The British government confirmed its defense priorities in the Far East when it chose to reinforce Malaya with troops from Hong Kong. Although the Defence Committee clearly intended the Hong Kong garrison to put up a vigorous defense of the colony against a Chinese attack, by 1951 it was clear to officials in both London and Singapore that improvements in Chinese military efficiency had made a successful defense of Hong Kong impractical. The decision to send a British contingent to Korea proved to be the high water mark of British military deployments to the Far East, and it was firmly tied to wider strategic reasons. The government’s subsequent refusal to send any more troops to Asia led to a secret decision to abandon Hong Kong in the event of an all-out Chinese attack. Nonetheless, it saw no reason to drop the pretense that Britain intended to put up a resolute defense, and so resorted to strategic and tactical deception as a means of deterring a Chinese attack. The Australians agreed to assist in a theater-wide deception effort, and it appears the Americans did too.

Until late 1951, US policy toward Hong Kong focused on limiting the colony’s trade with China, but anecdotal evidence suggests that from 1952 the US may have been involved in the deception plan. It is equally possible that the new American interest in the defense of Hong Kong was indeed genuine and may have flowed not only from a moral conviction about the ‘Berlin of the East’, but also from notions of using the colony as a base from which to attack China in the event of war in Southeast Asia. Many of the most sensitive decisions made during the period 1950–54 are obscured by the continued closure or excision of certain documents, but enough circumstantial evidence and public material is available to permit a fairly accurate rendering of Hong Kong defense policy and its relation to military strategy in the Far East. What
emerges is a story of British success in grasping the opportunity presented by the Americans’ new strategic valuation of Asia in general, and Hong Kong in particular.

**Hong Kong, FARELF and the Korean commitment**

Korea was not vital to either Allied or British strategy in the Far East. Indeed, from as early as March 1949 the JPS had assumed that Communists would eventually control the entire peninsula or that Russia would occupy it in war. Consequently, there was no *military* reason why the British should have gotten involved in the conflict that began when North Korean and Chinese army units crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea on 25 June 1950. Nor did it seem possible that they could, even if they wanted to. The Cold War in the Far East had very nearly drained the British Army of all available forces. In Malaya, a renewed MRLA offensive had prompted General Harding to redeploy 3 Commando Brigade and one infantry brigade from Hong Kong to Malaya. With the exception of three battalions undergoing periodic retraining in Malaya, FARELF had no troops to spare.

Thirty-six hours after the North Korean invasion, the Cabinet met to discuss the Korean crisis and the United States response. The US Government had already informed the British that President Truman had ordered the US Pacific Fleet to prevent any Communist attack on Formosa or any continuation of Nationalist air and sea operations against mainland China. Truman also ordered the expediting of military assistance to the Philippines and the three Associated States of French Indochina, the reinforcement of US forces in the Philippines, and the establishment of a US military mission in Indochina. In the space of a day, the US had met the British objectives of protecting Formosa and supporting anti-Communist forces in Indochina. The US also intended to sponsor a UN Security Council resolution calling on member states to furnish military assistance to South Korea to enable it to repel the attack. The Cabinet instructed its UN ambassador to vote accordingly, and then asked the Chiefs of Staff to report to the Defence Committee on what practical military steps Britain could take in support of this resolution.

The Chiefs rapidly concluded that the only support Britain could give United Nations forces would be to place several warships already in Japanese waters under US operational control. There were no RAF units in Japan, and they were adamantly opposed to sending troops or aircraft from operational duties in Malaya or Hong Kong. The Chiefs