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Targeting China

U.S. Nuclear Planning and “Massive Retaliation” in East Asia, 1953–1955

❖ Matthew Jones

The subject of U.S. nuclear planning for general war with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and early 1960s has received a great deal of attention from scholars.¹ Far fewer attempts have been made to examine how U.S. nuclear planning for conflict with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) evolved as Sino-American hostility intensified in the aftermath of the Korean War. Apart from studies of the possible use of nuclear weapons during the Korean War itself and mention of China’s broad inclusion in the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) first devised in 1960, little has been published on the period in between, from 1953 through the late 1950s.² What makes this omission especially pertinent is that the United States under Dwight D. Eisenhower was involved in multiple crises with China in which use of nuclear weapons was one of the options frequently mooted, most notably during the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954–1955 and 1958. “Massive retaliation,” the Eisenhower administration’s strategy of relying on nuclear threats and pressures to deter Communist aggression, was given some of its sternest tests in East Asia. A study of the military planning that lay behind this strategic approach can il-

1. See David Alan Rosenberg, “‘A Smoking Radiating Ruin at the End of Two Hours’: Documents on American Plans for Nuclear War with the Soviet Union, 1954–1955,” *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (Winter 1981/1982), pp. 3–38; David Alan Rosenberg, “The Origins of Overkill: Nuclear Weapons and American Strategy, 1945–60,” *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1983), pp. 3–71; and Marc Trachtenberg, “A ‘Wasting Asset’: American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949–1954,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1988/1989), pp. 5–49.

2. On U.S. nuclear planning and the Korean War, see Roger Dingman, “Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War,” *International Security*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Winter 1988/1989), pp. 50–91; Edward C. Keefer, “President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the End of the Korean War,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, (Summer 1986), pp. 267–289; and Conrad C. Crane, “To Avert Impending Disaster: American Military Plans to Use Atomic Weapons During the Korean War,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June 2000), pp. 72–88.

illuminate how it might have operated in practice.³ It is also worth bearing in mind that the PRC, unlike the Soviet Union, was a non-nuclear state during this period. Although China received some degree of protection through the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty, Chinese leaders had no direct means of retaliating against a U.S. nuclear attack. The United States therefore had greater leeway for possible attacks against China than against the USSR. U.S. military planners expected that war with the Soviet Union would lead to a large-scale nuclear exchange, but they were able to plan for nuclear strikes against China without being as concerned about nuclear retaliation. They could even consider more limited nuclear options and give clearer expression to their views about the potential threat posed by China.

This article presents new evidence about some of the detailed discussions on nuclear targeting policy toward China conducted by the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the Strategic Air Command (SAC) in 1953–1955, the period in which the doctrinal thinking encompassed by the Eisenhower administration's New Look defense policies began to influence war plans. Analysis of these debates highlights important differences of emphasis and opinion, as SAC developed a concept of nuclear operations aimed at the total destruction of the military-industrial potential of China, displaying impatience with the Joint Chiefs' stipulation that targets should be selected according to their relationship to the local area of Communist aggression in the Far East and that the number of nuclear strikes should be limited. The JCS had adopted this guidance after the NSC, at the behest of Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, embraced the view that allied support would be indispensable in an all-out war with China. Nothing was more likely to alienate allies and other potential friends than the indiscriminate use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese civilian population. U.S. officials also worried that the large-scale destruction of the PRC might trigger some form of Soviet intervention and escalation of the fighting to global war. Military planning for the use of nuclear weapons, as Eisenhower and Dulles repeatedly stressed, had to conform to the overall requirements of

3. See, for example, Gordon H. Chang, "To the Nuclear Brink: Eisenhower, Dulles, and the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 96–123; H. W. Brands, "Testing Massive Retaliation: Credibility and Crisis Management in the Taiwan Strait," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Spring 1988), pp. 124–149; Shu Guan Zhang, *Deterrence and Strategic Culture: Chinese-American Confrontations, 1949–1958* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); Ronald W. Pruessen, "Over the Volcano: The United States and the Taiwan Strait Crisis, 1954–1955," in Robert S. Ross and Jiang Changbin, eds., *Re-Examining the Cold War: U.S.-China Diplomacy, 1954–1973* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 77–106; and Robert Accinelli, "A Thorn in the Side of Peace: The Eisenhower Administration and the 1958 Offshore Islands Crisis," in Ross and Jiang, eds., *Re-Examining the Cold War*, pp. 107–140. For the most recent analysis of how Eisenhower regarded the utility of nuclear weapons in Korea, see Michael Gordon Jackson, "Beyond Brinkmanship: Eisenhower, Nuclear War Fighting, and Korea, 1953–1968," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (March 2005), pp. 52–75.

national security policy and the compelling need to gain support from allied governments. But this injunction was inherently problematic because SAC’s operational planning and ethos were shaped by principles of strategic air warfare derived from lessons acquired during the bombing campaigns over Germany and Japan in 1944–1945—campaigns that, at their extremes, hardly reflected the preferences of those in higher authority.⁴

The Setting of High-Level Policy: The New Look and Korea

The period that followed the end of the Korean War in July 1953 was marked by the Eisenhower administration’s insistence that the United States would never again commit substantial ground forces to the Asian mainland to counter renewed Communist aggression.⁵ Instead, administration officials wanted to ensure that if fighting in Korea resumed because of Communist action, the United States would be prepared to expand its response beyond the immediate confines of the Korean peninsula to attack targets in China itself, using nuclear weapons where militarily necessary. This general planning concept, designed both to deter a Communist attack and to allow for the reduction of U.S. troops deployed in Korea, was one of the most immediate and concrete outcomes of the administration’s fundamental review of national security policy that culminated in the adoption in late October 1953 of NSC 162/2, the basic document underpinning the New Look doctrine.⁶

In arriving at NSC 162/2, the Eisenhower administration brought together the principles of the New Look in national security policy and its ideas on how to respond to a revival of hostilities in Korea. The cuts in overseas deployments of conventional forces needed to reduce the level of defense spending entailed by the New Look were initially to be carried out in East Asia, where the administration believed that the Korean War had created a dangerous imbalance in the U.S. force posture. Because these reductions would compel locally raised forces to assume a greater burden of defense, the administration had to forge a strategy that would continue to reassure allies and de-

4. For the different levels of U.S. nuclear strategy-making and their problems of interaction, see David Alan Rosenberg, “Reality and Responsibility: Power and Process in the Making of United States Nuclear Strategy, 1945–68,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (March 1986), pp. 35–51.

5. See, for example, Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 33–34.

6. On the New Look, see Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Richard M. Leighton, *History of the Office of the Secretary of Defense*, Vol. 3, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look, 1953–1956* (Washington, DC: Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2001).

ter adversaries as U.S. forces began to withdraw.⁷ The strategy proposed in NSC 162/2—summed up in its much-quoted paragraph 39(b) affirming that “in the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other munitions”—had important implications for the defense of Western Europe as well as of East Asia. In December 1954 the North Atlantic Council formally accepted a strategy (encapsulated in the document MC 48) involving the rapid and large-scale use of nuclear weapons in the event of a Soviet attack in Europe.⁸ But the most immediate and obvious relevance of the New Look was in the Far East. On 29 October 1953, the day before NSC 162/2 was adopted, the NSC asked the JCS and State Department to consider how to respond if the Korean armistice were broken by an overt act of Communist aggression.⁹ In a further statement of intent, at a meeting held on 11 November 1953 with Eisenhower and the secretaries of the treasury and defense, Secretary of State Dulles argued that reductions of future defense budgets could be achieved if the United States soon began withdrawing troops from Korea. These withdrawals, he said, would be an integral part of the administration’s efforts to avoid ground force commitments in Asia, to cut the Army’s overall troop levels, and to rely more on “new weapons.” This view received general endorsement.¹⁰

The JCS planning bureaucracy promptly responded to the NSC’s request for a review of U.S. military options in the event of a Communist attack. In a report delivered on 10 November 1953 the Joint Strategic Plans Committee (JSPC), the main source of collective military advice to the JCS, recommended that U.S. policy be altered to reflect a set of primary military objectives including the destruction of “effective Communist power applied to the Korean effort” while also rendering “the enemy incapable of further aggression in Korea and the Far East.” This went considerably beyond NSC guidelines first issued in May 1953, which had planned for further U.S. military actions if needed to compel the Communist side to accept an armistice in Korea

7. See, for example, Robert J. Watson, *History of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Vol. 5, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1953–1954* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 230; “Memorandum of Discussion at the 166th Meeting of the NSC, 13 October 1953,” in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, Vol. II, pt. 1, p. 546 (hereinafter referred to as FRUS, with appropriate year and volume numbers); and Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, p. 163.

8. See “NSC 162/2,” 30 October 1953, in FRUS, 1952–1954, Vol. II, pt. 1, p. 593 par. 39(b). On the importance of MC 48, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 158–160.

9. See “NSC Action No. 949(d),” 29 October 1953, in FRUS, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, p. 1576; and Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, p. 228.

10. See “Memorandum for the Record by the President, 11 November 1953,” in FRUS, 1952–1954, Vol. II, pt. 1, pp. 595–596; and Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, pp. 170–171.

on American terms.¹¹ The JSPC explicitly linked its new position to NSC 162/2's language regarding the greater emphasis to be placed on nuclear weapons, which, the planners felt, would obviate the need for a "prolonged and costly" land campaign in Korea. The best way to achieve U.S. military objectives, the report proclaimed in capitalized letters, was to "employ atomic weapons in decisive numbers, conduct large scale strategic and tactical air warfare operations against targets in China, Manchuria and Korea; and exploit the successes achieved in the air offensive by aggressive action to destroy remaining enemy forces in Korea." To ensure the feasibility of such operations, the JSPC report laid out "major implementing actions," including recommendations that the JCS gain presidential authority "to enable the immediate employment of nuclear weapons in decisive numbers," obtain agreement regarding the use of nuclear weapons in such circumstances by close U.S. allies, and initiate a buildup of supplies and equipment in Japan to carry out the envisaged plans. The JSPC document indicated that planning should begin for "offensive atomic air operations" against military targets in North Korea, Manchuria, and northern China that threatened United Nations (UN) forces in Korea, as well as against more distant targets in Manchuria and China.¹² By the end of the month, the JCS had adopted the recommendations contained in the JSPC report almost wholesale, including the contention that any U.S. action should make Communist China "incapable of further aggression in Korea and the Far East."¹³

The JCS were not united about the desirability of this new approach. General Matthew B. Ridgway, the U.S. Army chief of staff, consistently opposed plans for a large-scale nuclear offensive against the PRC. But his views lost out to those of Admiral Arthur W. Radford, the JCS chairman who was the principal military architect of the New Look, and General Nathan F. Twining, the U.S. Air Force chief of staff, a staunch proponent of aerial nuclear bombardment. Both Radford and Twining believed that their recommendations were in keeping with the administration's new policy, citing when challenged the language contained in NSC 162/2 that areas such as Indochina or Taiwan were "of such strategic importance to the United States that an at-

11. On the Eisenhower administration's possible use of nuclear weapons if the Korean armistice negotiations were to break down, see Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy," pp. 85–89; and Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, pp. 2–4.

12. JSPC 853/179 and Appendix A, "U.S. Courses of Action in Korea," 10 November 1953, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 28, Air Force Plans, Box 899, Headquarters United States Air Force Records, Record Group (RG) 341, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

13. See "U.S. Courses of Action in Korea," Draft JCS Memorandum for the Secretary of Defense, SM-1864-53, 27 November 1953, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 29, Air Force Plans, Box 899, RG 341, NARA. This document is also in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, pp. 1626–1629.

tack on them probably would compel the United States to react with military force either locally at the point of attack *or generally against the military power of the aggressor.*"¹⁴

Even before the NSC formally endorsed the JCS/JSPC proposals for military options in the Far East, the JCS began to push forward with plans based on these expansive aims. On 21 November 1953, General Curtis E. LeMay, the head of SAC, was advised by Twining to begin planning nuclear attacks against China and Manchuria in the event of Chinese Communist aggression outside Korea (the possible contingencies were a Chinese move against Formosa or Indochina). The planning guidance given to SAC was both vague and wildly extensive. The general outline of the mission was that SAC should "reduce the industrial and logistical strength of Communist China through attacks upon resources exposed in China and Manchuria, so that no large scale aggression by Communist China can be sustained," and the similarly nebulous injunction to "neutralize or destroy military forces in China and Manchuria." Twining assured LeMay that "use of the required number of nuclear weapons will be authorized." The commanders-in-chief of the Pacific Command (CINCPAC) based in Honolulu and of the Far East Command (CINCFE) based in Tokyo also received orders to devise plans for such an eventuality, though as separate commanders under the general direction of the JCS, with authorization to attack targets that posed an immediate threat to their operations.¹⁵ Such broad instructions were bound to result in overkill, for which LeMay needed little encouragement, imbued as he was with a philosophy of maximum reliance on strategic air power.¹⁶ LeMay's views had been conditioned by his wartime experience overseeing the destruction of Japan's industrial-military base through all-out attacks against urban areas in 1945.¹⁷

The NSC first discussed the JCS's new recommendations on 3 December 1953. In preparation for the meeting, the head of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, Robert R. Bowie, sent a memorandum to Dulles discussing the political implications of the JCS proposals (Bowie was hamstrung in this

14. "NSC 162/2," p. 584 par. 13 (b); emphasis added.

15. Air Force Office of Plans Division (AFOPD), HQ U.S. Air Force, to COMSAC, TS 6477, 21 November 1953, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 29, Air Force Plans, Box 899, RG 341, NARA.

16. See, for example, Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 7; and William S. Borgiasz, *The Strategic Air Command: Evolution and Consolidation of Nuclear Forces, 1945–1955* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

17. On LeMay's beliefs regarding the use of SAC, see, for example, Richard H. Kohn and Joseph P. Harahan, eds., *Strategic Air Warfare: An Interview with Generals Curtis E. LeMay, Leon W. Johnson, David A. Burchinell and Jack J. Catton* (Washington, DC: U.S. Air Force, Office of Air Force History, 1988), pp. 108–109, 125; Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 23, 29, 82; and Peter J. Roman, "Curtis LeMay and Nuclear Targeting in Europe," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (March 1993), pp. 46–74.

effort because the department had only belatedly received the JCS document). The main concern he voiced was the lack of clarity about the "geographic location and general nature of the targets which the JCS intend to attack." The JCS recommendation encompassed many different targeting patterns for large-scale nuclear bombing operations against targets in China, Manchuria, and Korea—patterns that varied sharply in the risk they entailed of provoking Soviet counteraction against U.S. bases in Okinawa and other parts of Japan and adverse reactions among allied and other non-Communist governments. Bowie criticized the imprecise nature of the JCS's stated military objectives, one of which was to "render the enemy incapable of further aggression in Korea and the Far East." If taken literally (with the enemy defined as "Communist"), Bowie noted, this would "call for the destruction of all Chinese and Russian military capabilities in the Far East, and could hardly be achieved without attack on Soviet bases in the Far East." The JCS, in its list of major implementing actions, had also recommended that "upon the outbreak of hostilities [the United States should] launch immediately a large-scale air offensive employing atomic weapons to destroy Chinese Communist forces and selected targets in China, Manchuria and Korea." Again Bowie pointed out that the language could be construed to mean the targeting of Chinese forces throughout the mainland, "in which case the 'selected targets' would involve practically every Chinese city." This statement was a prescient forecast of the way U.S. targeting plans against China were later drawn up by SAC, but Bowie for the moment was hoping that Dulles would closely question the JCS about the scope of their proposed plans. Would the attacks be carried out solely against air bases, lines of communication, and enemy forces in or close to Korea, or would they involve more wide-ranging strikes against Chinese cities or Soviet bases in the Far East?¹⁸

At the NSC meeting itself, Radford laid out the new recommended military objective of reacting to a fresh Communist attack with "a massive atomic air strike which would defeat the Chinese Communists in Korea and make them incapable of aggression there or elsewhere in the Far East for a very considerable time." When asked by the president whether the JCS had determined the target system, Radford confessed that this had not yet been done. Eisenhower pressed on by emphasizing that "if the Communists attacked us again we should certainly respond by hitting them hard and wherever it would hurt them most, including Peiping itself. This . . . would mean all-out war against Communist China." Radford agreed with the president's contention that any resumption of fighting would effectively mean war with China.

18. "Memorandum by the Director of the Policy Planning Staff to the Secretary of State," 3 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, pp. 1634–1636.

He said that although operations would initially probably be “limited” to Korea, Manchuria, and northern China, the exigencies of war would mean that “we would have to strike against the Communist Chinese in the air from Shanghai all the way north.” This was hardly the measured response the State Department was hoping for, and Radford probably was gratified to hear Eisenhower speaking in such supportive terms.

In a carefully reasoned intervention, however, Dulles expressed concern about the political implications of this approach, which, he pointed out, could precipitate a general war with the Soviet Union if Moscow invoked its obligations under the Sino-Soviet alliance. “Over and above” this point was the fact that launching an all-out war with China was unlikely to command any degree of support from other UN members. Dulles warned that “we would thus be isolated from our allies.” In the Far East, he said, the Japanese government might restrict the use of U.S. bases in Japan if they feared that the bases could come under Soviet attack, and the Chinese, for their part, could send large forces into Indochina. The risk of triggering a general war through action in Asia, Dulles argued, might induce some of the West European allies to “run to cover” by adopting a more accommodating stance toward the Soviet Union. He reminded the NSC that when Great Britain had agreed to issue a joint warning of the consequences that would ensue if the Korean armistice were broken (the so-called greater sanctions statement), British officials had acted with some reluctance and only on the understanding that UN responses to Communist aggression would be limited to areas close to the battlefield in Korea.¹⁹ The British would certainly not welcome measures that might precipitate a general war with China in the Far East. The State Department, Dulles reported, believed that a more appropriate course of action would be to launch “a full atomic strike in Korea itself,” to attack Communist troop concentrations in or next to Korea, and to seize Hainan island and blockade China’s coast.²⁰

After Dulles spoke, the mood of the meeting seemed to shift. Eisenhower

19. The greater sanctions statement had been agreed to in January 1952 and was issued by the sixteen UN member-states that had military forces in Korea immediately after the armistice agreement was concluded. The statement included the warning that if fighting resumed, hostilities might not be limited to the frontiers of Korea. In May 1953, as the armistice talks reached a climax at Panmunjom, Churchill’s government tried to withdraw from its previous agreement to issue the statement. See “Memorandum of Conversation by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs,” 4 May 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 1, pp. 968–969; and “Memorandum of Conversation by the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs,” 5 June 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 1, pp. 1147–1148.

20. See “Memorandum of Discussion at 173rd Meeting of the NSC,” 3 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, pp. 1636–1641. Radford was prepared to concede that the JCS in formulating military objectives might have strayed into the prerogatives of the NSC by predetermining the desired outcomes of overall policy. See Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, p. 203.

instructed the JCS and the State Department to collaborate on a new statement of recommended courses of action. In marked variance to his earlier comments, he said "he must admit the necessity of distinguishing between airfields adjacent to the Yalu River as opposed to targets in the south of China. There was certainly a big difference."²¹ This change of tack was characteristic of many of Eisenhower's interventions when nuclear planning was discussed. His Clausewitzian military instincts inclined him to favor the overwhelming use of force to crush an opponent (and thereby also achieving a maximum deterrent effect), but this was often tempered by the crucial diplomatic setting that might precede or accompany the outbreak of hostilities. Eisenhower had spent a large part of his professional military life assembling and maintaining coalitions, a task at which he had excelled, and he was acutely conscious of the need to assuage allied opinion. Moreover, the New Look itself placed a premium on maintaining the strength of U.S. alliances. When the president received a draft of NSC 162/2 in October he had even argued that "securing [the] approval and understanding of our allies should precede the use of [nuclear] weapons" except in the event of a general war with the Soviet Union.²² This was easier said than done, as the JCS appreciated and as events were soon to reveal.

The Bermuda Conference of December 1953

Immediately after the NSC meeting on 3 December 1953, Eisenhower and Dulles traveled to Bermuda for a long-delayed high-level conference with the British and French. Both the president and the secretary of state wanted to make sure that their closest Western allies would understand how U.S. thinking was beginning to develop about the need to use nuclear weapons against China if hostilities resumed in Korea. (Dulles noted that "a great deal of 'educational work' had to be done on this point.")²³ However, the conversations at Bermuda did not go as the Americans had hoped, leaving Eisenhower and Dulles with little doubt about the acute diplomatic problems that would emerge if U.S. defense policy in the Far East were based on the early use of nuclear weapons.

21. "Memorandum of Discussion at 173rd Meeting of the NSC," p. 1642.

22. "Memorandum of Discussion at the 165th Meeting of the NSC," 7 October 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. II, pt. 1, p. 532.

23. See "Memorandum of Discussion at the 171st Meeting of the NSC," 19 November 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, pp. 1616–1617. It is worthy of note, in view of what transpired at Bermuda, that the JCS had proposed that U.S. nuclear intentions should not be made clear to its allies until hostilities were imminent or had broken out.

After arriving in Bermuda on 4 December, Eisenhower had immediately joined British Prime Minister Winston Churchill for lunch, telling him that if the Communist side broke the Korean truce, “we would expect to strike back with atomic weapons at military targets. We would not expect to bomb cities but would attack areas that were directly supporting the aggression.”²⁴ This was the selective and limited approach to targeting that the State Department had been urging to spare major centers of population. At this stage, the president inferred that Churchill was relatively relaxed about U.S. thinking. Eisenhower stressed this point when he dictated a summary of the luncheon conversation shortly afterward: “To all this, [Churchill] agreed, stating that they were already on official record as approving the idea of refusing to confine the war to the area south of the Yalu.”²⁵ Later, at the meeting’s first afternoon plenary session, Eisenhower again told the British and French that the United States would “hit back with full power” (as Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden noted) in the event of a breach of the armistice, again implying the use of nuclear weapons.²⁶

In contrast to what Eisenhower had supposed, British officials were alarmed by what they learned about U.S. intentions. Eden composed a firm note to Churchill that evening, arguing that the warnings previously issued to the Communist side about the allies’ inability to confine future hostilities to the Korean peninsula had generally been taken to mean that Chinese airbases on the Chinese side of the Yalu would be attacked with conventional munitions. The United States, he said, had never before implied that it was contemplating the widespread bombing of China or the use of nuclear bombs. The apparent American aim to “go for China with all the weapons at her command” went “beyond anything we have hitherto agreed.” Eden warned that any Soviet retaliation against a large-scale U.S. strike at China would likely be directed at the American air bases in East Anglia, and he therefore hoped that Churchill would urge the Americans to consult with Britain when deciding how to respond to a Chinese attack in Korea.²⁷ Another member of the British delegation at Bermuda, the deputy under-secretary of state at the

24. See “Memorandum of Conversation by the Secretary of State,” 4 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. V, pt. 2, p. 1739.

25. President’s Dictated Notes of Conversation with Churchill, 4 December 1953, in Bermuda—Presidential notes 12/53 (1), Box 3, International series, Ann Whitman File, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library (DDEL).

26. See Eden Note to Churchill, PM/53/337, 4 December 1953, in FK1078/8G, FO 371/105540, Foreign Office Records, General Political Correspondence, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNAUK). A comparison of Eden’s impressions with the more restrained account conveyed by the U.S. minutes is instructive. See “Lt Col Vernon Walters Minutes of First Restricted Tripartite Meeting,” 4 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. V, pt. 2, p. 1751.

27. Eden Note to Churchill, 4 December 1953, in TNAUK.

Foreign Office, Pierson Dixon, wanted to insist that consultations be required before any specific decision to use nuclear weapons. In the absence of such a guarantee, Dixon argued, "we must seriously consider protecting ourselves by asking [the Americans] to remove their bases from the United Kingdom."²⁸ This was just the kind of drastic measure and turn toward neutralism about which Dulles had warned the NSC. Because SAC's plans for general war with the Soviet Union at the time were greatly dependent on access to British bases for the refueling, replenishment, and forward positioning of the growing fleet of B-47 medium bombers, such a step would have represented a fundamental breach in Anglo-American relations.

Churchill took the opportunity the following day to express concern to Eisenhower about what the nuclear bombing of London would entail (for the survivors left in cellars "under mounds of flaming and contaminated rubble there [would] be nothing to do but take a pill to end it all"), but Eisenhower calmly asserted that he did not think the Soviet Union would attack in the West if the United States used nuclear weapons to deal with contingencies in Korea. The president said what he anticipated was "not a bombing of Chungking [*sic*] or Peking but the pursuit of attacking aircraft to their bases and the destruction of enemy supplies and troop concentrations. . . . [T]he American people would no longer remain there to be killed without carrying the war to the enemy."²⁹ Sensitized to the impact on allied opinion of a wider nuclear offensive against China, Eisenhower had carefully switched his language of only a few days before, when he had talked to the NSC about striking the Chinese capital. He now spoke solely about attacks on local military targets supporting the Korean battlefront.

Targeting policy and the issue of consultation lay at the heart of British concerns at Bermuda. Eden wanted to know whether the United States was "ready to drop atomic bombs on a fairly wide range of targets in China and Manchuria avoiding only big cities."³⁰ On 10 December, after returning to Washington, Dulles explained to the NSC that at Bermuda the British and French had "exhibited very stubborn resistance to any idea of the automatic use of atomic weapons, even in the case of a Communist renewal of hostilities in Korea." Although U.S. leaders had assured Churchill that nuclear weapons would initially be used only in and adjacent to Korea, he had registered his

28. Dixon Memorandum, 5 December 1953, in FK1078/8G, FO 371/105540, TNAUK.

29. Strauss Meeting Notes, Bermuda, 5 December 1953 (11:30 A.M.), in 711.5611/12-1153, Central Decimal File, Department of State Records, RG 59, NARA. These comments were omitted from the record of conversation published in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. V, pt. 2, pp. 1767–1769. See also John Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939–1955* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 684.

30. Eden Note to Churchill, PM/53/339, 7 December 1953, in FK1078/8G, FO 371/105540, TNAUK.

opposition and stressed that the UN allies would have to consent to any such action in advance.³¹

With so little evidence of allied support for the new policy, the State Department's previous reservations over the initial JCS recommendations of late November now carried additional weight. Officials in the department's Far East Bureau argued that the original JCS paper had been "too sweeping in character" and likely to trigger general war. The bureau preferred to see U.S. counteraction "limited to Korea and Manchuria, particularly lines of communication leading into Korea, air bases under use by the enemy and supply areas."³² Faced with this growing resistance, the JCS submitted a revised memorandum to Secretary of Defense Charles Wilson on 18 December with a new proposed course of action: "Employing atomic weapons, [U.S. forces will] conduct offensive air operations against military targets in Korea, and against those military targets in Manchuria and China which are being used by the Communists in direct support of their operations in Korea, or which threaten the security of US/UN forces in the Korean area." After evaluating the results of these initial operations, the JCS might order further action against China, such as raids, the seizure of Hainan Island, or a blockade of the coast to "reduce [China's] war-making capability in the Korean area." The revised military objective was to destroy Chinese military forces in Korea and China's capability for "further aggression in the Korean area."³³ The Joint Chiefs were evidently attempting to allay the State Department's anxieties by tying military actions and aims much more closely to the immediate vicinity of Korea, rather than attempting to use a resumption of fighting as a springboard to attack China's overall military-industrial strength (and its capacity to commit further acts of aggression in the Far East as a whole) in what would amount to all-out war. On 8 January 1954 the NSC finally approved the text of a new joint JCS/State Department memorandum on possible courses of action in Korea. The document included the more modest military objectives set out in the revised JCS paper. The State Department was also able to insert its own caveats to the effect that U.S. military objectives should remain limited in order to avert full-scale Soviet intervention and that "massive U.S. air attacks on numerous targets in China Proper, large scale landings on the China mainland, or possibly the seizure of Hainan, would stimulate Communist belief

31. "Memorandum of Discussion at 174th Meeting of the NSC," 10 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, p. 1654. See also the president's recollections of Churchill's objections and fears in Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1953–1956* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1963), p. 248.

32. "Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs to the Director of the Policy Planning Staff," 15 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, p. 1658.

33. "Memorandum by the JCS to the Secretary of Defense," 18 December 1953, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, p. 1674.

that . . . the U.S. in fact intended to bring about the complete overthrow of the Peiping regime." The State Department also stressed that allied and UN support would be undermined by large-scale actions that could trigger active Soviet participation or even aggression in Europe.³⁴

After the Bermuda meeting, Eisenhower was ready to announce on 26 December a phased reduction of U.S. ground forces on the Korean peninsula (initially involving the return to the United States of two divisions from the eight then deployed), giving the first concrete results to the New Look. But the president was careful to repeat the warning issued by UN members with forces in Korea that if the armistice was breached it would not be possible to confine hostilities to the peninsula. He also emphasized that the U.S. forces remaining in the Far East were sufficient to uphold commitments in the region and would be able to oppose aggression with even greater effect than before.³⁵

The principles laid down by the NSC for U.S. action in the event of renewed hostilities in Korea—that the initial response should focus on attacking Communist military forces in the immediate area of the fighting—were soon extended to cover possible Chinese intervention in Indochina as well. Dulles had already issued a thinly-veiled warning in a speech to the American Legion chapter in St Louis, Missouri on 2 September 1953 when he noted that "there is the risk that, as in Korea, Red China might send its own army into Indochina. The Chinese Communist regime should realize that such a second aggression could not occur without grave consequences which might not be confined to Indochina."³⁶ On 14 January 1954, the NSC endorsed a new statement of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, NSC 5405, which incorporated the now standard idea that Chinese territory would be subject to attack if Beijing intervened in an overt fashion to support the Viet Minh struggle against the French. The document stipulated that in addition to providing air and naval support to French forces in Indochina itself, the United States should interdict lines of communication within China, taking "air and naval action against all suitable military targets in China *which directly contribute to the war in Indochina* [while] avoiding insofar as practicable targets near the USSR boundaries." Such expanded action, NSC 5405 warned, necessarily en-

34. See "Memorandum by the JCS and the Department of State to the Executive Secretary of the NSC," 7 January 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, pp. 1700–1703; and "Memorandum of Discussion at the 179th Meeting of the NSC," 8 January 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, pp. 1704–1706.

35. "Statement on Troops in Korea," *The New York Times*, 27 December 1953, p. 5. On the withdrawal decision, see Lighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, pp. 178–179.

36. "Text of Dulles Address to the American Legion Convention," *The New York Times*, 3 September 1953, p. 1; and "Dulles Rules Out a Yalu 'Sanctuary' If Foe Renews War," *The New York Times*, 3 September 1953, p. 7.

tailed the risk of “an all-out war with Communist China” that might provoke Soviet intervention.³⁷

Command Arrangements and Nuclear Target Planning

After the NSC established the general principles for military planning, the subordinate commands had to convert these general guidelines into concrete plans. On 19 January 1954 the JCS issued formal instructions to the U.S. regional commands in East Asia—CINCFE and CINCPAC—to include nuclear weapons in their planning for an attack on selected targets in China in the event of Chinese aggression outside Korea. The JCS also informed LeMay that he should prepare to support CINCFE and CINCPAC with an “attack of strategic targets in China and Manchuria” (in what seems like a concession to Twining’s position on the need for a more general target plan against China). On 21 January, the JCS issued revised planning guidance to SAC on the course of action to follow if Korean hostilities were to resume. The document reflected the more restrictive military objectives and selective targeting recently laid down by the NSC. At the beginning of February, LeMay reported that his existing Far East Outline Plan (FEOP) 8-54, put together by SAC at the end of the previous year, satisfied all the new requirements inasmuch as it provided for attack on selected targets, support of the theater commanders, and a resumption of fighting in Korea.³⁸ Targeting nuances involving the avoidance of attacks on Chinese urban areas with consequent mass civilian casualties did not really enter into SAC planning for nuclear operations against China. The Air Staff sent advice to LeMay on how he should modify his FEOP 8-54 to conform to previous JCS directives, pointing out that with the limits established by the NSC on acceptable targets in the first phase of operations (those directly supporting Communist aggression on Korea or in the JCS’s view constituting an “immediate threat” to U.S. forces) SAC would have few initial targeting responsibilities if hostilities were resumed. Hence the Air Staff proposed that LeMay approach the CINCFE, General John E. Hull, to work out an agreed list of targets that SAC could attack with “limited theater delivery capability and range.”³⁹

37. NSC 5405, “United States Objectives and Courses of Action with Respect to Southeast Asia,” 16 January 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XII, pt. 1, p. 374; emphasis added.

38. See Memorandum for the Record by Lt. Col. John B. Kidd, Air Force Office of Plans Division, 10 March 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 30, Air Force Plans, Box 899, RG 341, NARA.

39. HQ USAF to COMSAC, TS 8011, 23 March 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 31, Air Force Plans, Box 900, RG 341, NARA.

LeMay's response was characteristic. Essentially, he refused to change the wording and rationale behind his plans for strategic air operations against China. To the suggestion that he be more selective in designating Chinese Communist airfields for attack, he retorted that "target selection should be fundamentally based upon its contribution to the destruction of enemy war making capacity, emphasizing destruction of enemy air power." This was, of course, precisely what the NSC itself had aimed for in limiting the scale of the initial nuclear attacks. To reassure the Air Staff, LeMay asserted that FEOP 8-54 could be executed in parts or as a whole and either separately or in conjunction with the plans being devised by CINCFE and CINCPAC. Moreover, LeMay noted with some disdain that he had seen General Hull's comments on FEOP 8-54 noting areas of disagreements, including "magnitude of operations, duplication between the SAC and FEC nominated targets, the lack of agreement on target importance, and command arrangements." LeMay did not anticipate that the two commands would be able to resolve such issues without JCS intervention. The problems with CINCFE, he said, involved "fundamental" differences over "concept[s] of strategic warfare." LeMay scorned the notion (which he attributed to Hull) that air warfare could apply to either "limited or general war," with different command arrangements for each: "[Hull's] concept is that in 'Limited War' (a phrase which defies precise definition) strategic air operations are in support of and therefore subservient to [the] Theater Commander, while admitting that in 'General War' (also undefined) Strategic Air Operations should be conducted by SAC on co-equal and mutually support[ing] basis."⁴⁰ LeMay stuck to his long-standing view that nuclear operations, once initiated, neither could nor should be limited. In early 1951 he had explained to General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the U.S. Air Force chief of staff, how SAC would carry out its mission against the Soviet Union: "I feel it is most important that the sound military practice of attacking in force be observed, particularly in our initial atomic attack. I feel certain that you are sympathetic to this view and share my concern over the disastrous consequences which might result from piecemealing our atomic attacks."⁴¹ LeMay's goal of delivering an overwhelming knockout blow, which he had trained his crews to perform, was one he believed was equally desirable against China. The "selective" nuclear strikes that would be conducted in response to Communist aggression in Korea and in support of the Far East Command were merely the brief prelude, in LeMay's thinking, to a wide-scale nuclear air offensive against China that SAC would

40. COMSAC to COFS, USAF, DPL 0337, 3 April 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 31, Air Force Plans, Box 900, RG 341, NARA.

41. Roman, "Curtis LeMay and Nuclear Targeting in Europe," p. 50.

be more than ready to carry out through FEOP 8-54. LeMay had no wish to use SAC resources unless they were directed at the strategic goal of destroying the PRC's military-industrial potential and thereby eliminating China's capacity to launch any further aggression in Asia.

Massive Retaliation in Practice: Selective Targeting versus Strategic Air Warfare

The NSC's final decision on 8 January 1954 specifying military responses to renewed hostilities in Korea helped to clear the way for the administration to issue a wider and more public declaration of the new policies it was beginning to adopt. This was one of the reasons Dulles came to make his now-famous speech to the Council on Foreign Relations on 12 January 1954 in which he declared that it was not "sound military strategy permanently to commit United States land forces to Asia to a degree that gives us no strategic reserve," that "there is no local defense which alone will contain the mighty land power of the Communist world," and that these defenses "must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power." The basic policy decision of the administration "to depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate instantly by means and at places of our choosing" (a phrase actually concocted by Eisenhower himself) was seen as having its first practical application in the Far East. The new policy gave added strength to the previous warnings that renewed fighting in Korea might spread "beyond the limits and the methods [the enemy] had selected." Dulles immediately followed this by affirming that the United States intended to maintain its position in Okinawa (where, it was widely known, U.S. air bases allowed for the easy deployment of nuclear weapons) "to ensure adequate striking power to implement our new collective security concept."⁴²

Within a short time, military commentators and political opponents of the administration began to question the wisdom and prudence of what the press dubbed a strategy of "massive retaliation." Critics warned that it left the United States with little choice other than to respond to a limited attack by unleashing a general nuclear offensive, with all the attendant risks of Soviet nuclear retaliation.⁴³ To deflect these concerns, Dulles produced an article for the April 1954 issue of *Foreign Affairs* noting the wide range of U.S. nuclear weapons that were "suitable not only for strategic bombing but also for exten-

42. "Text of Dulles' Statement on Foreign Policy of Eisenhower Administration," *The New York Times*, 13 January 1954, p. 4. See also Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, p. 199.

43. "Democrats Criticize Defense Plan," *The New York Times*, 23 January 1954, p. 3; and Divine, *Eisenhower*, p. 38; and Leighton, *Strategy, Money and the New Look*, pp. 217–225.

sive tactical use." He said that although certain types of Communist aggression might lead quickly to general war, "the free world must have the means for responding effectively on a selective basis when it chooses." The United States, Dulles argued, would seek to destroy the military assets of an aggressor, but this would not necessarily involve attacks on the industrial centers of China or the Soviet Union or "indulging in atomic warfare throughout Asia."⁴⁴ But opposition to the new policy was emerging within the administration as well as outside it. General Ridgway, who was worried about the budget cuts imposed on the Army by the New Look, criticized the new emphasis on nuclear weapons. In early February 1954, while testifying before Congress, he warned that a doctrine of massive retaliation would raise "serious apprehensions in the minds of many segments of foreign populations," especially in Western Europe.⁴⁵

The U.S. intelligence community was also aware that the new approach was likely to alienate important sections of world opinion. In early March 1954, a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) attempted to forecast international reactions to various actions the United States might take to rebuff a Communist attack in Korea. The SNIE indicated that if the aggression were clear-cut, U.S. allies would probably be reluctantly supportive of nuclear strikes against North Korea and targets in Manchuria and northern China that were not "adjacent to or within urban concentrations." However, the allied governments and public would oppose wider attacks that risked destroying such concentrations: "They almost certainly would not consider that the issues of the Korean war justified such an act, even in the event of renewed Communist aggression."⁴⁶ As international tension mounted with the Indochina crisis in the spring of 1954, the Eisenhower administration found itself under pressure to explain how massive retaliation would work in such ambiguous "brushfire" wars or if the Chinese intervened in the fighting.⁴⁷

The administration wanted to avoid the impression that massive retaliation in Asia would involve large-scale nuclear attacks on Chinese urban areas. When Eisenhower was asked at a news conference on 17 March whether the new policy meant bombing Moscow or Beijing, he replied that the idea of

44. John Foster Dulles, "Policy for Security and Peace," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (April 1954), pp. 358–60. See also Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, pp. 199–201; and Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 2nd ed. (London: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 81–88.

45. Ridgway presented his testimony on 8–9 February 1954. See "Ridgway Cool to 'New Look' and Doctrine of Retaliation," *The New York Times*, 16 April 1954. For Ridgway's views at this time, see also Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, pp. 245–250.

46. See SNIE 100-2-54, "Probable Reactions of Communist China, the USSR, and the Free World to Certain U.S. Courses of Action in Korea," 5 March 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XV, pt. 2, p. 1762.

47. Leighton, *Strategy, Money, and the New Look*, p. 223.

launching an all-out war in response to a small attack “on the fringe or periphery of our interests . . . [is something] I wouldn’t hold with for a moment.”⁴⁸ With some degree of confusion still hovering over targeting and command arrangements in the Far East, the JCS felt it necessary to update and clarify the planning guidance it had given to commanders earlier in the year. Accordingly, on 16 April 1954 the JCS met with planning representatives from SAC, CINCFE, CINCPAC, and the JSPC and explained that the NSC had determined that the basic principles to govern strategy if the Korean War resumed were that the use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese “will be a strictly limited atomic offensive throughout and at no time . . . is mass atomic bombing envisaged [*sic*]. All atomic annexes [to plans] should hold down use of atomic bombs.” The Joint Chiefs envisaged three phases of operations. In Phase I, CINCFE would select targets directly connected with Chinese forces in Korea. In Phase II, CINCFE would identify new targets that were supporting Chinese offensive operations. In either of these phases, SAC might highlight other targets “which need to be taken out,” but these would have to be referred to CINCFE. In Phase III, U.S. forces would seek to reduce the PRC’s “war-making capabilities in Korea and North China” by undertaking an “enlarged atomic offensive,” though still only against military targets. In principle, the offensive was to be “still strictly limited in its scope.” SAC would have sole responsibility for preparing the Phase III plan. The same general guidelines, the JCS advised, should be used in preparing plans to counter Chinese intervention in Indochina.⁴⁹ The briefing was far from an unqualified success, however. If the aim of Phase III was to “reduce” the “war-making capabilities” of China, the JCS did not explain how a SAC nuclear attack against the PRC could in any way be kept “limited,” especially given the opposition of LeMay and SAC to any notion that nuclear operations could assume a limited character.

The formal guidance documents produced by the JCS after this briefing were similarly open to varying interpretations. “Employing atomic as well as conventional weapons,” SAC and CINCFE were to “conduct offensive air operations against selected military targets in Korea and against those military targets in Manchuria and China which are being used by the Communists in direct support of their operations in Korea, or which threaten the security of the U.S.-UN and ROK forces in the Korean area.” Although the Joint Chiefs again stressed that the use of nuclear weapons was to be “strictly limited and

48. “Transcript of Presidential Press Conference with Comment on Retaliation to Aggression,” *The New York Times*, 18 March 1954, p. 7.

49. Memorandum for the Record, “Briefing Given by the Joint Chiefs of Staff to CINCFE, CINCPAC and COMSAC Planning Representatives,” 16 April 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47) Sec. 31, Box 900, RG 341, NARA.

at no time is mass atomic bombing envisaged," they also ordered SAC and CINCFE to be "prepared to take further action against Communist China to reduce its war-making capability," including the "destruction of additional selected military targets. . . . [S]uch action requires an enlarged but highly selective atomic offensive in addition to attacks employing other weapon systems." The Phase III instructions, specifically intended for SAC, were even more oblique:

If required to further reduce Chinese Communist war-making capabilities in Korea and North China, a third phase providing for an enlarged atomic offensive employing all weapons as necessary will be undertaken. This offensive, however, must be confined to military targets and must be held strictly to a limited atomic offensive. . . . Only military targets which are considered to be directly supporting the Communist effort in Korea will be attacked. Destruction will be kept to an absolute minimum, since the desired effect is only to reduce the enemy's capability for offensive action, while keeping loss of civilian lives as low as possible. In this connection, attacks with atomic weapons must, of necessity, be extremely selective, and used only when it is fully determined that conventional weapons are clearly insufficient to do the job.⁵⁰

In an additional directive to the JSPC, the JCS reiterated that the initial reaction to Chinese aggression in Korea or Indochina would be not "a massive atomic strike against Communist territory and its population" but a selective attack (with conventional as well as nuclear munitions) of military targets directly supporting Chinese operations. Even in the third phase, with SAC responsible for reducing China's war-making capabilities, the same principle would supposedly apply, and "targets would be selected carefully and, initially, would be those whose destruction would reduce the capabilities of the Chinese Communists' forces" in Korea or Indochina.⁵¹ These vague guidelines gave SAC ample room to continue to plan for the large-scale use of nuclear weapons against China. The reference to an "enlarged atomic offensive" was enough to justify an expansive Chinese target set in Phase III operations, even if the destruction of China's war-making potential was to be achieved on a "selective" basis. Given SAC's prevailing targeting philosophy and LeMay's tenacity in defending his planning prerogatives, injunctions to limit nuclear strikes were unlikely to be followed in practice.

50. "Outline Plan for Renewed Hostilities in Korea," Enclosure A, in JCS Secretariat Memorandum for JSPC, "Outline Plans in Event of Chinese Communist Aggression in Asia," SPSM-11-54, 17 April 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47) Sec. 31, Box 900, RG 341, NARA.

51. "Possible CHICOM Aggression in Korea and Indochina," JCS Memorandum for the JSPC (from Brigadier General Edwin H. J. Carns), 17 April 1954, OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47) Sec. 31, Box 900, RG 341, NARA. The final planning guidance generated by these discussions was formally issued by the JCS to SAC, CINCFE, and CINCPAC as SM-371-54 on 23 April 1954.

The “clarification” of the JCS guidelines for nuclear operations against China came as the Indochina crisis built to a climax in April 1954 with the siege of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu and much discussion of the possibility of direct Chinese intervention if the United States took military action in support of the French. The crisis once again brought to the fore the Eisenhower administration’s concern about ensuring allied solidarity if full-scale war with China should erupt. In late May 1954, Dulles alerted Eisenhower to the problems inherent in the JCS view that striking directly at the sources of Chinese power was the best response to overt aggression in Southeast Asia if Indochina succumbed to Communist control. This posture, Dulles warned, would alienate key allies and make a “workable coalition” impossible. “You will recall,” Dulles reminded the president, “that at Bermuda we discussed with Churchill and Eden the area of possible attack against China, if the Korean truce would be violated, and it was then understood that the area to be subjected to our attack would be an area which bore some demonstrable relationship to the attack itself.” Dulles again had in mind initial strikes against airfields, bases, and lines of communication close to the scene of the fighting, and perhaps the seizure of Hainan.⁵² The president raised these points later that day with the JCS, emphasizing the importance of taking “care not to frighten our friends in negotiations by bellicose talk.” Dulles chimed in by noting the results of the Bermuda meeting and stressing that

retaliation against overt Chinese Communist aggression was acceptable as a policy on a limited basis, but not in the broad context indicated in the JCS paper. . . . The U.S. to hold its allies would have to limit its counter-measures to targets having a demonstrable connection with Chinese aggression. If our plan were initially designed to destroy the total power of China, our allies would think we were heading toward general war.⁵³

At this very time LeMay was forwarding his revised FEOP 8-54 to the JCS for approval. In line with the guidance the JCS had given him in April, he indicated that Phases I and II of the plan would commit certain SAC forces to support CINCFE and CINCPAC in their attacks against military targets that were directly supporting China’s aggression and that Phase III would entail “unilateral air operations designed to reduce Communist China’s war making

52. “Memorandum by the Secretary of State to the President,” 28 May 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XII, pt. 1, pp. 527–528.

53. “Memorandum of Conversation,” 28 May 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XII, pt. 1, pp. 521–523. Eisenhower later recalled that the JCS “agreed that we should not in such circumstance rely upon a static type of defence as in Korea, but rather upon an offensive against Communist China—not, however, necessarily going to the industrial sources of power and destroying Chinese cities, but striking areas and facilities supporting a Chinese offensive, airfields, communications lines, and bases.” See Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change*, p. 361.

capability by destroying additional selected targets.”⁵⁴ The new version of FEOP 8-54 and SAC’s whole targeting philosophy came under a withering critique from General Ridgway in a long memorandum he sent to his fellow Joint Chiefs in July 1954. Ridgway argued that CINCFE and CINCPAC should have primary responsibility for target assignments to ensure that any nuclear strikes would be limited to military targets directly supporting Chinese operations in Korea or Indochina. He noted that FEOP 8-54’s target annexes for Phase III operations included only nuclear strikes, ignoring the JCS view that conventional as well as nuclear weapons should be incorporated into target planning whenever possible. Most revealing, however, were Ridgway’s objections to the plan’s target annex that identified numerous “industrial complexes” along with airfields and ports as priorities for nuclear attack. SAC obviously had chosen these targets as part of its Phase III task of reducing China’s “war-making capability.” Ridgway stressed that such an extensive list, with large urban populations near the target zones, was not in accord with the JCS planning guidance regarding “selectivity or injunction against mass nuclear bombing.” Ridgway’s list of “complexes” to delete from the target plan indicates that FEOP 8-54 included at least 99 of them, each containing multiple targets such as military depots, arsenals, petrol/oil/lubricant stores, railroad yards, and repair shops. The targets ranged from Urumchi (in remote Xinjiang province) at 97th on the list to “Pei-Ping” (Beijing) at number one. Ridgway wanted to delete the Beijing complex but was prepared to retain the “Fengtai” railroad yards to the southwest of the city. Other notable cities that Ridgway wanted to remove included Shanghai (ranking third in priority, with 37 separate targets), Tientsin (sixth, with 15 targets), Chang Sha (fourteenth), Cheng Tu (fifteenth), and Chung King (Chongqing, thirty-first, though he noted that the two arsenals listed as targets under the city were “actually miles away and may be destroyed without general destruction of the heavily populated area”). In all, Ridgway recommended that 42 complexes be dropped from SAC’s target lists.⁵⁵

That SAC’s Phase III nuclear strike planning against China should take on such a character comes as no surprise in light of what is known about simi-

54. See “Strategic Air Command Far East Outline Plan 8-54,” Memorandum for the Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force, 8 June 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47), Sec. 33, Box 900, RG 341, NARA.

55. “Strategic Air Command Far East Outline Plan No 8-54,” Memorandum from the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, for the JCS, 19 July 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47) sec.33, box 900, RG 341, NARA. Ridgway also objected to two targets (including Port Arthur) that were located in the Kwangtung territory then leased by the Soviet Union. Soon after Ridgway objected to SAC’s FEOP 8-54, he reinforced the point in his memoirs: “Mass destruction of [the enemy’s] industrial resources is only one way to neutralize his capacity to wage war. Such destruction may not destroy his will to resist; it may strengthen his determination. . . . Furthermore . . . such mass destruction is repugnant to the ideals of a Christian nation.” Matthew B. Ridgway, *Soldier: The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 275.

lar planning vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the sweeping nature of FEOP 8-54's target annexes, with their long lists of industrial-urban target complexes, is startling. LeMay's conception of strategic air power was that it should be directed at the industrial complexes of the enemy, including the targeting of large cities.⁵⁷ The JCS's guidance of April 1954 had been quite explicit in ruling out nuclear attacks that would produce mass civilian casualties and in its call for "selective" targeting, even in Phase III of a nuclear offensive. In SAC's lexicon, however, "selective" was taken to mean that targets had been chosen for their military value and contribution to China's "war-making capability." Ridgway's detailed rebuttal reveals that proximity to urban areas had played no role in the calculations of SAC target planners. Indeed, when SAC's basic Emergency War Plan at this time targeted such sites as air bases in the Soviet Union, the planners (still following techniques developed during the Second World War) were prone to moving aim points closer to nearby cities in order to achieve the "bonus" of destroying an urban concentration at the same time as a military objective.⁵⁸ The same practice seems to have been followed in FEOP 8-54 with regard to Chinese targets. As a result, the implementation of the plan, involving the detonation of hundreds of nuclear warheads over China's "industrial complexes," would have resulted in millions of civilian casualties and staggering amounts of fallout. This kind of outcome clearly ran contrary to the guidelines issued by the JCS to try to conform to the overall policy stipulated by the NSC in January 1954. Yet imposing any kind of JCS-level control over SAC planning processes was far from straightforward. Not only did LeMay guard his preserve of operational planning against all competitors, but SAC contained staff resources, capabilities, and intelligence in the area of targeting that the Joint Staff found difficult to match.⁵⁹ Firm JCS direction of SAC was also hindered by the perennial and bitter interservice rivalries that complicated attempts to reach collective decisions. With Twining as Air Force chief of staff, SAC always had a powerful voice at the top table defending its interests. LeMay thus maintained his independence from intrusive JCS oversight. "I consider it imperative," Ridgway

56. David Alan Rosenberg, "Nuclear War Planning," in Michael Howard, George J. Andreopoulos, and Mark R. Shulman, eds., *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 169–174; and Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," pp. 6–7.

57. For this point, see Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 18; Borgiasz, *Strategic Air Command*, pp. 124–125; Kaplan, *Wizards*, pp. 42–44, and Herken, *Counsels*, pp. 29–31.

58. See Kaplan, *Wizards*, pp. 211–212.

59. SAC's grip over the nuclear planning process is underlined in Kohn and Harahan, *Strategic Air Power*, p. 90; and Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," pp. 10, 37–38. Peter Roman has traced LeMay's resistance to having his targeting priorities challenged by theater commanders in Europe. His resistance to the use of SAC's resources in "retardation" missions against Soviet forces in the early 1950s was similar to his attitudes to planning for nuclear strikes against China. See Roman, "Curtis LeMay and Nuclear Targeting in Europe," esp. pp. 48, 57, 68.

wrote in October 1954, "that the Joint Chiefs of Staff insure that the great striking power of the Strategic Air Command be employed in accordance with the sound military principle of economy of force and in accordance with a national policy which seeks to attain national objectives without indiscriminate mass destruction of human life."⁶⁰ This was a laudable goal, but there is no real evidence that the U.S. military made much progress in attaining it in the 1950s.

By the end of 1954, the expansive nature of nuclear planning for war with China was still apparent. Conferences that had taken place at the Pacific Command's headquarters in Honolulu in May 1954 and at SAC's headquarters at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha the following month had led to some degree of coordination between the separate plans devised by SAC and the Far East and Pacific Commands.⁶¹ However, the Joint Chiefs were unhappy about the excessive numbers of nuclear weapons that all three plans envisaged would have to be used against Chinese targets. In December 1954, the JCS even told LeMay that expenditure of such large numbers of nuclear weapons "could conceivably jeopardise the U.S. capability to execute the JSCP [Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan—the basic short-range plan for war with the Soviet Union]." It would obviously make no sense for the United States to embark on a nuclear offensive against China that would so deplete the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile that it would leave SAC unable to respond adequately if the Soviet Union intervened (possibly with an attack on Western Europe). In a reflection of the profligate nuclear planning that had been going on for more than a year in the Far East, and of the lack of consensus among the staffs concerned, the JCS informed LeMay that "in the interest of over-all national security, fewer atomic weapons than the stated requirements could be utilized in the event of renewed hostilities in Korea or Chinese Communist intervention in Indochina and decisive military results still be achieved." Accordingly, LeMay again had to modify FEOP 8-54 to include only the numbers of nuclear weapons that the JSCP had already designated for targets in the area. Weapons beyond JSCP allocations would be provided only after initial allocations had been used, with the JCS's approval.⁶²

60. JCS 2057/47, 18 October 1954, in CCS 373.11 (12-14-48), RG 218, NARA: quoted in Rosenberg, "Origins of Overkill," p. 37.

61. As of late 1954, the three major plans to respond to a resumption of fighting in Korea or Chinese Communist intervention in Indochina were SAC's FEOP 8-54, Op Plan CINCFE 10-54 (Revised), and Op Plan CINCPAC 56-54.

62. "Strategic Air Command Far East Outline Plan No 8-54," Memorandum by the JCS for the Commander, Strategic Air Command, SM-1091-54, 21 December 1954, in OPD 381 Korea (9 May 47) Sec. 36, Box 901, RG 341, NARA. For more on the JSCP (the first of which was approved by the JCS, after a painfully protracted process, in late March 1954), see Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, p. 101. On SAC's role in JSCP planning, see Rosenberg, "A Smoking Radiating Ruin," pp. 8–10.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to shed greater light on some of the problems that arose with U.S. planning for nuclear war against China in the mid-1950s. The NSC, as the highest decision-making body on national security, was supposed to weigh the foreign policy implications of military strategy and give appropriate guidance to the JCS. The basic conclusion reached by the NSC in early 1954 was that targeting against China should be selective in order to minimize civilian casualties and thereby retain allied support for U.S. action. Nevertheless, translating this political imperative into concrete nuclear target planning was hindered by the war-fighting philosophy that held sway in SAC, as well as by LeMay's inclination to regard his command as a personal fiefdom. When the JCS did offer direction or advice to LeMay, he often ignored it or interpreted it in ways that bolstered SAC's reliance on massive bombardment.⁶³

The tension between the Air Force's desire to destroy Chinese power as swiftly as possible and the political need to limit civilian casualties in order to maintain international support for what was bound to be a hugely controversial campaign flared to the surface during the first Taiwan Strait crisis in March 1955. As the administration stepped up its rhetorical threats against Beijing, Dulles tried to prepare the public for the use of nuclear weapons in response to a Chinese attack on Jinmen and Mazu. He referred to "new and powerful weapons of precision," claiming that they could "utterly destroy military targets without endangering unrelated civilian centers." Eisenhower soon reinforced this message when he famously asserted during a press conference that he could not see why nuclear weapons should not be used against "strictly military targets and for strictly military purposes. I see no reason why they shouldn't be used just exactly as you would use a bullet or anything else." But the president also repeated an important qualification: "I believe the great question about these things comes when you begin to get into those areas where you cannot make sure that you are operating merely against military targets."⁶⁴ Dulles was soon disabused of any notion that the use of nuclear weapons could be so discriminating. His special assistant for atomic affairs, Gerard C. Smith, informed him that even relatively small nuclear weapons employed against enemy airfields would inevitably create fallout that would

63. These issues continued to raise problems well into the 1970s. See William Burr, "The Nixon Administration, the 'Horror Strategy,' and the Search for Limited Nuclear Options, 1969–1972," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 34–78.

64. See "Transcript of Presidential Press Conference on Foreign and Domestic Affairs," *The New York Times*, 17 March 1955; and Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, pp. 61–62.

spread over nearby urban areas. Smith also expressed doubt that small weapons would be used. He pointed out that despite the increasing efficiency of tactical nuclear weapons, the Air Force remained wedded to large-scale strategic bombardment, including attacks with megaton-yield munitions on targets such as airfields. Smith followed this up the next day with a session that also involved Robert Bowie. Smith reminded Dulles that when they visited Offutt Air Force Base in January, LeMay's briefing had given them the impression that if SAC's war plans were implemented "most major Russian cities would be destroyed and Russian casualties would be in the tens of millions." A war with China, he implied, might cause similar numbers of casualties. Dulles responded that "although he wanted to get the facts" about nuclear war, the problem was that maintaining large arsenals of both conventional and nuclear forces was unsustainable. Smith conceded the point but "urge[d] that we avoid the dangers of 'over-compensation' leading to the belief that nuclear warfare could be conducted without tremendous destruction of civilians."⁶⁵

Through much of what has been called the massive retaliation era of U.S. nuclear strategy, Dulles had little detailed knowledge of the nuclear plans that actually underpinned the approach to deterrence and war fighting that was so closely associated with his name.⁶⁶ In Eisenhower's case, however, the reasons for not exerting greater oversight of SAC are less clear-cut. As with Dulles, the president may simply have been unaware of the details of SAC's plans (the JCS were themselves sometimes kept in the dark by LeMay). But this does not square with what is known about Eisenhower's propensity to stay on top of military affairs as commander-in-chief or about his general support of SAC as a force that could launch rapid, overwhelming nuclear strikes against the Soviet Union. When Eisenhower was briefed about the first SIOP prepared by the SAC-dominated joint targeting staff at Omaha in late 1960, he could see the level of overkill involved but apparently did not demand more selective options. The implication, as others have noted, is that he believed the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons was best maintained by making the consequences of any breakdown of the peace so catastrophic as to restrain adversaries from committing aggression in the first place. This deterrent effect would

65. Discussion with the Secretary, Smith Memorandum for the File, 16 March 1955, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB108/fire-2.pdf>, accessed 19 June 2007. (The website incorrectly dates the memorandum as 16 March 1957.) Dulles's visit to SAC headquarters is mentioned in the entry for 14 January 1955 in Robert Ferrell, ed., *The Diary of James C. Hagerty: Eisenhower in Mid-Course, 1954–55* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 161.

66. Dulles often eschewed involvement in matters he considered outside the domain of the State Department. See "Gerard C. Smith Oral History," pp. 3–4, in John Foster Dulles Oral History Collection, Seeley G. Mudd Library, Princeton University.

also restrain over-zealous subordinates who were too eager to push toward confrontation.⁶⁷

This kind of argument might work when applied to a nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union but is less convincing about the Far East, where the large-scale use of nuclear weapons against the PRC (which at the time had no nuclear weapons of its own) would seem inappropriate for the limited-war scenarios associated with Korea, the Taiwan Strait, and Indochina in the mid-1950s. The stakes were lower, but the chances of provoking Soviet intervention and escalation to general war were still considerable. Instead, Eisenhower may have believed that the selective and local use of nuclear weapons under plans devised by the theater commanders (CINCPAC and the CINCFE) in Phases I and II would be sufficient to halt any Chinese attack. But if fighting continued, would the president then have to authorize a move to the SAC-directed Phase III and its “enlarged atomic offensive”? All-out war with China, involving extensive deployments of SAC nuclear bombers in the western Pacific that would otherwise have been assigned to operations against the USSR, might leave SAC badly positioned for its primary mission against the Soviet Union and might cause the Western alliance to dissolve in controversy. Perhaps the explanation is that Eisenhower simply felt no need to address these kinds of dilemmas and concerns. He had faced many dire crises during his years as a soldier and then statesman and no doubt was supremely confident about his own judgment and ability to control developments. In early March 1955, as the Taiwan Strait crisis entered a critical phase, Eisenhower carefully reaffirmed the directive he had issued in January 1954 regarding the interpretation of paragraph 39(b) of NSC 162/2 over the availability of nuclear munitions. He thus ruled out any automatic presumption of nuclear use in the event of hostilities at any level and stipulated that final decisions authorizing nuclear strikes could be taken only by the president, who would weigh “political questions of the gravest importance.” If limited hostilities occurred, the president would have to consider whether “immediate use of atomic weapons by the United States would increase the danger of their strategic use by the enemy, lose the support of allies, expose them to destruction, or widen the hostilities,” and the president would always decide the “nature and scope” of U.S. military action, including the “manner and extent” of the use of nuclear weapons. “These questions,” Eisenhower said in his directive, “are so intimately bound up with political and other factors that they cannot be governed by hard and fast rules adopted in the abstract.”⁶⁸

67. See, e.g., Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 67–69, 111, 117–119.

68. See Memorandum for the Record by Cutler, 11 March 1955, Declassified Documents Reference System, Online Version, Doc. No. CK3100452026; and “Policy Regarding Nuclear Weapons,” Mem-

The documents that are now available strongly suggest that civilian policymakers only occasionally got a sense of the full implications of brandishing U.S. nuclear threats, particularly considering the nature of the predetermined military plans that would come to the fore if the diplomatic management of a crisis situation were to break down. Although Eisenhower might be confident that he had final control over nuclear options, the plans devised by SAC created the framework through which those options would have to be exercised. Because Chinese forces would not necessarily be dependent for their initial operations on a long logistics tail, the limited use of tactical nuclear weapons close to the scene of the fighting or the destruction of enemy airfields with nuclear strikes might not in fact have halted an advance as anticipated. In the absence of this desired effect, and especially if U.S. and allied forces were reeling from a ground offensive, military commanders stood ready with the widespread nuclear bombardment of Chinese urban target complexes as stipulated in SAC's FEOP 8-54 Phase III operations. Implementation of the offensive would be fully in line with strategic air war doctrine propagated in Air Force circles in the mid-1950s.⁶⁹

Knowledgeable outside observers certainly sensed the difficulty of keeping nuclear options tightly controlled in light of SAC's and the Air Force's predilections. As tension in the Taiwan Strait surged in April 1955, the Canadian ambassador in Washington warned his superiors in Ottawa that "we cannot help feeling that once unleashed the USAF would with difficulty be restricted to direct military targets or to the coastal area."⁷⁰ The chairman of the Canadian Chiefs of Staff likewise warned Canadian officials that "once a war was started [with China], it would be quite impossible to stick only to using small bombs, particularly if the desired results were not realized and U.S. aims were not achieved."⁷¹ British and Canadian officials alike were concerned that Admiral Radford was determined to "take China out" (as Eden told the British Cabinet in February 1955) if given the opportunity, and they feared that

orandum by Lay for Dulles, Wilson, and Strauss, 14 March 1955, in *Atomic Weapons, Correspondence and Background for Presidential Approval and Instructions for Use (1953–1960)* (1), White House Office, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, NSC Records, Subject Subseries, Box 1, DDEL. See also Bowie and Immerman, *Waging Peace*, pp. 197–198, for the January 1954 interpretation.

69. See the discussion of Air Force doctrine after 1953 in Mark J. Conversino, "Should Deterrence Fail: Attack Theory and Planning in the Nuclear Era," in David R. Mets and William P. Head, eds., *Plotting a True Course: Reflections on USAF Strategic Attack Theory and Doctrine: The Post World War II Experience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), pp. 256–258.

70. "Ambassador in the United States to Secretary of State for External Affairs, Telegram WA-633, 20 April 1955," in Greg Donaghy, ed., *Documents on Canadian External Affairs*, Vol. 21, 1955 (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1999), p. 1557.

71. "General Charles Foulkes Comments, 21 April 1955," in Donaghy, ed., *Documents on Canadian External Affairs*, Vol. 21, 1955, p. 1558.

emotional hostility to the PRC engendered by the Korean War might spur the Eisenhower administration to embark on a large-scale war with Beijing.⁷² In this case, too, Ridgway offered an interesting counterpoint to the dominant view in the U.S. Navy and Air Force. In August 1954, shortly after he drafted his long critique of SAC's FEOP 8-54, the NSC was discussing alternative policies to pursue in the Far East. At the meeting, Ridgway argued that a prime U.S. goal in the Cold War must be to work for a Sino-Soviet split, and he said that it made no sense to argue, as some of his fellow Joint Chiefs appeared to do, that the United States should aim for the destruction of Chinese power. He himself "would regard the destruction of such military power as inimical to the long-range interests of the U.S. It would result in a power vacuum into which but one other nation would move, namely the Soviet Union. . . . [T]he statesmanlike approach would seem to be to bring Red China to a realization that its long-range benefits derive from friendliness with America, not with the USSR."⁷³ Although Eisenhower was not fully convinced, Dulles believed that this argument had considerable merit, adumbrating the kind of strategic calculation made by the Nixon administration as it assessed Sino-Soviet hostilities in 1969.⁷⁴

U.S. war planning in the mid-1950s revolved around the idea of an all-embracing general war with the Soviet Union and its Communist allies. The expectation was that in such a war, with intense fighting on a global scale, the United States would employ its full arsenal of nuclear weapons. The military establishment, especially SAC, found it difficult to adjust to the requirements of maintaining allied cohesion by devising scenarios for the limited use of nuclear weapons in the Far East, even though this was where some of the most critical crises of the period occurred. Although the NSC in early 1954 had determined that U.S. nuclear planning in the Far East should be of a "limited" character, SAC often failed to heed this basic injunction. Even as the Eisenhower administration tried to convince the public, both at home and abroad, that "massive retaliation" did not involve the widespread, indiscriminate use of nuclear weapons, SAC's nuclear target planning against China tended to

72. For Eden on Radford, see C.13(55), 15 February 1955, in CAB 195/13, Cabinet Notebooks, TNAUK. See also Matthew Jones, "Up the Garden Path? Britain's Nuclear History in the Far East, 1954–1962," *International History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 2003), pp. 306–333.

73. See "Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, Comments on NSC 5429," in "Memorandum by the JCS to the Secretary of Defense," 11 August 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XII, pt. 1, p. 723. Ridgway repeated the idea that destroying China would produce only a power vacuum that would be exploited to Soviet advantage in his *Memoirs*, p. 279.

74. For Dulles on Ridgway's views, see "Memorandum of Discussion at 211th Meeting of the NSC," 18 August 1954, in *FRUS*, 1952–1954, Vol. XII, Pt. 1, p. 749. As vice president, Nixon had also of course been present for this meeting.

reflect not the political guidance of the NSC but a concept of strategic air warfare that envisaged the destruction of Chinese power without regard for the wider consequences.

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