

Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War: Stalin's Strategic Goals in the Far East

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Introduction

In 1949, Stalin insisted that the unification of the Korean peninsula had to be realized in a peaceful manner. In early 1950, however, he suddenly approved North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's proposal for an invasion of South Korea. Until very recently, the only clue to the reason for this major policy shift was found in Stalin's telegram to Mao Zedong on 14 May 1950, which was declassified in the early 1990s. In it Stalin simply stated that "in light of the altered international situation, we agree with the proposal of the Koreans to move toward reunification."¹ What Stalin meant by the phrase "altered international situation" has remained a mystery. Scholars have been unable to explain this sudden and dramatic transformation of the Soviet Union's policy toward Korea in 1950.

In the mid-1990s, the Russian government declassified a number of crucial documents on the Korean War. In addition, many new memoirs and interviews on the subject have recently been published in China. These new

1. "Shifrtelgramma," from Stalin to Mao Zedong, 14 May 1950, in Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii (APRF), Fond (F.) 45, Opis' (Op.) 1, Delo (D.) 331, Listy (L.) 554. I have collected over 500 Russian archival documents, and I cite many of these in this article. The documents will be published in an archival compilation, *50 nianbou de zhengju: guanyu chaoxian zbanzheng de eguo jiemi dangan* (Testimony 50 Years Later: Declassified Russian Documents on the Korean War) (Hong Kong: Tiandi Tushu, Inc., forthcoming). I would like to thank the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the National Security Archive, the Harvard Project on Cold War Studies, and my friends Chen Jian, Kathryn Weathersby, and Sergei Goncharov for their help in providing me with copies of these documents. Some of the documents have no archival number attached. In such cases, I cite them as "SD" followed by a number, which indicates their location in my forthcoming book.

sources have enabled scholars to reconsider many aspects of the Korean War and Soviet foreign policy.² Much of the discussion has focused on Stalin's shifting attitudes toward Korea in 1950 and the factors that may have motivated him: the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in China, the development of Soviet nuclear capabilities, the determination that the United States would not intervene in Korea, and the desire to offset the U.S. presence in Japan with the establishment of a Communist state in Korea.³

In the book *Uncertain Partners*, Sergei Goncharov, John Lewis, and Xue Litai argue that Stalin's main goal in Korea was to expand the Soviet Union's buffer zone. Korea gave Stalin a springboard from which he could invade Japan in future conflicts. In addition, they contend that Stalin wanted to test U.S. will, aggravate the hostility between China and the United States, and divert American military attention away from Europe.⁴ John W. Garver places primary emphasis on Stalin's attitude toward Japan, contending that Stalin hoped to prevent that country from becoming a U.S. military base.⁵ A.V. Torkunov, on the other hand, concludes that Stalin felt free to do as he wished in Korea, since he assumed that the United States was interested only in the fate of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kaishek) in Taiwan. Torkunov also argues that Stalin was influenced by Soviet inroads into the U.S. nuclear monopoly, a shift that, in his view, could deter U.S. intervention in the Far East.⁶

2. Recent works on the Korean War include Sergei Goncharov, John Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); A.V. Torkunov and E.P. Ufimtsev, *Koreiskaya problema: Novyi vzglyad* (Moscow: "Angel" Publishing Center, 1995); Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1995); and Kathryn Weathersby's manuscript, "Stalin's Last War." For Soviet foreign policy after World War II, see Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Vojtech Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity: The Stalin Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

3. Many of these issues were discussed at an international conference commemorating the 45th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War and the dedication of the Korean War Memorial in Washington, DC in July 1995. Participants included Evgenii Bazhanov, Chen Jian, Valeri Denisov, Sergei Goncharov, Kim Chullbaum, Kim Hak-joon, Chong-sik Lee, James Matray, John Merrill, William Stueck, Kathryn Weathersby, and Shu Guang Zhang. The discussions at the conference are skillfully summarized in Weathersby's conference report, distributed by the Korea Society in Washington, DC.

4. Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, pp. 151–152.

5. John W. Garver, "Polemics, Paradigms, Responsibility, and the Origins of the U.S.-PRC Confrontation in the 1950s," *Journal of American–East Asian Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 27–28.

6. Torkunov and Ufimtsev, *Koreiskaya problema*, p. 32.

This essay analyzes the change in Stalin's policy toward Korea on three different levels. First, it examines the historical and political context of Soviet policy toward Korea in the 1950s. Second, it provides an in-depth look at Stalin's immediate incentives to give his approval for the war. Finally, it assesses Stalin's calculations of the means necessary for the success of his new policy. At each level, issues such as the Sino-Soviet alliance, the growing Sino-American confrontation, the complicated U.S.-Soviet relationship, and the postwar context of East Asia are considered.

The Political Context in 1950

The strategic goals of Soviet foreign policy after World War II fell into three major categories: peaceful coexistence, world revolution, and national security. Among the three, priority was given to national security. Stalin alternately exploited peaceful coexistence for propagandistic purposes and promoted world revolution whenever expedient. Both of these strategic goals, however, were ultimately subordinate to his perception of what would best serve the Soviet Union's national security interests. The three goals sometimes overlapped and reinforced one another, but at other times the first two were at odds with the third. When conflicts arose, the exigencies of national security won out.

Because of the frequent contradictions among the three goals, Stalin's foreign policy was continually shifting in the postwar period. In the first years after the war, Stalin hoped to cooperate with Western allies and desired to consolidate and develop the benefits he gained through the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. At the same time, Stalin sought to expand into regions such as Turkey and Iran, which the Yalta conference did not cover. But Stalin initially did not let his desire to extend the Soviet sphere of influence undermine his policy of cooperation with the West. The Soviet Union adopted a policy of retreat and compromise when confronted with a firm position by the United States and Great Britain. The Soviet withdrawals from Iran, Manchuria, and North Korea revealed that Stalin's expansionist objectives were limited. Whenever possible, he avoided direct conflict with the United States.⁷

The Marshall Plan of June 1947 changed Stalin's attitude. He suspected that the Plan was designed to create an anti-Soviet bloc in Europe through the expansion of Western influence into Eastern Europe and the rearmament of western Germany, Russia's historical enemy. Stalin's reaction to the

7. See Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, chs. 1 and 2; and Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, ch. 2.

Marshall Plan pushed the United States and the Soviet Union more deeply into Cold War conflict. After 1947, Stalin's policy toward the United States and the West became increasingly aggressive.⁸

The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union occurred first in Europe. The Berlin Crisis from June 1948 to May 1949 brought the two countries to the verge of a military confrontation, but the firm stance of the United States and Western Europe eventually forced the Soviet Union to back down. When Stalin decided to challenge the United States in Germany, he did not expect the Truman administration to be so unyielding. The Soviet leader initially underestimated U.S. military and economic strength, but he decided to abandon direct confrontation with the United States in Europe when he realized that the Soviet Union did not have the military capacity to do so effectively.⁹

It was in this international context that Stalin focused his major strategic attention on East Asia, where hostilities had been growing in the late 1940s. The Communist revolution in China and Beijing's subsequent adoption of a pro-Soviet "leaning-to-one-side" policy greatly increased the tension and uncertainty in U.S.-Soviet relations. At the same time, tensions also grew between Soviet-controlled North Korea and U.S.-protected South Korea. Both Korean regimes hoped to unify Korea through military means. Military clashes and fighting never stopped along the 38th parallel. The South Korean leader Syngman Rhee continually churned out war propaganda and repeatedly initiated military provocations after U.S. troops withdrew. In North Korea, Kim Il Sung actively considered an attack on the South.¹⁰

Stalin claimed that the United States had withdrawn its troops from the Korean peninsula to "give Rhee's army freedom to act" and to "untie the South Korean reactionaries' hands and feet."¹¹ To counter this threat, the Soviet Union increased its military aid to North Korea. At Kim Il Sung's request, the Soviet Union agreed to offer North Korea military-technological support

8. Mastny, *The Cold War and Soviet Insecurity*, ch. 3; see also Shen Zhihua and Zhang Shengfa, "From Cooperation among the Great Powers to Confrontation between the Two Camps: The Transformation of Stalin's Postwar Foreign Policy," *Dongou zhongya yanjiu* (East European and Central Asian Studies, Beijing), No. 6 (1996), pp. 55–66.

9. M. Narinsky, "Berlinskii krizis 1948–1949: Novye dokumenty iz Rossiiskikh arkhivov," *Novaya i noveishaya istoriya* (Moscow), No. 3 (May–June 1995), pp. 16–29.

10. Telegram from Vasilevskii and Shtemenko to Stalin, 20 April 1949, SD0225; Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 20 April 1949, APRF, F. 3, Op. 65, D. 839, Ll. 13–14; Report from Shtykov, "Spravka o voennykh podgotovkakh Yuzhnoi Korei," 21 May 1949, SD00233; Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 18 June 1949, SD00237; Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 13 July 1949, SD00242; and see also John Merrill, *Korea: The Peninsula Origins of the War* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1989), pp. 130–151.

11. Telegram from Gromyko to Shtykov, 17 April 1949, SD00224; and Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 18 June 1949, SD00237.

as part of a trade agreement. In 1949, Stalin sent the following items to Pyongyang: 100 military aircraft, 100 tanks, 57 armored vehicles, 102 automatic cannons, 44 foldable landing-craft carriers, rubber boats, various types of guns, ammunition, and other military support equipment.¹² At this point, however, Moscow's intention was to strengthen North Korean defensive capabilities rather than to encourage offensive action.¹³ Stalin insisted on reducing tensions between the Koreans and avoiding Soviet involvement in the conflict, even though some Soviet military leaders preferred to take military action. When Terentii Shtykov, the Soviet ambassador to Pyongyang, proposed to dismantle the navy base in Tsinkai and the air base in Pyongyang after U.S. troops withdrew from South Korea, Stalin quickly agreed. Soviet policy makers were concerned that North Korea could make use of those bases to attack the South and involve the Soviet Union in an embarrassing situation.¹⁴ The Soviet Union also took measures to stop North Korea's counterattacks against the South, fearing that the North Korean Communists might escalate the tensions on the peninsula into an uncontrollable crisis.

North Korean leaders, for their part, hoped to use the attacks from the South as an opportunity to achieve Korean unification through military means. On 3 September 1949, Shtykov reported to Moscow that Mun Il, Kim Il Sung's personal secretary, was convinced that South Korea intended to seize the area of the Ongjin peninsula north of the 38th parallel and bomb the cement plant in the city of Kaisiu. Kim Il Sung subsequently asked the Soviet Union for permission to take the Ongjin Peninsula and South Korean territory from Ongjin to Kaesong to shorten the line of defense. Believing that his troops could occupy the whole of Korea in two weeks or at most two months, Kim Il Sung planned to continue southward actions if the international situation permitted.¹⁵

Grigorii Ivanovich Tunkin, the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Pyongyang, was instructed to meet with Kim Il Sung and North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Hon-yong. He did so on 12 and 13 September and then sent Moscow a detailed analysis of the military capabilities of both South Korea and North Korea. He also reported Kim Il Sung's plans and his own views of the matter. According to Tunkin, Kim Il Sung assumed that the South Korean military

12. Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 1 May 1949, APRF, F. 6, Op. 9, D. 14, Ll. 57; Telegram from Shtemenko to Shtykov, 4 June 1949, SD00235; Park Mun Su, "Stalin's Foreign Policy and the Korean War: History Revisited," *Korea Observer*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Summer 1994), p. 348; and Torkunov, *Koreiskaya problema*, p. 20.

13. Torkunov and Ufimtsev, *Koreiskaya problema*, pp. 20–21.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

15. "Shifrtelgramma," from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 3 September 1949, SD00245. For an English translation of this document, see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 6.

force was not particularly strong: "The Northern army is superior to the Southern army in technical equipment (tanks, artillery, planes), discipline, training of officers and troops, and political morale." But if North Korea's military action to seize the Ongjin peninsula were to trigger a civil war, such a war might be difficult to win. Therefore, Kim Il Sung hoped to avoid war, seeking only to secure the Ongjin peninsula and a portion of the territory of South Korea near Kaesong to the east of the peninsula. Kim also expected Southern "partisans" to rise up when the North entered the South. If everything went smoothly, North Korea could continue its southward march. Tunkin sensed that Kim's "limited" military action would definitely precipitate a civil war. He warned that "to begin the partial operation conceived by Kim Il Sung would be inadvisable," because the North was not strong enough to win a civil war quickly. A protracted war, Tunkin emphasized, would place the North at a disadvantage, both militarily and politically.¹⁶

Shtykov, by contrast, supported Kim Il Sung's plan. In a telegram to Stalin on 15 September 1949, the Soviet ambassador reiterated the North Korean leader's arguments: The Korean people were eager to achieve unification, but they could not do so through peaceful means. If North Korea did not act militarily, unification could be delayed for many years, and the reactionary South Korean regime would use that time to suppress the "democratic forces" in the South, establish a more powerful army to invade the North, and destroy all the institutions set up by the North in recent years. Shtykov argued that the political situation in the Korean Peninsula was favorable to North Korea. Even though Pyongyang could not exclude the possibility that "the United States would intervene in this conflict and aid South Korea," and even though "the People's Army is not strong enough quantitatively and qualitatively to wipe out Rhee's army and occupy South Korea," Shtykov assumed that it was possible and appropriate to encourage Communist guerrillas in the South and offer other types of support to the North. In addition, Pyongyang, in Shtykov's view, could "make use of Seoul's provocation at the 38th parallel to punish South Korea by seizing the Ongjin peninsula and the region of Kaesong." Shtykov also believed that insofar as the Chinese revolution had gained its victory without America's interference and the Korean people had demonstrated their "revolutionary enthusiasm after the withdrawal of U.S. troops," the situation in the Far East made it a favorable moment for the Soviet Union to confront the United States.¹⁷

16. Telegram from Gromyko to Tunkin, 11 September 1949, SD00246; and Telegram from Tunkin to Gromyko, 14 September 1949, SD00247. Both documents are also translated and published in "Shiftelegramma," from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 3 September 1949, SD00245, pp. 6–7.

17. Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin on 15 September 1949, APRF, F. 3, Op. 65, D. 776, Ll. 1–21.

Nevertheless, Stalin was reluctant to support military action in the Korean peninsula. The Soviet Politburo discussed the Korean situation on 24 September and then instructed Shtykov to read its decision verbatim to Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong:

Since at present North Korea does not have the necessary military superiority over South Korea, we have no choice but to acknowledge that a military attack against the South would be ill-timed and therefore, from the military point of view, impermissible. . . . At present, very little has been done to develop the guerrilla movement and . . . prepare for a general uprising in South Korea. Therefore, even from a political perspective, the attack on the South has not been prepared.

Moreover, the Soviet Politburo contended that a limited operation to attack the Ongjin peninsula and seize the Kaesong region could lead to “the beginning of a war between North and South Korea.” The possibility of a prolonged war would then “give the Americans an excuse for interfering in Korean affairs.” The Politburo concluded that

the struggle for the unification of Korea demands a concentration of maximum effort. In the first place, the guerrilla movement must be developed, liberated areas must be created, and a general armed uprising in South Korea must be prepared for in order to overthrow the reactionary regime. . . . Second, the People’s Army of Korea must be strengthened in every way.¹⁸

This resolution clearly indicated that Moscow’s policy at the time was to encourage unification through revolution in the South rather than by military invasion from the North. It is interesting to note that in another instruction drafted by several high-ranking officials, including Nikolai Bulganin and Andrei Gromyko, Shtykov was asked to remind Kim Il Sung that he had not done everything to achieve “peaceful unification.” For instance, he had “overlooked the Declaration of Peaceful Unification issued by the National Front, which is an important and politically favorable document.”¹⁹

North Korean leaders accepted Moscow’s instructions reluctantly,²⁰ but they did not stop preparing for military action. When a fierce skirmish took

18. Soviet Politburo resolution, 24 September 1949, APRF, F. 3, Op. 65, D. 776, Ll. 30–32. For an English translation, see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), pp. 7–8. The translation here has been modified in accordance with the Russian original.

19. Instruction from Moscow to Soviet Embassy, 23 September 1949, APRF, F. 3, Op. 65, D. 776, Ll. 33–38.

20. Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 4 October 1949, SD00251.

place near the 38th parallel on 14 October 1949, Stalin was dismayed that Shtykov and other Soviet military advisers had supported this action without reporting it to Moscow. Gromyko severely reprimanded Shtykov: "You were forbidden to recommend to the North Korean government that it take action against the South Koreans without approval of the Center, and you were told that it was necessary for you to present timely reports to the Center on all actions and events occurring along the 38th parallel."²¹ At this point, Stalin still preferred to solve the Korea issue through peaceful means.

Why was Stalin reluctant to take military action in Korea? Soviet documents have shown that he was primarily concerned about two things: the possibility of U.S. intervention in Korea, and North Korea's lack of preparedness for war.²² Although these concerns were not sufficient to prevent Stalin from permitting the North Korean Communists to start a revolutionary war, he needed the impetus to justify taking action—a motive that would override the above concerns.

When Stalin finally did change his mind and approved Kim Il Sung's plans in late January 1950, these concerns had not been alleviated. The preconditions for North Korean action against the South still did not exist: The North had not established new liberated areas in the South and had not encouraged guerrilla activity there.²³ But careful analysis of the changing international situation in East Asia in late 1949 and early 1950 demonstrates that it was the rise of Communist China and the resulting Sino-Soviet alliance that created a new impetus for Stalin to change his Korea policy.

The Impetus for Shifting Soviet Policy Toward Korea

Stalin began to adopt a different policy toward the Korean peninsula in the first few months of 1950. According to Shtykov's report to Moscow on 19 January 1950, Kim Il Sung raised the unification issue again at a luncheon held by the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 17 January. Kim argued that the liberation of the South could proceed now that the revolution in China had been accomplished. In Kim's own words,

21. Telegrams from Gromyko to Shtykov, 26 October and 20 November 1949, SD00252, SD00254.

22. Scholars have different views about this issue. For a more detailed discussion, see Shen Zhihua, "Comprehensive Assessments of the Korean War: New Documents and New Views," *Zhonggong dangshi yanjiu* (CCP History Studies, Beijing), No. 6 (1996), pp. 86–90.

23. The Communist guerrillas were most successful in the fall of 1949. They were even able to invade large cities and fight against entire divisions of enemy forces. But the guerrillas were suppressed by the spring of 1950. See Merrill, *Korea*, chap. 5; and Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, Vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), chap. 12.

The people of South Korea trust me and rely on our armed might. Guerrillas cannot solve the problem. The people of South Korea know that we have a good army. Lately I have not slept well at night, thinking about how to resolve the question of the unification of the whole country. If the matter of . . . the unification of the country is drawn out, then I may lose the trust of the Korean people.

Kim acknowledged that Stalin had given permission for Northern action only if the South instigated hostilities, but he argued that this meant a long delay while waiting for Syngman Rhee to act. Kim again expressed his hope of visiting Stalin and securing permission for action against the South. Kim even assured Shtykov that the Korean People's Army could take the Ongjin peninsula in three days and then push to capture Seoul within another several days. In light of the Soviet Politburo's resolution of 24 September 1949, however, Shtykov did not give Kim an encouraging response.²⁴

In a surprise move, Stalin himself changed his mind after hearing Kim's report. He cabled Kim personally on 30 January:

I received your report. I understand the dissatisfaction of Comrade Kim Il Sung, but he must understand that an effort as important as the one he wishes to undertake in South Korea needs careful preparation. The matter must be organized so that it will not pose such a great risk. If he wants to discuss this matter with me, then I will always be ready to receive him and discuss it with him. Transmit all this to Kim Il Sung and tell him that I am ready to help him in this matter.²⁵

Kim Il Sung was enthusiastic about Stalin's reply and expressed his willingness to visit Moscow immediately. Kim also suggested increasing his army to ten divisions and purchasing Soviet weaponry for three new divisions. Stalin agreed to fulfill Kim's request.²⁶ Stalin also appointed Marshal A.M. Vasilevskii as head of the team of Russian military advisers to the Korean People's Army, a position that had been held by the Soviet ambassador since

24. "Shifrtelgramma," from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 19 January 1950, Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (AVPRF), F. 059a, Op. 5a, D.3, Papka (Pap.) 11, Ll. 87–91. For an English translation, see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 8.

25. "Shifrtelgramma," from Stalin to Shtykov, 30 January 1950, AVPRF, F. 059a, Op. 5a, D. 3, Pap. 11, Ll. 92. For an English translation, see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 9.

26. "Shifrtelgramma," from Shtykov to Stalin, 31 January 1950, AVPRF, F. 059a, Op. 5a, D. 3, Pap. 11, Ll. 93; Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii on 7 February 1950, AVPRF, F. 059a, Op. 5a, D. 4, Pap. 11, Ll. 145–146; and Telegram from Vyshinskii to Shtykov on 9 February 1950, APRE, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 346, Ll. 76.

the Soviet troops had left. At the same time, the Soviet Union began to provide North Korea with massive military aid.²⁷

Kim Il Sung paid a secret visit to Moscow from 8 to 25 April 1950 and held direct talks with Stalin. No transcripts of these talks have been found so far, and scholars have had to rely on the memories of participants.²⁸ A top secret "Report on the Background of the Korean War," prepared by the Soviet Foreign Affairs Ministry for Leonid Brezhnev on 9 August 1966, states that Stalin finally approved Kim's military plans during the North Korean leader's visit to Moscow in March and April 1950.²⁹ It is thus clear that, at some point between January and April 1950, Stalin decided to allow Kim to launch a war on the Korean peninsula. The important question is, What happened during those months that prompted Stalin to change his Korea policy?

One plausible explanation can be found in the shifting U.S. attitude toward Korea and Taiwan. On 5 January 1950, President Harry Truman proclaimed that the United States would not challenge the claim that Taiwan was part of China. A week later, Secretary of State Dean Acheson pointedly excluded Taiwan and South Korea from America's defense perimeter in the western Pacific. He also tried to drive a wedge between the Soviet Union and China by claiming that the Soviet Union was pursuing an imperialist policy toward China, especially in Xinjiang and Manchuria.³⁰ Newly available Chinese and Soviet sources show that these statements caught the attention of both Stalin and Mao while Mao was in Moscow in January and February 1950. V.P. Tkachenko, the head of Korean affairs in the Central Committee apparatus of the Soviet Communist Party, recalled that Stalin was impressed with Acheson's speech after he had studied it carefully.³¹ Chinese and Soviet leaders made concerted attempts to rebut Acheson's attack on Sino-Soviet relations.³² Although both Communist states were dismayed by Acheson's comments, they were heartened by some of his statements, which implied that the United

27. "Shifrtelgramma," from Shtykov to Vasilievskii on 23 February 1950, AVPRF, F. 059a, Op. 5a, D. 3, Pap. 11, Ll. 148; Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 16 March 1950, APRF, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 346, Ll. 133–140; and Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 18 March 1950, APRF, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 346, L. 142. The above documents have all been translated and published in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6–7 (Winter 1995/1996), p. 37.

28. See Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War: New Documentary Evidence," *Journal of American–East Asian Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Winter 1993), p. 433; and see also Kim Chullbaum, ed., *The Truth about the Korean War: Testimony 40 Years Later* (Seoul: Eulyoo, 1991), pp. 105–106.

29. Weathersby, "The Soviet Role," p. 441.

30. Department of State, *Department of State Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (16 January 1950), pp. 111–116.

31. Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 101.

32. Shi Zhe, *Zai lishi juren shenbian: Shi Zhe buiyilu* (By the Side of Historical Giants: Shi Zhe's Memoirs) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1991), pp. 454–455.

States was retreating from East Asia. On 27 January 1950, Su Yu, a high-ranking Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) commander who was in charge of preparations for a military campaign against Taiwan, concluded in an internal report that the United States would not send military forces to defend Taiwan.³³ In a face-to-face discussion about the Korean situation, Mao told Stalin that he did not believe the United States would intervene in Korea's internal affairs.³⁴ These seemingly auspicious trends in U.S. policy undoubtedly were one of the factors that induced Stalin to shift in favor of Kim's plans.

It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that Stalin's attitude toward Korea was simply a response to public statements made by senior U.S. officials. The situation, in Stalin's view, was far more complex. In a telegram to Shtykov on 30 January 1950, Stalin merely declared that he was "ready to help [Kim Il Sung] in this matter," without specifying precisely what this "help" would consist of. During Kim Il Sung's visit to Moscow in April, Stalin again emphasized that he would not back Kim's invasion plan unless the North Korean leader first secured China's support. Before consenting to any military actions, Stalin wanted to ensure that China would be taking an active part.

Stalin's motives for insisting on China's involvement in the Korean peninsula were complicated. Declassified Chinese and Soviet documents hint that Stalin shifted his policy toward Korea relatively early, in January 1950, as he increasingly grasped the significance of the Chinese Communist revolution. The documents reveal that Stalin was not entirely pleased with the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and he was reluctant to embrace a full-fledged strategic alliance with the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC).

Scholars have often argued that the birth of the PRC and the signing of the Sino-Soviet alliance positively affected Stalin's assessment of the balance of power in Asia and gave him the confidence he needed to confront the United States in Asia. But it is also possible to argue that Stalin perceived the rise of the CCP as a potential threat to Soviet dominance of the international Communist movement. For Stalin, the success of the CCP was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enlarged the Soviet Union's buffer zone and helped spread Communist influence in Asia. On the other hand, once the Chinese gained military strength, they had the potential to become a rival power in the East. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of February 1950 created an important strategic bulwark for the Soviet Union in East Asia, but it also forced Stalin to abandon most of the privileges he had obtained from Jiang Jieshi in

33. Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, p. 102.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88.

the 1945 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. Stalin crafted a new Korea policy with these considerations in mind.

After World War II, the Soviet Union pursued two major strategic goals in East Asia: the separation of Mongolia from China to create a broader buffer zone, and the restoration of the pre-1917 Russian sphere of influence in Manchuria with its access to a warm-water port. Moscow was able to achieve these goals by controlling the Chinese Eastern Railroad, Lushun (Port Arthur), and Dalian and by exploiting provisions in the Yalta agreements and the Sino-Soviet treaty of 1945. Stalin, in return, supported the Guomindang (GMD) Nationalist government, tried to persuade the CCP to limit its revolutionary activities in China, and encouraged peace talks between the GMD and the CCP.³⁵ During the Chinese civil war, Stalin's China policy began to reflect the growing tension between the Soviet Union and the United States, making Soviet actions in China inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory. As the GMD government increasingly became a U.S. ally, Stalin delayed the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Manchuria and supported the entry of CCP forces in the northeast. However, because Stalin still wanted to avoid open U.S.-Soviet confrontation over China, he adhered to a policy of disengagement during the Chinese civil war. In early 1949, on the eve of the CCP's final victory, he sought to play a role in the CCP-GMD peace negotiations.³⁶ These seemingly inconsistent actions served the consistent purpose of maintaining the privileges that the Soviet Union had enjoyed in East Asia since the Yalta conference in 1945. When the Chinese Communists came to power, Stalin was unsure whether they would defer to Soviet interests as obediently as the East European Communists had.

The major conflicts between the Soviet Union and China concerned Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Manchuria. Chinese leaders were aware of the constraints they faced on the Mongolian question. In early 1949, Mao asked Anastas Mikoyan, a Soviet Politburo member who was visiting the CCP headquarters at Xipaipo, whether Inner and Outer Mongolia could be merged into one autonomous province of China. When Mikoyan rejected the idea, Mao did not press it. During Mao's visit to Moscow from December 1949 to February 1950 (which Zhou Enlai joined in January 1950), the status quo of Outer Mongolia was recognized in a joint statement.³⁷

35. Odd Arne Westad, *Cold War and Revolution: Soviet-American Rivalry and the Origins of the Chinese Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), chap. 3; and see also Shen Zhihua, "Soviet Entry into China's Northeast: Goals and Results," *Lishi yanjiu* (Historical Studies, Beijing), No. 5 (1994), pp. 85–103.

36. "Communications between Mao and Stalin: Seven Telegrams, January 1949," trans. by Song Datu, *Chinese Historians*, Vol. 7, No. 1–2 (Spring and Fall 1994), pp. 163–172.

37. Ivan V. Kovalev, "Istoriya i sovremennost': Dialog Stalina s Mao Tszedunom," *Problemy*

The CCP paid special attention to the question of Xinjiang. Mao informed Mikoyan of the importance of Xinjiang and reminded him that the Soviet Union supported the independence movement there by providing anti-aircraft guns, tanks, and planes. Mikoyan assured Mao that the Soviet Union did not support the independence movement in Xinjiang and that Moscow had no territorial designs on the region. CCP leaders were not convinced and pressed the matter again in the summer of 1949 when Liu Shaoqi, the second most important CCP leader, visited Moscow.³⁸ In the end, Soviet policy toward Xinjiang satisfied and even surprised the CCP. Stalin not only suggested to Liu that the Chinese PLA accelerate its liberation of Xinjiang, but also promised to offer material assistance.³⁹ It is possible that Stalin's concession was aimed at winning a favorable bargaining position on the question of Manchuria.

The real conflict between the Soviet Union and China occurred over Manchuria. The fate of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance signed in 1945 depended largely on what would become of Soviet privileges in this northeastern part of China. Mao, as the founder of the new Communist Chinese state, wanted to abolish unequal treaties in order to reaffirm China's national sovereignty. Stalin, on the other hand, did his best to maintain key Soviet positions in East Asia, including Manchuria. Considering the sensitivity of the matter, both sides proceeded cautiously in their discussions about the 1945 Sino-Soviet Treaty. Mikoyan sent a report to the Soviet Politburo acknowledging that the treaty was unequal and agreeing to abolish it after signing a peace treaty with Japan. The Soviet Union would withdraw its army from Lushun if the CCP thought it necessary. The Soviet Union also agreed to reconsider the status of the Chinese Eastern Railroad. Mao told Mikoyan that he would establish a special committee to formulate a proposal. Both sides approached the treaty negotiations without undue agitation. Mikoyan felt that Mao "had his own considerations, but he did not speak out."⁴⁰

Dal'nego vostoka, Nos. 1–2 (1992), p. 87; and Andrei Ledovskii, "Sekretnaya missiya Mikoyana v Kitai (Part I)," *Problemy Dal'nego vostoka*, No. 2 (1995), p. 107. Shi Zhe, Mao's Russian language interpreter, refused to acknowledge that Mao asked Mikoyan about the issue of Mongolia, but he admitted that Liu Shaoqi did raise the issue of Mongolia in the name of nongovernmental persons during his visit in Moscow in July 1949. Li Haiwen, "A Distortion of History: An Interview with Shi Zhe about Kovalev's Recollections," *Chinese Historians*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall 1992), pp. 59–64. 38. Ledovskii, "Sekretnaya missiya (Part I)," p. 106; and Kovalev, "Istoriya i sovremennost'," p. 87. 39. Deng Liqun, "Before and After the Liberation of Xinjiang: A Chapter in Sino-Soviet Relations," *Jindai shi yanjiu* (Modern Chinese History Studies, Beijing), No. 5 (1989), pp. 143–150; Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 70.

40. See Ledovskii, "Sekretnaya missiya (Part I)," pp. 106–107; A. Ledovskii, "Sekretnaya missiya Mikoyana v Kitai (Part II)," *Problemy Dal'nego vostoka* (Moscow), No. 3 (1995), p. 101.

Liu Shaoqi raised the issue of the Sino-Soviet treaty again when he visited Moscow in July 1949. Liu, on behalf of the CCP, proposed three alternatives: The Chinese Communist state could declare the original treaty still in effect; it could negotiate a new Sino-Soviet treaty; or it could maintain the status quo and revise the treaty at a suitable time in the future. Stalin was not pleased by Liu's proposal. He explained the conditions under which the treaty was signed, and he explained why the Soviet Union had stationed its troops in Port Lushun. Then he promised that the Soviet Union would withdraw its troops from Lushun immediately if China so desired. Finally, Stalin stated that the three options put forward by Liu should wait until Mao himself visited Moscow.⁴¹ It was clear that Stalin did not want to revise the original treaty. As numerous scholars have suggested, the proposed withdrawal of Soviet troops from Lushun was more a threat than a conciliatory gesture. If China had accepted the offer, the Soviet Union would have considered this an indication of open hostility.⁴² Liu had no choice but to drop the issue for the time being.

When Mao arrived in Moscow for celebrations of Stalin's birthday in December 1949, his real purpose was to sign a new Sino-Soviet treaty. He made these intentions clear in Zhou's telegram to Moscow and through a report to Stalin by Ivan Kovalev, the Soviet leader's personal envoy to China.⁴³ Stalin made it equally clear that he was not prepared to agree. According to the minutes of the 16 December meeting between Mao and Stalin, Mao raised the issue, and Stalin at first seemed willing to discuss it. But then Stalin immediately added that it would be better "not to modify any of the points of this treaty for now" because it was concluded in the spirit of the Yalta accords. Stalin also said that he would prefer to withdraw Soviet troops from Port Lushun "while formally maintaining the provisions of the treaty."⁴⁴ According to Mao's telegram to Liu Shaoqi after the talks, Mao told Stalin that the original treaty had become meaningless after the collapse of the GMD regime. Stalin then suggested that the Soviet Union would revise the treaty in two years.⁴⁵

Mao was extremely disappointed with the results of the talks. He spoke with Kovalev on 22 December and asked him to apprise Stalin of two considerations: that the Sino-Soviet treaty was of great importance, and that negotia-

41. Hu Qiaomu, *Hu Qiaomu huiyi Mao Zedong* (Hu Qiaomu Remembers Mao Zedong) (Beijing: People's Press, 1994), pp. 550–551.

42. Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 68.

43. Boris Kulik, "Kitaiskaya Narodnaya Respublika v period stanovleniya, 1949–1952," *Problemy Dal'nego vostoka*, No. 6 (1994), p. 76. Also see Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 83.

44. See "Stalin's Conversations with Chinese Leaders," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 6–7 (Winter 1995/1996), p. 5.

45. Pei Jianzhang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi, 1949–1956* (A Diplomatic History of the People's Republic of China, 1949–1956) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi, 1994), pp. 17–18.

tions on a new treaty should continue.⁴⁶ But Stalin disappointed Mao once more by not mentioning the subject in their second conversation on 24 December.⁴⁷ Thereafter, Stalin declined to meet with Mao, and the Chinese leader ended up having to spend long stretches by himself at a luxurious villa in Moscow. The deadlock was not broken until 2 January 1950, when Stalin finally began to relent in his opposition to a new treaty. At the Soviet leader's behest, Vyacheslav Molotov and Mikoyan visited Mao on the evening of 2 January to ask for his views on the Sino-Soviet treaty. Mao presented them with three new options: signing a new Sino-Soviet treaty; issuing a joint statement by the two governments and thus making public their differing opinions; or signing a declaration highlighting the general tenor of Sino-Soviet relations. Molotov declared his willingness to accept the first option immediately.⁴⁸

The timing of this concession was not accidental. Odd Arne Westad has argued on the basis of Russian archival sources that Stalin was worried that a continuous deadlock over the issue would seriously damage Sino-Soviet relations. Because Mao had repeatedly asked to negotiate a new treaty, Stalin sensed that it would hurt the CCP if Mao left Moscow empty-handed.⁴⁹ Such a development might even create a rift between the two countries. Stalin was increasingly willing to accept Mikoyan's contention that a new Sino-Soviet treaty would not irreparably harm Moscow's interests. Mao's unyielding attitude also affected Stalin. On 1 January 1950 the CCP leader told the Soviet ambassador, Nikolai Roshchin, that he wanted to return to China ahead of schedule on the pretext of feeble health.⁵⁰ The following day, Mao publicly declared in a TASS press service interview that the primary aim of his visit was to sign a new Sino-Soviet treaty. He further declared that his "stay in Moscow depends partially on when the various problems concerning the interests of the PRC are resolved."⁵¹ These events were taking place at a time when Burma, India and, most important of all, Great Britain had expressed a willingness to recognize and establish diplomatic relations with the PRC.⁵² After assessing the international situation, Stalin found it necessary to change his attitude toward negotiating a new Sino-Soviet treaty.

46. Kovalev, "Istoriya i sovremennost," pp. 88–89.

47. Pei Jianzhang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi*, p. 19.

48. Shi Zhe, *Zai lisbi juren shenbian*, p. 440; and *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* (Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1992), Vol. 1, p. 212.

49. Odd Arne Westad, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and the United States: War, Politics, and Perceptions, 1950–1961," paper presented to the Cold War International History Project (CWIHP) conference on "The Cold War and Asia," Hong Kong, January 1996.

50. Kulik, "People's Republic," p. 76.

51. *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, Vol. 1, p. 206.

52. Pei Jianzhang, *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiao shi*, pp. 96, 120, 308.

When Stalin finally agreed to hold talks, Mao made clear that he would take Soviet interests into account. In a conversation with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinskii on 6 January, Mao stressed that “he increasingly believed that a new Sino-Soviet treaty should be signed” because the majority of the Chinese people were not satisfied with the old Sino-Soviet treaty. Vyshinskii replied that the question was a difficult one “because the United States and Britain might make use of this opportunity to revise some provisions, which would hurt both Moscow and Beijing. This is what we would hate to see and what we cannot allow to take place.” Mao replied immediately: “It is certain that we should give attention to this matter when we seek to resolve the situation.”⁵³ During a conversation with Kovalev on 9 January, Mao reiterated that China would abide by all the agreements signed at Yalta, Teheran, and Potsdam.⁵⁴ Finally, on 22 January 1950, Stalin informed Mao that they could begin negotiating a new Sino-Soviet treaty.⁵⁵

To make up for what the Soviet Union would lose by signing the treaty, Stalin insisted on signing a secret supplementary agreement stipulating that the Far Eastern and Central Asian parts of the Soviet Union, northeastern China, and Xinjiang “should not be leased to any other foreign country and no citizens and investment should be allowed to participate in industrial, financial, commercial and any governmental or non-governmental organs in these regions.”⁵⁶ Because no “foreign country” or “foreign citizen” could have imagined “leasing” the territory of the Soviet Union, it is apparent that this proposed agreement was directed at Manchuria and Xinjiang.

During the negotiations, Soviet officials agreed to return the Chinese Eastern Railway and Lushun to China after a peace treaty with Japan had been signed. Stalin claimed that this was an enormous concession, one that could potentially jeopardize the Soviet Union’s strategic position in the Far East. The Soviet Union had achieved a major coup in 1945 by gaining access to the Pacific Ocean and control over a warm-water port. Stalin had contrasted the 1945 victory with Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, declaring that the Russians had waited forty years to end their humiliation.⁵⁷ The new Sino-Soviet Treaty made Stalin reconsider his overall Far East policy and forced him to seek new means of maintaining Soviet interests in the area.

53. Kulik, “People’s Republic,” p. 77.

54. See Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, pp. 247–248.

55. “Zapis’ besedy I.V. Stalina s Predsedatelem Tsentral’nogo Narodnogo Pravitel’sva Kitaiskoi Narodnoi Respubliki Mao-Tsze-Dunom,” 22 January 1950, APRF, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 329, Ll. 29–38.

56. Pei Jianzhang, *Zhonghua renmin gongbequo waijiaoshi*, p. 25.

57. Zhonggong Zhongyang Bianyiju (Central Translation and Editing Office, Chinese Communist Party), *Selected Works of Stalin* (Beijing: People’s Press, 1962), Vol. 2, pp. 438–439.

With these considerations in mind, Stalin began to develop a new strategy for Northeast Asia. The Korean peninsula suddenly loomed attractive, as it could provide the Soviet Union with access to a Pacific warm-water port. If North Korea occupied South Korea, the Soviet Union could control the whole of the Korean peninsula, and the ports of Inchon and Pusan would replace Lushun. As early as March 1949 the Soviet Union and North Korea agreed to build a railroad linking Aoji in Korea and Kraskino in the Soviet Union. The expectation was that this railroad would eventually replace the Chinese Eastern Railway.⁵⁸ If the North Koreans lost in their attack on South Korea, China would be forced to ask the Soviet Union to retain its troops in Lushun and Dalian. In either case, Stalin would be the victor.

Stalin had long understood the strategic importance of the Korean peninsula for Soviet security interests. The department of the Soviet Foreign Ministry responsible for the Far East sent a report to the negotiators of the Potsdam Conference on 29 June 1945, pointing out the significance of the Korea issue. The report declared that the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, aimed at curbing Japanese expansion onto the Asian continent, was “a historically justified act.” It further argued that “Japan must be forever excluded from Korea, since a Korea under Japanese rule would be a threat to the eastern territories of the USSR.” The report concluded:

Korean independence must be effective enough to prevent Korea from being turned into a staging ground for future aggression against the USSR not only from Japan, but also from any other power that would attempt to put pressure on the USSR from the east. The surest guarantee of the independence of Korea and the security of the USSR in the Far East would be the establishment of friendly and close relations between the USSR and Korea.⁵⁹

In essence, Soviet leaders believed that they had to try to prevent South Korea from becoming a springboard for military action on the Asian continent.

In the late 1940s, the Soviet Union placed special weight on several strategic areas in the southern part of the Korean peninsula and linked these areas with Lushun in China. A newly declassified document from the Russian archives reveals that in September 1945 the Soviet Union asked that “the island Kvel’part [Chejudo] be placed in the Chinese occupation zone,” arguing that this would “motivate Chinese interest in strengthening the strategic position of

58. “Zapisi besed I.V. Stalina s koreiskimi tovarishchami,” 5 March 1949, APRF, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 346, Ll. 13–23.

59. Zhukov and Zabrodin, “Koreya: Spravka,” 29 June 1945, AVPRF, F. 0430, Op. 2, D. 18, Pap. 5, Ll. 18–30.

the Soviet-Chinese military-naval base at Port Arthur.” The Soviet document also affirmed that, upon the conclusion of the occupation regime (presumably after two years), “Korea must become a trust territory of the four powers, with the apportionment of three strategic regions: Pusan (Tsinkai), Kvel’part Island (Saisiu), and Chemul’po (Dzinsen) [Inchon], which must be controlled by the Soviet military command.” The report concluded that by

insisting on giving the USSR jurisdiction over strategic regions in Korea, we can exert pressure on the American positions and take advantage of [Washington’s] desire to obtain strategic regions in the Pacific Ocean. If the proposal to grant the Soviet Union these strategic regions in Korea is met with opposition, it is possible to propose joint Soviet-Chinese control over the strategic regions.⁶⁰

Another report in September 1945 added that:

In the agreement that affixes the conditions of the four-power trusteeship over Korea, the apportionment of the following strategic regions must be provided for, in accordance with article 82 of the United Nations Charter: Pusan and Tsinkai, Kvel’part Island, Dzinsen (Chemul’po). These regions are of fundamental importance in securing dependable sea communications and approaches to the Soviet military-naval base at Port Arthur, which is in joint use with the Chinese Republic, and must be subject to special military oversight by the Government of the USSR, in accordance with the provisions of the UN Charter.⁶¹

After signing the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in August 1945 and the Soviet-American agreement to divide Korea along the 38th parallel, Stalin felt that Soviet strategic aims were satisfied for the time being. But after his meetings with Mao four years later, Stalin realized that the prospective return of Lushun to China would mean that Moscow would lose direct control of its only warm-water port in the Far East. Soviet strategic interests were again at stake. Stalin thus had greater interest than ever in gaining control of the strategic regions on the Korean peninsula.

Russia had a long tradition of adjusting its Far Eastern policy to suit changing international situations. After the humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, the Tsarist government reevaluated its whole stance in East Asia. Tsarist officials began to encourage an independence movement in

60. “Notes on the Question of Former Japanese Colonies and Mandated Territories,” September 1945, cited in Kathryn Weathersby’s “Soviet Aims in Korea and the Origins of the Korean War, 1945–1950: New Evidence from Russian Archives,” for Working Paper No. 8, Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, 1993. pp. 9–10.

61. “Proposal on Korea,” September 1945 in Weathersby, “Soviet Aims in Korea,” pp. 10–11.

Mongolia and then negotiated a compromise agreement with Japan in which Russia acknowledged Japan's special position in Korea in exchange for Japan's acknowledgment of a Russian "sphere of influence" in Mongolia.⁶² In 1950, when Stalin shifted the emphasis of Soviet foreign policy in East Asia from the retention of Lushun to the pursuit of new warm-water ports in Korea, he was following the precedent set by his Tsarist predecessors.

The Calculations Underlying Stalin's Policy Toward Korea

During the early stages of the Cold War, Stalin adhered to three basic principles in U.S.-Soviet relations. First, he avoided open confrontation with the United States. Although he believed that conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union was inevitable, and although he never excluded the possibility of an eventual war, he was cautious because he realized that Soviet military and economic inferiority meant that any open clash with the West would likely result in Soviet defeat. The Berlin crisis of 1948–1949 had highlighted Soviet weaknesses. Stalin drew lessons from that conflict and decided that supplies of weaponry and military support to North Korea would have to be provided secretly. Although he supported Kim Il Sung's military plans, Stalin refused to allow Soviet military personnel to participate in the war directly. On 20 June 1950, Shtykov sent Moscow an urgent telegram: "Kim Il Sung has asked me to communicate the following: ships are needed for the attack and landing. Two ships have arrived, but we have not been able to prepare crews. He also requests ten Soviet advisers. I believe this request should be satisfied." Stalin replied two days later: "Your proposal is rejected. It would provide grounds for interference."⁶³ The Soviet Union became even more cautious after the outbreak of the Korean War five days later.

Second, Stalin always carefully assessed the probability of U.S. intervention in a conflict. He grew anxious about the possibility of a U.S. response to tensions in Korea in the summer of 1949, and he urged Kim Il Sung and the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang to evaluate the situation. Kim Il Sung believed that the United States would not intervene directly. He argued that the United States would do little more than provide Seoul with air and naval support and help out with coordination of a defense.⁶⁴ Stalin, however, was much less

62. Zhongong Zhongyang Bianyiju, *A Collection of Lenin's Works* (Beijing: People's Press, 1990), Vol. 54, p. 777.

63. Dmitri Volkogonov, "Sleduet li etogo boyat'sya?" *Ogonek* (Moscow), No. 26 (June 1993), p. 28.

64. Telegram from Vyshinskii to Tunkin, 11 September 1949, SD00246; and Telegram from Tunkin to Vyshinskii, 14 September 1949, SD00247.

sanguine. Nevertheless, Acheson's January 1950 speech excluding Korea from America's defense perimeter in the western Pacific seemed to confirm Kim's assessment. Stalin therefore agreed to meet the North Korean leader in Moscow to discuss the plans for an attack on the South. According to Mun Il, Kim Il Sung's interpreter during his visit to Moscow in April 1950, Kim cited four factors when he explained to Stalin why the United States would not intervene: first, the North Koreans would launch a decisive surprise attack; second, the war would be won within three days; third, an uprising by 200,000 Communist party members in South Korea would coincide with the North's attack; and fourth, the guerrillas in the southern provinces would support the Korean People's Army. Thus the United States would not have sufficient time to intervene.⁶⁵ Stalin finally seemed convinced. After Kim's secret visit, Stalin approved the military plans. Yu Song-chol, the minister for military operations of the Korean People's Army, took part in the war preparations. In the early 1990s, he recalled that Soviet military advisers planned for an operation that would take only four days, since they assumed that the war would be over once the People's Army took Seoul.⁶⁶ Soviet leaders clearly assumed that the United States would have no time to intervene once the Korean War began.

Third, Stalin considered what would happen if the United States did in fact intervene. His general strategy was to involve China. In discussions with Kim Il Sung, Stalin repeatedly stressed the need to obtain Mao's consent for an attack on South Korea. Mikhail Kapitsa, a long-time Soviet Foreign Ministry official responsible for East Asia, remembers that in the final conversation between Stalin and Kim in April 1950, the Soviet leader urged Kim to consult Mao again. Stalin warned: "If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger. You have to ask Mao for all the help."⁶⁷ Stalin cabled Mao on 14 May and told him that Moscow had agreed to Kim's proposal for military action, but that the final decision rested with China and North Korea. If the Chinese were reluctant, the matter had to be postponed.⁶⁸ Stalin was clearly seeking to force China to bear responsibility for the defense of North Korea if the United States intervened in the conflict.

65. Weathersby, "The Soviet Role," p. 433.

66. Vladimir Petrov, "Soviet Role in the Korean War Confirmed: Secret Documents Declassified," *Journal of Northeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 63–67; and Kim Chullbaum, *The Truth about the Korean War*, pp. 143–155.

67. Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 145; and also see Kim Chullbaum, *The Truth about the Korean War*, p. 106.

68. "Shifrtelgramma," from Stalin to Mao, 14 May 1950, in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 4 (Fall 1994), p. 61.

At the time, Stalin was facing two potential conflicts in East Asia. On the one hand, Kim Il Sung needed Moscow's permission and assistance for an attack on South Korea. On the other hand, Mao hoped for Soviet military aid in his campaign to "liberate" Taiwan. For Stalin, the decision between the two was not difficult. A unified Korea would be firmly under Soviet control, whereas a China victorious in Taiwan would be a potential rival for Soviet influence in the Far East. While Kim Il Sung needed only Soviet military assistance, Mao needed direct air and naval support for the Taiwan campaign, particularly after the PLA's failed invasion of Jinmen Island in October 1949.⁶⁹ Because Stalin wanted both to unify the Korean peninsula and to keep China under Soviet influence, the Korean operation seemed a perfect means of achieving both ends. He surmised that the outbreak of the Korean War would prevent China from attacking Taiwan and, at the same time, would place China's military at the service of Soviet strategy. Stalin knew that Mao was reluctant to intervene in Korea before the CCP had consolidated its power and regained control of Taiwan. Hence, Stalin had to ensure that China would actively support the North Korean Communists before he approved Kim's invasion plans.

Questions about China's Policy

Mao's reaction to the Soviet and North Korean plans is now better understood because of newly available evidence. Four questions regarding Mao's strategic thinking can now be provisionally answered.

First, did China specifically endorse Kim Il Sung's military action against the South? As early as May 1949, Kim Il Sung sent Kim Il, the director of the PLA's Political Department, on a secret visit to Beijing. Kim Il met four times with two high-ranking officials, Zhu De and Zhou Enlai, and saw Mao once. He discussed several matters with the Chinese leaders: the transfer of ethnic Korean soldiers serving in the PLA to North Korea, the situation on the Korean peninsula in general, and the possibility of establishing a Far Eastern Communist Intelligence Bureau. Two reports on these conversations have been found in the Russian archives: one written by Shtykov in Pyongyang and the other written by Kovalev in Beijing. Their contents are not identical. The Shtykov report, written from Kim's perspective, declared that Mao not

69. For discussions about the PLA's failed invasion of the GMD-controlled Jinmen (Quemoy) Island in October 1949 and its impact on Mao's Taiwan strategy, see He Di, "The Last Campaign to Unify China: The CCP's Unrealized Campaign to Liberate Taiwan," *Chinese Historians*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1992), pp. 1–16; and see also Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, chap. 4.

only supported Pyongyang's military plan, but also promised to offer military aid. By contrast, the Kovalev report states that Mao asked the North "not to launch a military attack until the moment was favorable." According to Kovalev, Mao explained that China could not assist North Korea until the Chinese revolution was complete, and then the matter had to be discussed with the Soviet Union.⁷⁰ A conversation between Tunkin and Kim Il Sung on 12 September 1949 makes clear that Kovalev's report was more accurate. Tunkin reported that when he asked Kim "how the population will view the situation if the North were to begin a civil war," Kim Il Sung "vacillated." Kim also informed Tunkin about Mao's comment to Kim Il that "the Northerners should not begin military action now, since in the first place, it is politically disadvantageous, and in the second place, the Chinese friends are occupied at home and cannot give them serious help."⁷¹ These statements show that Mao was reluctant to support Kim Il Sung's military plan.

Second, did the Chinese transfer of Korean soldiers from the PLA to North Korea mean that Mao had finally approved the North Korean attack on the South? Many Koreans were living in northeastern China, and many of them had joined the Chinese Communist forces in the war against Japan and in the Chinese civil war. Some of them returned to Korea when the war against Japan was over. After Kim Il's conversation with Mao in the spring of 1949, the CCP sent instructions to Gao Gang, the commander of PLA forces in the northeast, to send two PLA divisions of Korean soldiers based in Shenyang and Changchun back to North Korea. These two divisions went to North Korea in July and August of 1949. Then, in early 1950, Kim Il Sung dispatched a senior official, Kim Kwang Hyop, to Beijing to request that China send all remaining Korean PLA soldiers back to North Korea. Approximately 23,000 Korean soldiers returned from the PLA to North Korea in the spring of 1950.⁷² Nevertheless, none of these decisions offers solid evidence that Mao supported Kim Il Sung's plans to attack the South. The main reason Mao allowed the Korean soldiers to return to North Korea is that he had sympathy for Kim Il Sung's regime. Moreover, at the time, China's economy was in trouble. Military expenditures amounted to 60 percent of government spend-

70. Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 15 May 1949, SD00231; and Telegram from Kovalev to Filippov, 18 May 1949, APRF, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 331, Ll. 59–61.

71. "Shifrtelgramma," from Tunkin to Soviet Foreign Ministry, 14 September 1949, SD00247. For an English translation of this document, see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 5 (Spring 1995), p. 7.

72. "Shifrtelgramma," to Shtykov, 8 January 1950, SD00257; and Telegram from Shtykov, 11 January 1950, SD00258. See also Nie Rongzhen, *Niu Rongzhen buiyilu* (Memoirs of Nie Rongzhen) (Beijing: Jiefangjun, 1982), p. 774; and Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, pp. 109–110.

ing (or more, if indirect military expenditures are taken into account).⁷³ Demobilization was necessary now that the civil war was over and the revolution was being consolidated. Sending Korean Chinese soldiers back to Korea solved part of the problem.

Third, did Stalin and Mao discuss Kim Il Sung's military plan against South Korea in Moscow? A.M. Ledovskii, a scholar working in the Far East Academy of Sciences of the Soviet Union, states that he saw two telegrams between Mao and Stalin in mid-October 1949 in the Russian Presidential Archive. In the first telegram, Mao told Stalin that North Korea wanted to solve the Korean question through military force, and that China had tried to persuade Kim not to do so. In a reply to Mao, Stalin said he agreed with Mao's approach. Stalin emphasized that the North Korean Communists were not yet ready for war, and that the best course of action was to organize guerilla forces in South Korea.⁷⁴ A number of other documents now reveal that Mao and Stalin did *not* explicitly touch on military options in Korea, although they did speak about the general situation on the peninsula. When Mao was still in Moscow in early 1950, Stalin and Kim Il Sung discussed Kim's military plans by telegram, and Stalin then invited Kim to visit the Soviet Union. But there is no evidence that Stalin mentioned these exchanges to Mao.

Fourth, what was Mao's own attitude toward the Korean issue during Kim Il Sung's visit to Beijing in May 1950? According to Russian documents, Kim Il Sung told Stalin before the visit that he had decided to visit Beijing on 13 May. Kim planned to inform Mao both of North Korea's intention to attack the South and of the results of his discussions with Stalin. Kim also stated that he did not need China's aid, because he had already received what he needed in Moscow.⁷⁵ The North Korean leader flew to Beijing on 13 May and met with Chinese officials that evening. As yet, no notes from the meeting are available. According to Roshchin's report to Moscow, however, the meeting did not go smoothly. Zhou Enlai went to the Soviet Embassy just before midnight to confirm Kim Il Sung's claim that Stalin's attitude toward Korea had changed. Zhou stressed that Mao Zedong wished Comrade Filippov (Stalin) to clarify the situation personally. Roshchin sent an urgent telegram to Moscow specifying Zhou's query and noting that "the Chinese comrades request

73. Chen Yun, "Overcome Serious Financial Difficulties," 8 August 1949; and "No Government Bonds to Supplement Financial Deficit," 2 December 1949, *Zhonghua renmin gonghegong jingji dang'an ziliao xuanbian, 1949-1951* (Selected Economic Records from the Archives of the People's Republic of China, 1949-1951) (Beijing: Zhongguo chengshi shehui jingji, 1990), pp. 114-115, 117, 120.

74. Author's interview with A. Ledovskii, 31 July 1996, Moscow.

75. Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinskii, 12 May 1950, AVPRF, F. 059a, Op. 5a, D. 3, Pap. 11, ll. 100-103.

an urgent answer.”⁷⁶ By all indications, the Chinese did not believe Kim Il Sung’s claim that Stalin had come around in support of North Korea’s plans.

But the next day, Stalin confirmed that Kim Il Sung was correct. Vyshinskii sent the following telegram to Mao:

In his conversation with the Korean comrades, Filippov and his friends expressed the view that, in light of the changed international situation, they support the Korean move toward reunification. We agreed that, in the end, the question should be decided by our Chinese and Korean comrades. If our Chinese comrades disagree, the decision on the question should be postponed for further discussion.⁷⁷

After receiving this telegram, Mao threw his support behind Kim’s military plan. At the same time, the Chinese accelerated their preparations for a Taiwan campaign. In a report to the Third Plenary Session of the CCP’s Seventh Central Committee in early June, Su Yu asked the Central Military Commission (CMC) to oversee the Taiwan operation. By 23 June 1950, the CMC on three occasions had changed the plan for an invasion of Taiwan. The number of PLA units that were to be involved in the Taiwan campaign had been increased to 16 armies.⁷⁸ Mao was clearly hoping to complete the Taiwan campaign before Kim Il Sung launched an invasion of South Korea.

In sum, Stalin cleverly manipulated the Chinese position on Korea. Stalin knew that Mao would be opposed to taking military action on the peninsula in the near term. The reconquest of Taiwan, as Stalin was well aware, was the CCP leader’s top priority. But Stalin also knew that the Chinese Communists wanted Soviet aid for the Taiwan campaign.⁷⁹ The Soviet leader took three crucial steps to force China to consent to a North Korean military attack. First, he refrained from discussing the matter directly with Mao and instead dealt with Kim Il Sung. Second, he asked Kim Il Sung to inform Mao of the decision to go forward with an attack against the South. Faced with this fait accompli, Mao could only acquiesce. Finally, Stalin did not divulge any details about North Korea’s military preparations and operational plans to China.⁸⁰ The Soviet Union and China had no further discussions on Korea before the outbreak of the Korean War.

76. “Shifrtelgramma,” from Roshchin to Filippov, 13 May 1950, SD00278. For the English translation of this document, see *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 4 (Fall 1994), p. 61.

77. “Shifrtelgramma,” from Filippov to Mao, 14 May 1950, APRF, F. 45, Op. 1, D. 331, Ll. 55. Translated in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, No. 4 (Fall 1994), p. 61.

78. He Di, “The Last Campaign to Unify China,” pp. 14–15.

79. M.S. Kapitsa recalls that the Soviet Union knew Mao’s objection to Kim’s plan; see Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 147.

80. A high-ranking North Korean officer recalled that all the military equipment provided by Mos-

All this suggests that Stalin did not trust Mao and that a rift between China and the Soviet Union was already emerging. Stalin had two particular concerns about China's policy toward Korea. First, he was afraid that Mao would openly oppose any action against the South. Second, he worried that Beijing would not shoulder the burden if something unexpected were to occur.⁸¹ The three steps adopted by Stalin alleviated those concerns. The Soviet Union ensured that it would retain its strategic position in the Far East, regardless of whether the Korean War proceeded smoothly.

Conclusion

By 1950, the Korean peninsula was on the brink of war. Stalin decided to provoke a crisis to preserve Soviet strategic interests in the Far East and to thwart U.S. influence in the region. The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance signed in February 1950 threatened crucial Soviet privileges in the Far East, privileges that Stalin gained at the Yalta conference and in the treaty he had signed with Jiang Jieshi's GMD government. These privileges included Lushun, Dalian, and the Chinese Eastern Railway, all of which provided access routes to warm-water ports in the Pacific. To retain Soviet control of warm-water ports, Stalin approved Kim's military plans in early 1950 and thus condoned a large-scale war on the Korean peninsula.

The shift in Stalin's Korea policy was intimately connected with evolving Sino-Soviet relations, revealing Stalin's complicated attitude toward the newly established Chinese Communist state. The Soviet leader certainly understood that the addition of China to the Communist camp meant that the balance of power in East Asia shifted from the United States to the Soviet Union. But Stalin also feared that China's emergence as a Communist power could challenge the Soviet Union's dominant position in the international Communist movement. Stalin's new policy toward Korea not only served Soviet strategic interests in the Far East, but also limited the growing power of the PRC. Stalin thus accomplished his two main objectives in one fell swoop.

cow to Pyongyang went by sea. The purpose was to keep China away. See Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, pp. 153, 163.

81. Actually, Stalin did not have to worry about the latter scenario. He changed his view of Mao when China decided to help North Korea despite facing a disadvantageous situation. Moscow and Beijing started their real cooperation after China's entry into the war, as I will discuss in a subsequent article.