August 23, 1950

Mr. Secretary:

Attached are some thoughts about Far Eastern policy which I had dictated with a view to leaving them with you when I left the Department. Hearing that you will be discussing the Japanese peace treaty this morning, I thought I would let you have them now.

I am afraid that, like so many of my thoughts, they will be too remote from general thinking in the Government to be of much practical use to you. But they may serve to signal one or two dangers connected with the Pentagon’s present approach to these matters—dangers which ought at least to be recognized and given attention in any further discussions of this problem we may have.

George F. Kennan

Attachment:

Memo, August 21, 1950
to the Secretary from
George F. Kennan
C: GPKennan: dmh
S - Mr. Secretary

Mr. Dulles recently asked me to give him a formal answer as to whether I approved of his latest draft of the Japanese peace treaty. I have given him certain conditional answers, which avoid the larger question of our attitude toward the Japanese Peace Treaty as part of our whole Far Eastern policy. But his inquiry reminded me that I have never really set forth to you my feelings about Far Eastern policy in general, and has made me feel that perhaps I ought to try to summarize them for you, if only for purposes of clarification, before I leave the Department.

I would therefore like to say the following:

1. The course upon which we are today moving is one, as I see it, so little promising and so fraught with danger that I could not honestly urge you to continue to take responsibility for it. These are the main reasons why I feel this way:

A. We have not achieved a clear and realistic and generally accepted view of our objectives in Korea and sectors of our public opinion and of our official establishment are indulging themselves in emotional, moralistic attitudes toward Korea which, unless corrected, can easily carry us toward real conflict with the Russians and inhibit us from making a realistic agreement about that area.

B. By permitting General MacArthur to retain the wide and relatively uncontrolled latitude he has enjoyed in determining our policy in the north Asian and western Pacific areas, we are tolerating a state of affairs in which we do not really have full control over the statements that are being made—and the actions taken—in our name.

C. Our
C. Our policy toward the rival Chinese regimes is one almost sure to run us into serious conflict with other Asian countries and with England and the Commonwealth and to strengthen Peking-Moscow solidarity rather than weaken it.

D. In Indo-China we are getting ourselves into the position of guaranteeing the French in an undertaking which neither they nor we, nor both of us together, can win.

E. By our intention to leave U.S. forces in Japan with full freedom of movement there, and with their presence sanctioned by the Japanese Peace Treaty, we are undermining our future political relations with the Japanese people and creating a situation which will obscure for them a correct view of their own national interest; in addition to this, we are thereby making an agreement with the Russians over Korea far more difficult than it would otherwise be.

2. In the light of this situation, what course of action would be dictated by considerations of pure national interest, leaving aside for the moment our domestic political inhibitions?

First of all, we should make it an objective of policy to terminate our involvements on the mainland of Asia as rapidly as possible and on the best terms we can get.

With respect to Indo-China, we should let Schuman know at the coming meeting of the Foreign Ministers that the closer view we have had of the problems of this area, in the course of our efforts of the past few months to support the French position there, has convinced us that that position is basically hopeless. Stressing that this has been, and continues to be, their own responsibility, we should say that we will do everything in our power to avoid embarrassing the French in their problems and to support them in any reasonable course they would like to adopt looking to its liquidation; but that we cannot honestly agree with them that there is any real hope of remaining successfully in Indo-China, and we feel that rather than have their weakness demonstrated by a continued costly and unsuccessful effort to assert their will by force of arms, it would be preferable to permit the
the turbulent political currents of that country to find their own level, unimpeded by foreign troops or pressures, even at the probable cost of an eventual deal between Viet-Nam and Viet-Minh, and the spreading over the whole country of Viet-Minh authority, possibly in a somewhat modified form. We might suggest that the most promising line of withdrawal, from the standpoint of their prestige, would be to make the problem one of some Asian regional responsibility, in which the French exodus could be conveniently obscured.

So far as Korea is concerned, my thoughts are not based on any regret for the basic determination to enter the Korean war, which was unquestionably the correct one; but I think we will be on very dangerous terrain if we fail to recognize the following subtle but wholly valid and vital distinction:

It was not tolerable to us that communist control should be extended to South Korea in the way in which this was attempted on June 24, since the psychological radiations from an acquiescence in this development on our part would have been wholly disruptive of our prestige in Asia;

Nevertheless, it is not essential to us to see an anti-Soviet Korean regime extended to all of Korea for all time; we could even eventually tolerate for a certain period of time a Korea nominally independent but actually amenable to Soviet influence, provided this state of affairs were to be brought about gradually and not too conspicuously, and were accompanied by a stable and secure situation in Japan and a quieting down of the existing tensions and fears in that general area.

My reasons for considering this distinction a valid one are these: it is beyond our capabilities to keep Korea permanently out of the Soviet orbit. The Koreans cannot really maintain their own independence in the face of both Russian and Japanese pressures. From the standpoint of our own interests it is preferable that Japan should dominate Korea than that Russia should do so.*

---

* In his book on "Roosevelt and the Russo-Japanese War" Tyler Dennett described Roosevelt's policy toward Korea in 1905 as follows: "To Japanese ascendency in the peninsula the American Government has no objections. Japanese control was to be preferred to Korean misgovernment, Chinese interference, or Russian bureaucracy."
But Japan, at the moment, is too weak to compete. We must hope that with the revival of her normal strength and prestige, Japan will regain her influence there. But the interval will probably be too long to be bridged over successfully by any of the expedients we have employed in the past or now have in contemplation. A period of Russian domination, while undesirable, is preferable to continued U.S. involvement in that unhappy area, as long as the means chosen to assert Soviet influence are not, as was the case with those resorted to in June of this year, ones calculated to throw panic and terror into other Asian peoples and thus to achieve for the Kremlin important successes going far beyond the Korean area. But it is important that the nominal independence of Korea be preserved, for it provides a flexible vehicle through which Japanese influence may someday gradually replace Soviet influence without creating undue international repercussions.

As for Japan, we have here the most important single factor in Asia. We cannot, in the long run, continue successfully to keep Japan resistant to Soviet pressures by using our own strength as the main instrument in this effort. The only adequate "main instrument" for this, in the long run, will be enlightened self-interest of the Japanese people, as translated into action by a Japanese Government. If we insist on keeping troops in Japan, their presence there will inevitably be a bone of political contention, and the communists will vigorously make capital of it. Precisely because we have forces there, we will not be able to establish a healthy diplomatic relationship to the Japanese, which could develop and enlist their sense of self-interest. Our commander and his position will constantly tend to stand in the way of such a trend of events. This is particularly cogent in its implication because of our seeming inability to keep large bodies of troops abroad without burdening local peoples physically and financially before them the visible evidences of a vastly higher standard of material comfort. Furthermore, the marked predilection of the American people for taking the side of any United States garrison commander abroad against the Government (and particularly the State Department) in Washington, will mean that we will not really have effective policy control over him. A military commander in a foreign territory is never a suitable vehicle of political policy. In addition to this, if the commander has a quasi-international status, as is now the plan, he will exploit this as a means of evading policy directives from this Government which do not coincide with his own predilections.

Finally,
Finally, if the Japanese agreement to the presence of such forces is anchored in a treaty of peace, which in turn reflects a duress implicit in military defeat and unconditional surrender, it will never have full legitimacy in Japanese eyes. This element of duress will always rise to plague us in all our future relations to the Japanese, and to divert Japanese attention to the problem of "how to get United States troops out" rather than "how to meet Soviet pressures against Japan."

In the event of war, I take it we would not try to maintain and supply an armed establishment in Japan anyway, if it were faced, as I think it would be, with active opposition and attack from Soviet forces on the mainland. I assume, therefore, that the presence of our forces there is not necessary for this contingency.

Our best bet, therefore, at the present time would be to establish real diplomatic contact with the Russians (this means contact along the lines of the Malik-Jessup talks of last year) aiming at the achievement of something like the following state of affairs: we would consent to the neutralization and demilitarization of Japan (except for strong internal police forces) whereas the Russians would agree to a termination of the Korean war involving withdrawal of the North Korean forces and of our forces and a period of effective United Nations control over Korea for at least a year or two, the U.N. utilizing for this purpose the nationals and forces only of other Asian countries.

Such an arrangement would have to have as its concomitants certain decisions of unilateral United States policy: to wit:

(a) A readiness on our part to get ourselves out of the line of fire on the question of Chinese admission to the United Nations, by a policy of abstention from voting on this subject or of the exertion of pressure on others;

(b) The adoption of a military policy in this country whereby we would maintain in being and in a state of readiness at all times a mixed combat force, commanded and operated as a unit, capable of dealing a sharp blow on a limited front almost anywhere in the world on short notice, along the lines of my recommendations to the Defense Committee of the American Chamber of Commerce in 1947 (copy attached);

(c) ...
(c) A determination on our part to see to it that the Japanese would be adequately equipped to look after their own internal security, even in the face of the worst that their own communists could do; and

(d) An approach to the Formosan question based on a U.N.-conducted plebiscite, again without U.S. participation, and complete subsequent demilitarization of Formosa under whatever regime might be established, the U.S. acting as permanent supervisor.

It should be noted that this does not imply any written agreement with the Russians. In fact, to try to negotiate anything of that sort would probably be disastrous. It implies only a general meeting of the minds, the sanction for which would lie in the readiness of either side to proceed with its part of the arrangement. Thus channels should be left open so that further Russian tactlessness in Korea could be followed by an immediate re-introduction of U.S. forces into Japan. If, on the other hand, we were to re-occupy Japan without provocation, the Russians could consider all bets off with respect to Korea.

Such an arrangement, it should be noted, would involve the resumption of real diplomatic contact with Japan, as well as with the Soviet Union. This means contact not with the present Japanese Government but with the really influential circles which are now lurking in the political background. This cannot be done by General MacArthur or by anyone in his headquarters. It would take a real diplomatic envoy, backed by Presidential authority but instructed to operate quietly, patiently and inconspicuously.

3. So much for national interest in the abstract. There remains the fact that United States public opinion, aroused by the Korean aggression, and confused by the partisan attacks on the administration, is not prepared for this sort of a policy. I realize that an attempt to proceed along these lines would encounter, as things stand today, violent and outraged opposition both within sectors of the Executive branch and in the Congress. In particular, it would mean pouring oil on the fires already kindled by the Republican opposition in the charge that our Far Eastern policy has been over-lentment to Communism and therefore neglectful of our national security. Nevertheless, I think
think there is a clear problem of responsibility here involved, which begs for clarification. This is not really my competence, and I do not think I should discuss it in this paper. But I would be glad to give you my views orally, before I leave, if they would be of any interest.

George F. Kennan

Attachment:
Copy of January 23, 1947 presentation to National Defense Committee of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

C: GPKennan:dmh
Copies to:
D: - Mr. Webb
S/A: - Mr. Jessup
G: - Mr. Matthews
PE: - Mr. Rusk