

“Transatlantic Security Issues from the Cold War to the 21st Century”
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PANEL 1: NATO DURING THE COLD WAR: SUCCESS AND PROBLEMS

The Korean War: Miscalculation and Alliance Transformation

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The North Korean invasion of June 25, 1950 created the explicit threat that stimulated a massive U.S. military buildup and basically implemented the full range of recommendations of NSC 68 which had previously been blocked by cost concerns. This buildup transformed NATO from a loose political organization with minimal military strength into an integrated armed force with a unified command and significant military capacity. It greatly increased the U.S. military presence in Europe, tripled the size of the Strategic Air Command, gained basing rights for strategic bombers at sites ringing the Soviet Union, committed the alliance to a nuclear strategy, and vastly increased the CIA's covert activities.

Recently available archival records from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China show that many of the assumptions and calculations behind the U.S. military buildup were seriously flawed. Far from Truman administration assertions, Stalin was reluctant to approve Kim Il Sung's repeated requests for approval and support of an invasion of South Korea. He only agreed to back the invasion in late January 1950 when Kim persuaded him that the United States would not intervene if the North invaded. Contrary to U.S. beliefs, Stalin was not supporting the North Korean invasion as a probe of Western will prior to a challenge in Western Europe. The Soviet leader's main concern was an expansion of Japanese strength in South Korea after a U.S. withdrawal which could create an obstacle to Soviet domination of the Korean peninsula. Further the Soviet leadership did not expect a massive buildup of U.S. strategic forces and a significant reinforcement in Europe including a transformation of NATO into an integrated military alliance.

The new evidence indicates that the U.S. buildup in response to the North Korean invasion generated a significant, unplanned expansion of Soviet strategic forces and produced an unwanted escalation and militarization of the Cold War.