved. Without this knowledge it would be difficult to explain why the United States was so much more assertive and proactive than they ever would have been before the Second World War.

The experiences in China were also important. During the Second World War the Republic of China had been one of the allies, a major nation in the narrative of the war (Nojeim, 2006). The American planners and strategists saw China as an integral US ally in the future as well, and they were given a seat in the United Nations Security Council. The Civil war that re-erupted in 1945 and 1946 was not entirely a surprise to the US, but the success of the communists there certainly convinced the American leadership that next time they would be more decisive (Nojeim, 2006). When the nationalists under Chiang Kai-Shek had to flee to Taiwan it was clear that the Soviets and the communist camp had gained a great victory. President Truman received harsh criticism domestically for failing to stop the communist takeover of such a large country as China (Nojeim, 2006). It is important to remember that the flight to Taiwan only occurred in December 1949, half a year before the North Korean invasion. When that invasion took place it prompted a strong US response. Truman not only sent troops to Korea, he also sent the US 7th fleet to the Taiwan Straits in order to block any potential hostilities between the two Chinas (Nojeim, 2006). The developments in China thus motivated and forced the US leadership even more to act decisively in Korea.

Combining the two approaches of constructivism and realism enables us to see a more complete picture. The balance of power and the challenge to the regional hegemony of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region by the communist advances provided a clear motivation for acting decisively. Additionally, the experiences of the past decade and the

prize of neutrality and passiveness were painfully clear to all Americans (Hybel, 2014, p. 67). Placed on its own in a contextual vacuum however, the decision would be much more difficult to explain. Essentially what happened was that a major power escalated a far-off war without any apparent connection to the safety of its citizens despite the huge risk of this escalation leading to a new world war. This would seem entirely illogical and contrary to both realism and constructivism if not for the historical context the events took place in. Adding to the unlikeliness of the eventual decision is the important fact that the American leadership were well aware of the risks involved, especially the possibility of Chinese or Soviet intervention, and they nevertheless decided to go through with it. Evidence of this is manifold, but one example would be that the Chinese prime minister Zhou Enlai told the Indian ambassador to Beijing, Mr. Panikkar, on the 2nd of October that China would definitely intervene if UN forces crossed the 38th parallel (Riedel, 2017). Panikkar passed this information on to his own government which then distributed it to the states with troops in Korea. This warning was extremely alarming to the British who also had troops in Korea, but the Americans chose to dismiss it as communist propaganda (Riedel, 2017).

The recent history of the Second World War can as we have seen contribute to the understanding of the American decision to cross the 38th parallel, despite the apparent risks and modest possibilities for immediate reward. A neo-realist perspective, especially Kenneth Waltz' defensive realism, would fall short in attempting to motivate the development. In a structural and universal world the US would not risk a third World War over Korea. They would defend their interests, i.e. ensuring South Korea survived, and then be satisfied instead of choosing to continue the advance. The fear of a major war would be much stronger than the greed of seizing a small advantage in Korea according to Waltz. A constructivist realist approach with its historical contingency would on the other hand be able to explain the experiences and trends that led the US to this course of action, while still having power balances as a part of the analysis. I have discussed the historical contingency of the event and will now move on to the social factors co-constructing the environment that president Truman was acting in.

4.2 The logic of the social

The logic of the social dictates that humans are not isolated individuals making rational decisions based on universal truths. Instead every person, system and state is formed socially, and the decisions we reach are dependent on the surrounding community. President Truman was responsible for the final decision in crossing the 38th parallel, but that does not mean that he reached it alone based on his knowledge and views, or even that he himself ultimately decided it. It only means that he was responsible. The views of his advisors, military commanders and intelligence officers undoubtedly affected him, and so did the general opinion of the country and the advice of foreign leaders. Classical realists claim that people do what is rational in their particular situation and constructivists say that people do what is socially appropriate in their situation. Studying these sources can help us build on the conclusions we reached regarding the historical context of the decision. By looking at it through the combined lens of constructivism and realism we can capture not only the power relations between the actors, but also the co-construction of the decision through both what is situationally rational and socially appropriate (Barkin, 2012, p. 50).

As mentioned before, the American population was decisively supportive of further military action. A Gallup poll conducted in early October indicated that 64 percent of Americans surveyed wanted the troops to continue into North Korea (Casey, 2008, p. 100). This is of course significant in itself, insofar as the president should ideally represent the views of the general population, and it inadvertently affected what he seemed as socially appropriate, but his own personal inputs of information were equally important. However, these were also skewed in favor of an advance across the parallel. The daily briefings Truman received from the CIA were adamant in their denial of a serious threat from China. Already on the 27th of September they reported on possible communist Soviet or Chinese intervention, but stated that recent threats most certainly were a bluff intended to keep the US from advancing further. On the 9th of October one entry had the headline “Chinese Communists intervention in Korea discounted”, and throughout October and early November the CIA repeatedly commented on reports of Chinese troops in Korea saying that they believed it to only account to small local reinforcements, and that China could not afford to commit any major troop contingents (CIA Daily summaries, 1950-09-27, 1950-10-09). The time for intervention had long passed, they claimed, and any involvement would be inconsequential. It took until the

end of November, when Chinese troops had been in Korea for over a month, that the CIA finally reported the Chinese intervention (CIA Daily summaries, 1950-11-16, 28).

They were not the only authority downplaying the threat however. General Douglas MacArthur in command of the UN forces in Korea was an aggressive commander, favoring swift and decisive action (Hybel, 2014, p. 62). He strongly sought the green light to cross the 38th parallel, and his staff office concurred with the beliefs of the CIA that significant involvement from other states in the case of an advance was unlikely (Matray, 1979, p. 326). During their famous meeting on Wake Island on the 15th of October president Truman asked MacArthur about the way forward in Korea. He specifically asked about the attitude of China, and the answer MacArthur gave him was reassuring. They would not intervene, and according to MacArthur's intelligence staff, even if they did intervene the Chinese could at most provide some 50 000 support troops, not nearly enough to halt the attack. (Riedel, 2017). In the end the general got his way, but the extent of the effect his reassurance had on Truman is difficult to ascertain. The two men had a rocky relationship, which later would culminate in a major dispute and the sacking of MacArthur from his position by Truman (Nojeim, 2006).

The South Korean leadership might not have had much power over the larger scope of affairs at this time. They were after all effectively brought back from the dead by the US in the wake of the initial invasion, and the South Korean military was transferred to US overall command (Korea Institute of Military History, 1997, p. 753). But the Koreans had a great deal of influence and power on the ground nevertheless, and president Syngman Rhee was very eager to reunite his country. Prior to any US commitment for a drive north, he informed his commanders and ministers that they would cross the parallel and defeat the north with or without UN assistance. Rhee let the Americans know that the ROK military would go north and there was nothing he could do to stop them (Korea Institute of Military History, 1997, p. 751). It is of course entirely possible that the US could have forced them to stop, but the fact is that in some ways Truman was faced with a *fait accompli*. The continued invasion would happen and he could choose to support it or risk it to fail. With reassurance from his top military commander, his intelligence community, the general public, and presented with this fact, the decision he reached might not seem very surprising. It would be the rational choice from a classical realist point of view and the socially appropriate choice from a constructivist perspective.

However, these are not rules or universal laws of human behavior. The actors have individual agency too. MacArthur was for example a very risk-taking man at heart. This is evident from his request to deploy nuclear weapons against China later in the war, and his earlier efforts in the Second World War (Farley, 2016). His willingness to cross the parallel can thus also be explained on grounds of individual agency. Rhee was supported by the general will of his countrymen, but he was also personally very attached to the idea of leading an independent united Korea (Hybel, 2014, p. 59). Truman naturally had his own agency too, and the choice he made was not predestined or inevitable. In many aspects it was not the appropriate choice, despite the many urgings to go through with it.

To begin with the US administration were aware of the risks. The directives given to MacArthur on the 27th of September regarding the future objectives of the war outlined that he could pursue and destroy the enemy across the 38th parallel, but if any indication arose of Chinese or Soviet intervention he would immediately stop the advance and report to Washington. He was furthermore told to avoid using non-Korean troops near the northern border of Korea to avoid provocation at any cost (Appleman, 1961, p. 607). These directives were careful and showed an awareness of the possibility of escalation. Truman additionally knew of the Panikkar warning, saying that China would interfere if the parallel was crossed (Riedel, 2017). This warning might have been mistrusted by the Americans, but they did not ignore it completely, and in any case it indicated a strong Chinese opposition to the crossing of the parallel and a raising of the stakes. In light of this, the question whether his eventual decision was rational or appropriate gets more uncertain, and an individual agency must be factored in to his decision.

On the 9th of September the National Security Council of the United States compiled a report on the possible courses of actions in Korea where they advocated for a highly careful approach. They highlighted the risks of general war with the major communist powers and strongly advised securing the support of the United Nations if a further escalation should be on the table. Additionally the risk of communist Chinese intervention was raised, but it was framed as “politically unlikely”. Thus the Council recommended that MacArthur should draw up plans for operations north of the parallel and the occupation of the whole peninsula, but that this should only be executed on the direct order of president Truman himself. If China or the Soviet Union intervened however, the UN forces should retreat to and hold the 38th

parallel, acting as unprovocative as possible in order to avoid a full war between major powers. (National Security Council, 1950)

Truman's advisors were split on the issue. Influential diplomat and theorist George Kennan argued that the UN resolutions in place did not grant the authority to cross the parallel and more importantly that doing so would greatly risk Chinese or Soviet intervention. He had support for this view from Paul Nitze who was head of the Policy Planning Staff. Initially this position enjoyed significant support, with MacArthur and John Allison, the director of the Office of North East Asian Affairs as the main opposition (Matray, 1979, p. 318, 323). Allison was adamant in his view that the United States should push hard and reunify Korea. In his view this was both strategically beneficial and tactically necessary. Without a clear US commitment to Korean unification the soldiers, especially the South Koreans, would be demoralized, he argued. With the stabilizing of the front in late July and the landing at Incheon in September, opinion among the US leadership started to change. Allison's and MacArthur's position was greatly strengthened, and when Dean Acheson, the secretary of state, joined their camp it greatly influenced the president (Matray, 1979, p. 324). Truman had deep admiration and trust for Acheson and their friendship lasted long after their professional relationship ended (Knopf, 2010). Dean Acheson and Douglas MacArthur both advocated the same position to the president, but it seems like it was the former who truly had his ear.

These social factors deepen and broaden our understanding of the social forces and the logic of appropriateness that governed Truman's thinking. He would be affected by them all, to varying degrees, but they would not act as commanding factors. Constructivist realism is careful in neither ascribing these social factors nor the threads of history a definitive or fatalistic quality. They shape the reality of the day and impact which choices exist and what is reasonable or logical to do, but the actors in history and politics are individuals with free will (Barkin, 2012, p. 102). They have agency, and this is by nature reflexive. Every occasion and event has its unique sets of circumstances.

4.3 Reflexivity

Constructivism and classical realism both have a hard time theorizing the individual agency of actors in international relations. The two schools seem to agree that it is a driving force for change and an important element in the evolution of foreign policy, but the fact that they both reject the determinism and universalism of neorealism and rational choice theory in favor of reflexivity complicates the analysis of this factor (Barkin, 2012, p. 100). Barkin captures this problem by stating “...to theorize agency is to deny agency” (2012, p. 102). In neorealism individuals are of negligible importance, and only states, as the main unit of analysis, are of importance in the grand scheme of things. They claim that states act according to certain principles and models, which do not change or can be changed. Constructivist realism however holds that while states undoubtedly are important, they are constituted by individuals with the power to affect the way the state acts. These individuals can thus be said to have an agency that is always unique and reflexive, based both on the personality of the individual in question, the society surrounding him or her and the specific set of past events and experiences. We can not with certainty understand the inner thoughts or motivations of Harry Truman in reaching the decision to cross the 38th parallel no matter how much we learn about it. However we can as scholars come close. In order to do that we need to understand the historical context, the social context, but also the unique aspects of the individual and the event and values at the time that we study.

Truman was like all people guided by his own morals when making decisions. As the head of government and the commander-in-chief of the US armed forces, his morals undoubtedly had an effect on the foreign policy of the nation. Classical realists recognize that morality is reflexive and situational (Barkin, 2012, p. 134). How did Truman regard the decision in Korea from a moral standpoint? One important traditional aspect of American foreign policy is the idea of isolationism. In its modern form it originated during the First World War but it had its roots in the Monroe Doctrine during the 19th century. Essentially it meant that US leaders should always prioritize its own citizens and the safety of the nation, not engage in distant conflict or sacrifice lives and resources for the sake of other states (Schlesinger, 1995). The proponents of this idea were numerous and advocated against American involvement in the World Wars and for general non-commitment between the wars. To commit troops to Korea was in itself a big step away from this policy. America had of course

taken part in both World Wars eventually, but only after provocations and attacks on American lives. Korea had little to do with America. The attack there was on South Korea, not on the United States. Intervening there was decisively anti-isolationist and a brand new streak of foreign policy for the United States. By further risking a major war with a significant power in crossing the parallel, Truman went way beyond what would traditionally be considered just and wise in the context of American foreign policy. Naturally, the revolutionary changes that had occurred since Pearl Harbor with four years of war, around 400 000 Americans dead and two atomic bombs dropped had transformed the American morality, but the move to cross the parallel was without a doubt a break with tradition and established wisdom (US Veterans Affairs, 2019).

Another aspect of the decision often overlooked in histories of the Korean War is the domestic politics at home in the United States. Truman, as a politician in a democracy, needed to consider his popularity and his chances of getting reelected. The next presidential election was still two years away, but Truman struggled with public approval. He had won the presidential election of 1948, but he did it as a clear underdog (Nojeim, 2006). In early October 1950 his approval rating hovered around 40 percent, much less than his predecessor FDR ever had (Woolley & Peters, 2020). It is not preposterous to assume that Truman was aware of this, and that it played a part in his decision-making, especially since the public was so positive to a crossing of the parallel as we saw earlier. There was also a powerful “China lobby” in the US congress that advocated for a tough stance on communism in East Asia and had been very critical of what they perceived to be a soft stance from the president ever since the Chinese Civil War (Hybel, 2014, p. 82). Taking the fight to North Korea itself would serve to secure their support, or at least avoid further political attacks from them. Thus the president's own political interests might have played a part in taking the risk that an advance meant and it certainly favored a further commitment in Korea. This individual agency is often missing from traditional analysis that focuses on structures and power relations.

The official motivations for the commitment north of the parallel was heavily based on specific contemporary morals too. In statements, speeches and “fireside chats”, a tradition he carried over from his predecessor on the job Franklin Roosevelt, president Truman and his aides continuously framed the conflict and the importance of it in manichaeian terms (Matray, 1979, p. 321). According to this the North Korean aggression was just another example of the evil communist menace advancing and threatening the free world. Truman wanted to defeat

the invasion, reunify the peninsula and then the eventual unified Korea could become a democratic and successful nation, acting as a symbol for the world that when communism tried to conquer, democracy and capitalism won out in the end, and produced great success (Matray, 1979, p. 333). Attempting to demonstrate the superiority of their own system while appealing to the fear of communism was very much in line with the American morality of the day, and the leadership certainly felt some degree of fear themselves in facing a strong and assertive Soviet Union, but it was also an extremely powerful tool to rally support (Casey, 2008, p. 102). Truman and his advisors seem to have acted on a belief that they were doing good for the world by saving it from communism but the extent to which they truly believed this and to what extent they in actuality wanted to counter the growing influence of the Soviet Union to protect the position of the United States is hard to ascertain. In any case one needs to grasp the anti-communist atmosphere of the early 1950's and the arguments and morality that it spawned in order to understand the context of the decision to cross the 38th parallel.

It is important to realise for me as a scholar that following the concept of reflexivity my views and experiences have an effect on my perception of the studied subject (Barkin, 2012, p. 100). I have throughout the study tried to be as contextual as possible, to discuss the decision from a contemporary perspective, but it is inevitable that my current context and morality will impact my analysis. I also have the benefit of hindsight, which can tend to make some aspects seem strange or self-evident to an observer today. For example it might today seem very strange that the American leadership just plainly ignored the warning that Panikkar, the Indian ambassador provided, as it was a clear message that the Chinese were strongly opposed to an American advance into North Korea, regardless of whether they were prepared to intervene or not. By modern logic they would take this into account and be meticulous in gathering intelligence and indications whether an intervention was being prepared. As it occurred however, the climate at the time was full of mistrust, psychological games and bluffs between the major powers, and the Americans chose to interpret this as a bluff, which can be explained in the anti-communist climate existing in the US at the time. This danger of misinterpreting historical issues is something I am aware of, and in part the aim of the study itself tries to circumvent this flaw. By using the constructivist realist approach with its focus on reflexivity we can more accurately understand the event, regardless of our inherent lenses and experiences.

5. Results and discussion

The Korean War and the decision to advance beyond the 38th parallel greatly affected the Cold War and US foreign policy, and even more importantly the Korean peninsula and its people were immensely affected by it, with the effects still very much evident today. By using a new, hybrid theory I have shed new light on the circumstances, individuals and their motivations surrounding this momentous decision. My research question for this study was as follows:

- “How can constructivist realism explain the US decision to advance beyond the 38th parallel during the Korean War?”

I chose to tackle this question with the help of three central themes or understandings in constructivist realism, historical contingency, the logic of the social and reflexivity.

Truman was affected by many factors in reaching this decision. One of the most important factors was the Cold War and the recent developments leading up to the Korean War. I have shown how the power structures, both real and perceived, in the nascent conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union after the Second World War impacted the thinking of the US and motivated them in trying to contain the Soviets. President Truman was afraid of the revisionist power of the communist block, and wanted to cement the global leadership of the United States, thinking in realist terms about balancing and containment. He had experienced the failure of appeasement and neutrality prior to the Second World War and acted with that memory on the forefront of his decision-making. He was also part of the social realities of the day, with immense fear of communism and a great deal of domestic lobbying and opinion urging him to be firm and decisive towards any communist aggression, especially with the “loss” of China the year before.

President Truman was a social actor within these structures and societies. In addition to being a part of the societal fear of expanding communism, he received a great deal of advice, recommendations or warnings from various sources. The logic of the social tells us that these factors shape our options and the way we think. The warning by ambassador Panikkar was one of the most clear indications of the disaster about to unfold, but due to the mistrust and hostility against communism and communist actors, it was ignored. The National Security

Council advised a cautious and level-headed approach, with emphasis on international support and averting a major war. However, the recommendations of his friend Dean Acheson along with military “superstar” Douglas MacArthur to seize the opportunity to deal a blow to the communist camp carried more weight. The South Koreans of course played a part too, with president Rhee informing the US that he would not order his troops to stop at the parallel, adding further pressure to Truman. Coupled with the insistence by the CIA that the threat from China was minimal, these factors greatly explain the final decision reached by the president.

Related to this pressure and the existing structures I have discussed individual agency. Constructivist realism holds that this is inherent in all people, and despite the historical developments and social contexts and rules actors can contradict and reshape these structures. In relation to that I have presented some motivations of Truman himself. He was for example very interested in keeping and ensuring political support, as there was often a lack of it during his presidency. Since public opinion heavily favored crossing the parallel this can thus be seen as a reason for doing it. He also acted variously within or without the boundaries of morality and tradition, important in understanding the event according to the idea of the reflexive nature of politics. Before the Second World War it was expected of American leaders to stay out of conflicts and focus on domestic issues in an isolationist pattern. The war changed that, and when Truman intervened and escalated the Korean War he acted with agency to change the contemporary conceptions of what was appropriate and moral, which greatly affected American policy in the later Cold War. Additionally, it is important to remember the morals and social currents of the day, and not analyse the events from a contemporary perspective. For example the anti-communism within the US was very prominent at this time, greatly affecting the decision-making of the president.

It is clear in retrospect that the effects of the decision were suboptimal (Matray, 1979, p. 333). In the end North Korea was not destroyed, the peninsula was not united, and hostilities, casualties and animosity were all running high. It is therefore of great interest for scholars to understand how such an apparently harmful decision was reached. I have attempted to paint a thorough picture of this in my study, and although we can never say for certain why events played out as they did, I have with the help of constructivist realism shed light on many of the processes, actors and structures that played a part in the event.

Further studies could serve to more deeply connect this particular case to the larger geopolitical reality of the Cold War, or to contrast this case with another similar one in order to more clearly test the theoretical validity of constructivist realism. The purpose of my study was to understand the American crossing of the 38th parallel during the Korean War from a constructivist realist perspective. The result is that they crossed the parallel due to anti-communist societal fears, misguided advice and intelligence, geopolitical considerations based on recent history and individual motivations from president Truman himself.

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