



## New insights into Mao's initial strategic consideration towards the Korean War intervention

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## New insights into Mao's initial strategic consideration towards the Korean War intervention

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### ABSTRACT

The argument that the US army's crossing of the 38th parallel compelled China's intervention has been widely accepted in the West. However, as the US manoeuvre posed a major threat to the political and ideological foundations of the CCP regime in the early period of the Korean War, Mao Zedong wanted to send troops to assist North Korea's quick victory. However, this was not realised because of Stalin's negative position. Mao's stance shows that his overriding criteria for intervention was not whether US forces would cross the 38th parallel, but whether their dispatch helped to solidify the CCP regime and if the preconditions for victory existed.

### Introduction

The outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950, and the ensuing intervention by the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) intensified the Cold War and left the relationship between Washington and Beijing irreconcilable for decades. In comparison, Mao's decision to enter the Korean War assuaged Stalin's suspicions and strengthened Sino-Soviet ties. The crossing of the Yalu River on 19 October 1950 by Chinese troops was a historic event that shaped Sino-American relations and the Asian regional order until the PRC replaced the Taiwan Kuomintang (KMT) in the United Nations (UN) in 1971.

Research on China's intervention in the Korean War primarily developed with the declassification of relevant materials and has been greatly influenced by the US political-intellectual environment. It has been a long established view in the West that the US crossing of the 38th parallel posed an imminent threat to China's border security, which then

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compelled China to intervene in the Korean War.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, previous research has mainly focussed on discussions between Stalin and Mao regarding an intervention and strategic thinking about entering the war since the Incheon Landing Operation, while the Chinese leadership's attitude toward the Korean War and its influence on Chinese policymaking before the Incheon landing have received relatively less attention.

With the declassification of Chinese documents and memoirs from the early 1980s, research on the Chinese perspective in the early period of the Korean War has begun. Yao Xu argues that the prompt US engagement in the Korean War and Truman's announcement of dispatching of the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait made Mao confident that 'a major, direct Sino-U.S. confrontation was inevitable.'<sup>2</sup> Hao Yufan and Sergei Goncharov insist that when American troops pushed across the 38th parallel after the Incheon landing, Mao believed that a Sino-American war was inevitable and proactively selected the most favourable time and place.<sup>3</sup> Though there is a time difference in terms of when and why their claims were introduced, the aforementioned scholars all agree on the fact that even before US troops traversed the 38th parallel, Mao was convinced that both a war with the US and Chinese intervention were inevitable.

Furthermore, Chen Jian and Shen Zhihua argue that the 38th parallel was not a 'precondition' for China's intervention in the war. Chen Jian claims, 'Mao aimed to win a glorious victory by driving the Americans off the Korean peninsula', long before the Incheon landing. He also states that in late August, when Mao predicted the Incheon landing, he still considered sending troops to accelerate a KPA (Korean People's Army) victory, or, at least, to prevent a possible reversal.<sup>4</sup> Shen Zhihua, in his latest research, asserts that 'Washington's rapid intervention and announcement of dispatching of the 7th Fleet to protect Taiwan stirred Mao's revolutionary passion and war-mongering instinct'. Thus, he argues that Mao was considering a military intervention in the Korean War from as early as July, only days after its initiation, believing that 'the war with US had already begun.'<sup>5</sup> In fact, recent studies conclude that China hoped for an early participation in the Korean War but failed to do so due to opposition from Kim Il-sung and Stalin who were afraid of China's influence spreading on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>From the 1960s, Allen S. Whiting and others asserted that the US decision to cross the 38th parallel triggered China's intervention, arguing that Beijing's entry could have been averted, and that the war could have been concluded in the autumn of 1950 if US forces had refrained from crossing that line: Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 2–13, 159; Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980), 16–19; Gerald Segal, *Defending China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 92–9; Rosemary Foot, "Making Known the Unknown War: Policy Analysis of the Korean Conflict in the Last Decade," *Diplomatic History* 15, no. 3 (1991): 418–19; Qing Simei, "The U.S.-China Confrontation in Korea Assessment of Intentions in Time of Crisis," in *Northeast Asia and the Legacy of Harry S. Truman: Japan, China, and the two Koreas*, ed. James I. Matray (Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2012), 93–118.

<sup>2</sup>Yao Xu, *Cong Yalujiang dao Banmendian* (From the Yalu River to Panmunjom) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1985), 12, 21–2; However, Qing Simei insists that Mao, expecting America's Incheon Landing Operation, began to war preparations from July 1950. Qing, "The U.S.-China Confrontation in Korea," 104.

<sup>3</sup>Hao and Zhai, "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited," *China Quarterly* 121 (1990): 106, 108, 115; Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 216.

<sup>4</sup>Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 3, 154, 158–9.

<sup>5</sup>Shen Zhihua, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng* (Mao Zedong, Stalin and the Korean War) (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 2013), 321–2.

<sup>6</sup>Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 156; Goncharov et al., *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*, 163; William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 65; Shen, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng*, 262–3.

However, Russian archival material reveals that the Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai delivered, on 2 July 1950, stringent conditions for Chinese involvement to Stalin, i.e., US troops had to cross the 38th parallel and the Soviets had to provide air cover for Chinese troops.<sup>7</sup> This was the first condition put forth by the Chinese government after the outbreak of the Korean War, indicating that China was not enthusiastic about entering the Korean War unless the US posed a direct threat to China itself.

In July 1950, despite the entry of US ground forces into the Korean battlefield, the KPA unexpectedly won consecutive victories against them. In fact, by the end of July, the KPA occupied all of South Korea, except for the south-eastern tip along the Naktong River, i.e., the Pusan Perimeter. Since mid-July 1950, Mao reversed his initial position and began to send signals to Kim Il-sung and Stalin that China was ready to send troops.<sup>8</sup>

By late August 1950, Zhou Enlai stated that China established the Northeast Border Defence Army (NEBDA) to drive out the American forces into the sea and aid North Korea's early victory in July–August, verifying the firm determination of China's early intervention. Furthermore, when the war entered a deadlock in late August, China advised Kim Il-sung that 'the KPA should retreat tactically from the Naktong River so as to divide the enemies and defeat them one by one.' To realise this plan, China aggressively considered sending troops.<sup>9</sup> However, the plan did not materialise because of Stalin's ambivalent attitude.

With the successful American-led UN troops' landings at Incheon on 15 September 1950, Mao's eagerness to enter the war diminished. Mao adopted a new strategy of peace talks with the UN or of 'bluffing' by deploying Chinese troops near the Chinese-North Korea border to counter pre-emptively Washington's ambition to advance north of the 38th parallel.<sup>10</sup> In addition, when Stalin and Kim Il-sung, on 1 October 1950, requested China's military intervention, Mao notified them that China would not dispatch troops, because of 'China's inferior military equipment', 'the possibility of expanding a Third World War', 'the negative consequences in China's domestic affairs' and 'the opposition of the majority the CPC's Central Committee members.'<sup>11</sup>

This essay, by employing recently declassified Russian and Chinese archival documents and China's *Neibu Cankao* (Internal Reference), sheds light on China's attitude towards the Korean War prior to the American troops' crossing of the 38th parallel. Specifically, it analyses the shift from a reluctant attitude toward intervention to an eager one, presenting a new interpretation of this transition. It also discusses the reasons behind Stalin's reserved attitude toward China's early intervention. Mao earnestly desired China's intervention in the Korean War, not because of the inevitability of war with the US, the desire to spread

<sup>7</sup>Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 3 July 1950, *Arkhiv Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Archive of the President of the Russian Federation] (hereafter APRF), fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 331, listy. 75–7; Anatoly Torkunov, *The War in Korea 1950–1953: Its Origin, Bloodshed and Conclusion* (Tokyo: ICF, 2000), 92–3.

<sup>8</sup>Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 20 July 1950, *Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Russian Federation Ministry of Defence Central Archive] (hereafter TsAMO), fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 352–5; Torkunov, *The War in Korea 1950–1953*, 94–5.

<sup>9</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi and Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junshi kexueyuan, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* (Collection of Zhou Enlai's Military Manuscripts) Vol. 4 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1997), 44–5.

<sup>10</sup>Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 18 September 1950, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 331, listy. 123–6.

<sup>11</sup>Mao's verbal message to Stalin via Roshchin, 3 October 1950, *Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii* [Russian State Archives on Social-Political History] (hereafter RGASPI), fond. 558, opis. 11, delo. 334, listy. 105–6; On October 3 1950, Mao received Kim Il-sung's envoy Pak Il-u, and informed him that 'we will do whatever we can, but we can't send troops', reaffirming China's non-intervention position: telegram from a representative of the Soviet Army in Pyongyang to Stalin, 7 October 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 121, listy. 705–6.

the Chinese Revolution to Asia and the world, nor Mao's revolutionary passion and war-mongering instinct, but rather because of his desire to minimise the negative fallout of the Korean War on China's domestic politics. Mao also wanted to take advantage of the KPA's victories during the initial period of the war and, therefore, to set the course for the conflict's early conclusion. The political circumstances of China at that time included much public concern about a possible war between the US and China and the rumoured return of Taiwan's Chiang Kai-shek, which gravely undermined the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ideological and political foundations.

The author argues that the US crossing of the 38th parallel was not a decisive strategic consideration for China's intervention in the Korean War; rather, the practical domestic need to strengthen the CCP's legitimacy through an early victory in a war in its own 'backyard' was fundamental.

### PRC policy on the Korean peninsula before the outbreak of the war

Prior to the establishment of the PRC in October 1949, the CCP regarded the recovery of industrial productivity and economic development as primary national priorities. Afterwards, on 16 December 1949, Mao, in a meeting with Stalin in Moscow, argued,

The most important question at the present time is the question of establishing peace. China needs a period of 3–5 years of peace in order to return China's economy to pre-war levels and to stabilise the country in general.<sup>12</sup>

In this context, 'the establishment of stable environment favourable to economic development was the primary goal of Chinese diplomacy'.<sup>13</sup>

In line with this logic, Mao, like Stalin, opposed Kim Il-sung's attack on South Korea.<sup>14</sup> In May 1949, Mao received Kim Il-sung's emissary Kim Il, advising him 'do not attack South Korea' but

wait for a more suitable situation because MacArthur might quickly move Japanese troops and weapons to Korea during this attack. The CCP cannot give quick, substantial support, since all our main forces have withdrawn beyond the Yangtze River.

While agreeing to repatriate three ethnic Korean divisions in the PLA to North Korea, Mao even stated that if the South, with the support of the Americans or Japanese, attacked the North, the North should 'exhibit caution', and 'not fight back but preserve its army, even if part of the North Korea's territory is sacrificed'. Finally, Mao added,

in the early 1950s, if the international situation becomes favorable to North Korea's attack on the South, then actions can be taken ... At that time, in the event of an invasion of the South

<sup>12</sup>Record of Conversation between Stalin and Mao Zedong, 16 December 1949, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 329, listy. 9–17.

<sup>13</sup>Jin Chongji, *Mao Zedong zhuan: 1949–1976* [Biography of Mao Zedong: 1949–1976] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyong Wenxian Chubanshe, 2003), 545.

<sup>14</sup>On March 7 1949, Stalin turned down Kim's request to attack South Korea on the ground that, first, 'the KPA does not have an overwhelming superiority over the troops of the South.' Second, 'there are still American troops in the South that will interfere in case of hostilities.' Third, 'the agreement on the 38th parallel is in effect between the USSR and the United States.' Stalin permitted a counterattack only in the case of South Korea attacking: see Evgenii P. Bajanov, *Aktual'nye Problemy: Mezhdunarodnykh Otnosheniy* [Present Problems: International Relations] Vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauchnaya Kniga, 2002), 37; Politburo decision to confirm the following directive to the Soviet ambassador in Korea, 24 September 1949, APRF, fond. 3, opis. 65, delo. 771, listy. 30–2; Donggil Kim, 'Stalin's Korean U-Turn: The USSR's Evolving Security Strategy and the Origins of the Korean War,' *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 24, no. 1 (2011): 89–114.

with the help of Japanese troops, we will be able to move quickly our troops and defeat the Japanese forces.<sup>15</sup>

In June 1949, the CCP drafted New China's basic economic blueprint, 'On the Economic Development Principles of New China', and sent a delegation, headed by Liu Shaoqi, to Moscow to request Soviet assistance.<sup>16</sup> Stalin promised a 300 million dollar loan and the dispatch 15 Soviet experts to aid China's economic development.<sup>17</sup> At the time, Liu promised that China would assume the main responsibility of aiding revolutionary movements in Asia.<sup>18</sup> However, even after the establishment of the PRC on 1 October 1949, China maintained its earlier stance of opposing North Korea's attack on South Korea. For example, in a telegram to Stalin of 21 October 1949, Mao expressed his disapproval of a Northern invasion of the South, an opinion with which Stalin concurred.<sup>19</sup>

On 30 January 1950, however, Stalin reversed his previous position and agreed to Kim Il-sung's proposal of a pre-emptive attack on South Korea.<sup>20</sup> However, Stalin's agreement had a condition: if the US intervened, Chinese rather than Soviet troops should aid North Korea.<sup>21</sup> At that time, Mao was not aware that Stalin had already agreed to Kim Il-sung's proposal to attack the South. At the end of March 1950, Mao received Lee Ju-yeon, North Korean ambassador to Beijing, informing him that

if Kim Il-sung intends to begin military operations against the South in the near future, then Kim Il-sung's visit should be organised secretly, but if he does not yet intend to do so, then the meeting with Kim Il-sung can be conducted officially.<sup>22</sup>

Zhou Enlai proposed that 'the meeting have an official character', demonstrating clearly that China was still opposed to military action against South Korea.<sup>23</sup>

On 3 May 1950, Stalin tersely informed Mao that 'Korean comrades visited us recently. I will inform you shortly about the results of the conversations.'<sup>24</sup> On 13 May 1950, Kim Il-sung visited Beijing with Park Heon-young, Foreign Minister of North Korea. Kim simply notified Mao of Stalin's directives that 'the present situation has changed from the situation in the past and, that North Korea can move toward actions; however, this question should be discussed with China and personally with comrade Mao Zedong'. Mao doubted whether

<sup>15</sup>Telegram from Kovalev to Stalin, 18 May 1949, APRF, fond. 4, opis. 01, delo. 333, listy. 59–61; Donggil Kim, 'Prelude to War? The repatriation of Koreans from the Chinese PLA, 1949–50,' *Cold War History* 12, no. 1 (2012): 227–44.

<sup>16</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian bianjuan weiyuanhui, *Liu shaoqi Xuanji* [Selected Works of Liu Shaoqi] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1981), 426–31; Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Liu Shaoqi nianpu: 1898–1949* [A Chronicle of Liu Shaoqi: 1898–1949] Vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), 215–17.

<sup>17</sup>Summary of conversation between Stalin and delegation of CC CCP, headed by Liu Shaoqi, 27 June 1949, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 01, delo. 329, listy. 1–7; On 30 July 1949, Liu Shaoqi and Georgy Malenkov signed a loan agreement. The Soviet Union agreed to offer a 300 million dollar loan, at a low interest rate of 1%, to the CCP: see Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Liu Shaoqi nianpu* Vol. 2, 219–20.

<sup>18</sup>Shi Zhe, *Zai lishi Juren shenbian: Shi Zhe huiyilu* [By the Side of Historical Giants] (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1991), 412.

<sup>19</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Mao, drafted by Molotov, 26 October 1949, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 332, listy. 47–8.

<sup>20</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 30 January 1950, *Arkhiv Vneshney Politiki Rossiiskoy Federatsii* [Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation] (hereafter AVPRF), fond. 059a, opis. 5a, delo. 3, papka. 11, list. 92.

<sup>21</sup>Kim Il-sung visited Moscow from 30 March to 25 April 1950, and met Stalin three times: Torkunov, *The War in Korea 1950–1953*, 51–2.

<sup>22</sup>Telegram from Soviet representative Aleksei Ignatieff in Pyongyang to Vyshinsky, 10 April 1950, AVPRF, fond. 059a, opis. 5a, delo. 3, papka. 11, listy. 98–9.

<sup>23</sup>Telegram from Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 12 May 1950, AVPRF, fond. 059a, opis. 5a, delo. 3, papka. 11, listy. 100–3.

<sup>24</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Mao Zedong on the issue of Kim Il-sung's visit to Moscow, 3 May 1950, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 331, list. 54.

Kim's notifications were true. Therefore, Mao sent Zhou Enlai to the Soviet Embassy and asked to have personal clarifications of Stalin on this question.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Mao's suspicion was well grounded because, only a few months earlier in Moscow, Mao and Stalin had discussed the Korean situation and reached an agreement that

under the current situation on the Korean Peninsula, it is more likely that the South would attack the North and not the other way around. Therefore, the North should be prepared for this contingency, while maintaining the initiative.<sup>26</sup>

However, Kim Il-sung continued to pressure Mao Zedong to agree to his attack plan and emphasized that 'the American imperialist will not be able to intervene. Stalin also told us that the imperialist will not intervene.' To this, Mao replied: 'How the imperialist behaves is beyond my control. We don't know what's inside the imperialist's mind.' Mao still opposed to Kim Il-sung's attack plan.<sup>27</sup> On 14 May 1950, Stalin notified Mao that

in light of the changed international situation, Filippov (Stalin) and his friends agree with the proposal of the Koreans to move toward reunification. If the Chinese comrades do not agree, the decision on the question should be postponed until a new discussion.<sup>28</sup>

Under this circumstance, Mao had no alternative but to agree, since 'Stalin already agreed. And Kim Il-sung is not seeking any help from China.'<sup>29</sup>

From 6–9 June 1950, the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the CCP (CC CCP) was convened. The primary item on its agenda was a 'discussion of the national financial situation and the confirmation of the CCP's leading role in the nation's efforts to overcome economic difficulties.'<sup>30</sup> Although Mao had already agreed to Kim Il-sung's plan of attacking South Korea, his focus was still on strengthening China's economy.

Why did Mao initially oppose North Korea's attack on South Korea? First, as of late June 1949, US forces had withdrawn from South Korea, leaving behind only about 500 military advisers. Thus, the security threat to China from the Korean Peninsula had virtually disappeared. Under these circumstances, Mao's preference was not a full-scale attack on South Korea, which would likely lead to the recall of US forces to the Korean Peninsula. Rather, he favoured small-scale, organised guerrilla campaigns within South Korea to achieve unification.<sup>31</sup> Second, China was planning to import the machinery, equipment, and relevant resources necessary for economic development from capitalist nations, since the socialist countries, including the Soviet Union, could not provide them.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it is natural that the PRC wanted to avoid unnecessary international conflict that would undermine its relations with the capitalist countries.

<sup>25</sup>Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 13 May 1950, AVPRF, fond. 059a, opis. 5a, delo. 3, papka. 11, listy. 100–3.

<sup>26</sup>Record of the second conversation between Mao Zedong and representatives of CPSU, 23 September 1956, author's personal collection.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid; Shen, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng*, 221–2.

<sup>28</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Mao Zedong, 14 May 1950, RGASPI, fond. 558, opis. 11, delo. 334, list. 56.

<sup>29</sup>Shen, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng*, 221–2; Record of the second conversation between Mao Zedong and representatives of CPSU, 23 September 1956, author's personal collection.

<sup>30</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Mao Zedong nianpu: 1949–1976* [A Chronology of Mao Zedong: 1949–1976] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2013), 152–3.

<sup>31</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Mao, drafted by Molotov, 26 October 1949, APRF, fond. 45, opis.1, delo. 332, listy. 47–8.

<sup>32</sup>Before the founding of the PRC, the CCP planned to utilise Hong Kong as an import and export channel with capitalist countries. On 6 July 1949, Liu Shaoqi asked Stalin to 'open a Dalian seaport for facilitating China's exporting of coal and salt to Hong Kong and Japan'. At the same time, he also requested that 'when Shanghai and Tianjin port were blockaded, China should be allowed to use the Port of Dalian, and the U.S. and England merchant ships are permitted to access Dalian, as well': see Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi and Zhongyang dang'anguan, *Jianguo yilai Liu Shaoqi wengao* [Liu Shaoqi's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2005), 27.

Mao calculated that maintaining the *status quo* on the Korean Peninsula would suit China's economic and security interests. A full-scale war in the Korean Peninsula, on the other hand, would cause the return of the American military to the region, which would threaten China's safety and cause its economic reconstruction to stall.

### From a passive to an eager stance: China's strategic shift of early July 1950

In early May 1950, when Mao agreed to North Korea's plan to attack the South, he made clear China's position on intervention in the future, stating, 'Even if the US intervenes, if it does not advance beyond the 38th parallel, we will not intervene'.<sup>33</sup> From this, it could be construed that prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, China did not intend to assist North Korea proactively to achieve a quick victory and did not seek to intervene either, unless China's own security was directly undermined.

After the outbreak of the Korean War, the US intervention was much faster and more comprehensive. On 25 June, at the instigation of the US, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a resolution, calling for the immediate cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of North Korea's forces to the 38th parallel.<sup>34</sup> Two days later, the UNSC passed a resolution calling on UN member states to provide necessary assistance to repel North Korea's military attack and to restore international peace and security in the area.<sup>35</sup> This paved the way for the US to enter the Korean War under the auspices of the UN.

US naval and air forces began their operations on 27 June below the 38th parallel and extended their air strikes to the north of it on 30 June.<sup>36</sup> On 1 July 1950, the first US ground forces, the Smith Battalion, an advanced element of the 24th Infantry Division, landed at Pusan port. In this way, the US army, navy, and air force began to participate in the conflict in a comprehensive manner.

The US intervention was not limited to the Korean Peninsula. The US regarded North Korea's military attack as a prelude to the Socialist Bloc's full-blown aggression. Therefore, on 27 June, Truman announced the dispatching of the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait to block a possible PRC attack and declared that 'Formosa [Taiwan]'s future status must await the restoration of security in the Pacific'. At the same time, the US substantially increased its assistance to Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam and the Philippines.<sup>37</sup>

In response, China condemned the US measures as 'an intervention in its internal affairs' and denounced Truman's earlier non-intervention declaration on Taiwan as a lie.<sup>38</sup> To counteract the US move in Vietnam, China strengthened its military assistance to North

<sup>33</sup>Shen Zhihua, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng*, 221–2; Record of the second conversation between Mao Zedong and representatives of CPSU, 23 September 1956, author's personal collection.

<sup>34</sup>US Department of State, "Resolution adopted by the United Nations Security Council, June 25, 1950," 25 June 1950, *Foreign Relations of the United States* (hereafter *FRUS*), Korea, 1950, 155–6.

<sup>35</sup>US Department of State, "Resolution adapted by the United Nations Security Council, June 27, 1950," *FRUS* (1950), Korea, 211.

<sup>36</sup>US Department of State, "Memorandum of conversation, by the Ambassador at large (Jessup), 26 June 1950," *FRUS*, (1950), Korea, 179; US Department of State, "Statement issued by the President, 27 June 1950," *FRUS* (1950), Korea, 202–3.

<sup>37</sup>Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Doubleday, 1956) Vol. 2, 333–9; US Department of State, "Memorandum of Conversation, by the Ambassador at Large (Jessup), June 26, 1950," *FRUS*, Vol. 7 (1950), Korea, 178–83.

<sup>38</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi and zhongyang dang'anguan, *Jianguo yilai Zhou Enlai wengao* [Zhou Enlai's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC] Vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonggong Wenxian Chubanshe, 2008), 524–6.



Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> Thereafter, a confrontational stance between the US and China formed in the Korean Peninsula, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

The US actions created uncertainty in China's domestic economy and ideological confusion as well. For example, on 28 June, in large cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Tianjin, cash withdrawals from banks rapidly increased, and stock markets collapsed. Commodity prices also soared, as people rushed to purchase large quantities of daily necessities. At the same time, rumours began to appear that the Korean War was the 'prelude to the Third World War' and that 'China should give up on Taiwan to avoid a conflict with the US'.<sup>40</sup>

Under these circumstances, on the second day of the arrival of the US ground troops in South Korea, China for the first time clarified its position on intervention. On 2 July 1950, Zhou Enlai, when receiving Soviet ambassador N.V. Roshchin, stressed that 'North Korea had underestimated the possibility of American military interference, ignoring Mao's warning to this effect back in May of 1949 and 1950', and that,

if the Americans cross the 38th parallel, then Chinese soldiers, disguised as Koreans, will take action using volunteers against them. For this purpose Chinese leadership has already concentrated in the area of Mukden three armies numbering 120,000 personnel.

Zhou Enlai then 'inquired if it would be possible for the Soviet air force to provide air cover for these Chinese soldiers.' At the same time, he advised that 'the KPA must speed up its advance to the South to occupy the ports of Pusan, Masan, and Mokpo' in order to pre-empt US troops landing and also mentioned 'Incheon' as a potential landing point for US troops.<sup>41</sup> As shown by this conversation, China's leaders hoped that the KPA could achieve a quick victory by their own efforts. On 5 July, Stalin agreed to offer the air cover that China requested.<sup>42</sup>

The PRC and Soviet Union agreed that if US troops crossed the 38th parallel, the Soviets would send in air forces and that China would send in ground troops. Thus, by adding the condition that the Soviet Union must provide air cover, China's conditions for entering the war had become more rigorous compared to those of May 1950. Its evolving position differs from the previous depictions of other scholars, that is, that rapid intervention of the US and its announcement of the deployment of the 7th Fleet compelled Mao to believe that 'a Sino-American war was inevitable' and 'awakened his revolutionary passion'.<sup>43</sup>

Under the Security Council Resolution of 7 July 1950, General MacArthur was appointed commander of the American-led UN forces and began a full-scale intervention in the Korean War. On the same day, the PRC held a meeting of the Central Military Commission and decided to establish the NEBDA, composed of four army corps and three artillery divisions. China also sent Chai Chengwen to Pyongyang as an emissary, delivering the message that 'the Chinese government is ready to help to provide anything the North Korea needs in the war' and requested 'maps of the Korean Peninsula and a sample of the KPA uniform'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Yang Kuisong, "Changes in Mao Zedong's Attitude toward the Indochina War, 1949–1973," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper* 34 (February 2002): 5–10.

<sup>40</sup>Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao* (Internal Reference), 1 July 1950, no. 171, 1–3.

<sup>41</sup>Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 2 July 1950, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 331, listy. 75–7; Torkunov, *The War in Korea 1950–1953*, 92–3.

<sup>42</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Roshchin, 5 July 1950, RGASPI, fond. 558, opis. 11, delo. 334, list. 79.

<sup>43</sup>Yao, *Cong Yalujiang dao Banmendingian*, 21–2; Shen, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Chaoxian zhanzheng*, 321–2.

<sup>44</sup>Chai Chengwen and Zhao Yongtian, *Banmendingian Tanpan* (The Panmunjom Negotiations) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1992), 36; Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 15 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 303–5.

Concurrently, China began to show an eagerness for the early dispatch of its troops. On 12 July, Mao met with Kim Il-sung's envoy, Lee Sang-jo, Deputy Chief of Staff of the KPA, and informed him: 'It's likely that the US may send additional troops ... If North Korea asks, China is ready to send troops. For this purpose, we have already prepared 320,000 soldiers, four army corps.' Mao underscored that 'even if China intervenes, it will not likely lead to a Third World War' and requested an answer from Kim Il-sung by 10 August.<sup>45</sup> This was the first time Mao mentioned that China was ready to send troops before the US forces crossed the 38th parallel, which was no longer a precondition for China's intervention. It is worth noting that Mao emphasized that China's military involvement would not lead to a Third World War, insinuating that in this intervention China had no need for Soviet air cover. This demonstrates that China's position on the Korean War had changed to aiding North Korea to achieve a quick victory through the early intervention of Chinese troops, even without the support of Soviet air cover.

What triggered this change? To answer this question, it is crucial to understand and analyse the events that unfolded from 2 July to 12 July, as well as how these developments affected Mao's thinking. This reveals the true reason behind Mao's attempt to commit troops onto the Korean Peninsula in the initial stages of the war. By 2 July, Mao's initial strategy to commit troops was a joint intervention with Soviet air forces when the Americans crossed the 38th parallel, as the crossing of the 38th parallel indicated an intention of a 'total war'. However, by 12 July, Mao announced instead that if China intervenes, it will not lead to a Third World War. Why did Mao abruptly feel the necessity of a swift end to the war?

The decisive reason is that a full-scale involvement of the UN troops on 7 July 1950 significantly harmed the political and ideological foundations of the CCP regime within China. Rumours that the Korean War would eventually lead to a Third World War, that Mao's regime would be overthrown, and that Chiang Kai-shek would be reinstated, spread throughout China.<sup>46</sup> Even particularly dramatic rumours, such as 'the US attempted to arrest Mao Zedong, Hainan Island had already fallen into the hands of the US, and Lin Biao were already sacrificed' broadly circulated.<sup>47</sup> In addition, there was a tendency among the Chinese public not to trust news reports about the KPA's victories. Some local CCP officials also worried about imminent US air strikes, believing that China was no match for the US militarily.<sup>48</sup>

The seriousness of these phenomena was well highlighted in Luo Ruiqing's report, Minister of the Public Security Department. He reported that

since the outbreak of the Korean War, a rumor-mongering campaign launched by anti-revolutionists increasingly destroyed our economy, especially our military transport system ... A 'shapeless' anti-revolutionary movement exists in force ... Such anti-revolutionary rumors are acts of aggression to us.

Luo also emphasized that imperialists provide the encouragement to the anti-revolutionaries abroad since the advent of the Korean War. They spread a rumor that the debacle of CCP

<sup>45</sup>Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 20 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 352–5.

<sup>46</sup>Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 4 July 1950, no. 172, 12; Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 10 July 1950, no. 175, 24–5; Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 11 July 1950, no. 176, 31–2.

<sup>47</sup>Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 13 July 1950, no. 178, 39–40; Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 15 July 1950, no. 179, 45.

<sup>48</sup>Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 22 July 1950, no. 184, 79–80.

was near, saying that the darkness will vanish, the dawn will come, having all expectations for the Third World War.<sup>49</sup>

These local sentiments were reported to Mao daily, and these rumours continued even towards the end of August 1950.<sup>50</sup>

To improve the situation, China promulgated an order to suppress anti-revolutionary activities on 23 July 1950.<sup>51</sup> Under this circumstance, North Korea's quick victory was the most effective means of quelling the active anti-revolutionary movements prevalent in China and consolidating the political legitimacy of the CCP.

Besides, from a military standpoint, China's commitment of its troops as the war turned to the KPA's favour was strategically advantageous for China herself. In the early period of the war, the KPA won battle after battle. By 20 July, for example, the KPA occupied Taejeon, a major city in the central area of South Korea, and captured Major General William Dean, a division commander of the 24th Infantry Division.<sup>52</sup> Soon thereafter, the KPA occupied the entire south-western area of South Korea and on 25 July advanced near the south-eastern Naktong River perimeter. On 1 August, the 8th US army commander, Lieutenant General Walton Walker, ordered both US and ROK troops to withdraw south of the Naktong River by 4 August, which meant that, in only a month, the KPA had occupied all of South Korea, except for the south-eastern cities of Taegu and Pusan. On 19 August 1950, Mao optimistically predicted, 'if the US continues its operations in South Korea with its current-level forces, soon the KPA will drive them out of the Korean Peninsula.'<sup>53</sup>

Assessing the military situation in the beginning of the Korean War, US leadership also firmly believed that 'the principal key' to the outcome of the war was whether China would intervene before the UN forces fully reinforced their troops on the Korean Peninsula. They assessed the best moment for Chinese intervention was between July and August 1950 when the UN forces would defend 'the small area of Taegu-Pusan' as well.<sup>54</sup> MacArthur also recalled that if China had sent troops in the July-August period, it would have had a decisive impact on the direction of the Korean War.<sup>55</sup> Mao's determination to enter the war was encouraged by the KPA's victories. It is quite natural that instead of waiting for

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<sup>49</sup>Luo Ruiqing tongzhi zai diersi quanguogonganhuiyishang de baogao [Comrade Luo Ruiqing's Report at the second national public security meeting held on 16 October 1950], cited from Yang Kuisong, 'Xinzhongguo "zhenya fangeming" yundong yanjiu' [A Study in the Movement of Suppression of the Anti-Revolutionaries in the Early Period of PRC] *Shixue yuekan* 1 (2006): 45–61.

<sup>50</sup>Regarding the petition movement developed by the Chinese government to peacefully resolve the issue of the Korean Peninsula, some people said that 'the petition is a preparation phase of compulsory military service, and if you sign, you will suffer disadvantages when the Kuomintang returns', showing that many Chinese people believed that reinstatement of the Kuomintang regime was at near: Xinhua News Agency, ed., *Neibu cankao*, 24 August 1950, no. 205, 69–71.

<sup>51</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Jianguo yilai Zhongyao Wenxian Xuanbian* [Selected Important Documents Since the founding] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyao Wenxian Chubanshe, 1992), 358–60; From January to October in 1950, 816 armed revolts occurred to overthrow the China's communist government and the number of people who got arrested for being a spy totaled up to 25,041 by August, and the Chinese government executed 639 of them: Yang, "Xinzhongguo 'zhenyafangeming' yundong yanjiu," 49; Wang, "Liu Shaoqi yu xinzhongguo chenglichuqi de zhenya gangeming yundong" [Liu Shaoqi and the Suppression of the Counterrevolutionary Movement in the Early Period of People's Republic of China], *Shixue yuekan* 11 (2013): 42.

<sup>52</sup>Seoul Sinmunsa, ed., *Juhan migun 30 nyeonsa (1945–1978)* [A History of American forces in Korea for 30 years (1945–1978)] (Seoul: Haenglim chulpansa, 1979), 155–7.

<sup>53</sup>Torkunov, *The War in Korea 1950–1953*, 94–5.

<sup>54</sup>CIA Intelligence Report, "Communist China's Role," Weekly Summary Excerpt, 14 July 1950. Cited from Kuhns, *Assessing the Soviet Threat*, 419–21; 'The Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Kirk) to the Secretary of State', 29 September 1950, *FRUS*, 1950, Vol. 7, 821–2.

<sup>55</sup>US Department of State, "Substance of Statements Made at Wake Island Conference on 15 October 1950," *FRUS*, 1950, Korea, 953.

US troops to cross the 38th parallel, Mao wanted to assist the KPA by sending in Chinese ground forces, thus taking advantage of North Korea's military superiority. Had China committed its troops at this juncture, it would have altered the outcome of the Korean War.

Third, the collective involvement of the US and the other 15 capitalist countries also provided moral justification for China to enter the war. On 12 July, Mao asked Lee Sang-jo 'if Kim Il-sung and the Central Committee of the Korean Workers' Party had the intention to call on the Socialist brother countries to send international troops to aid North Korea', and he stated that 'if the DPRK asks for Chinese troops to be dispatched, China is ready to send troops'.<sup>56</sup> On 13 July 1950, Kim Il-sung also stated that 'America and other countries are jointly fighting on the side of Syngman Rhee. Therefore, Czechoslovakia and China and other people's democracies could offer aid to North Korea'.<sup>57</sup>

Fourth, for China, early dispatching to Korea could have constituted an opportunity to expand its influence in North Korea and achieve a division of labour in the Asian revolution, sharply elevating its status within the Socialist Bloc.

In August 1950, Chinese leadership began to stress the necessity of early Chinese intervention more clearly. Mao, in a politburo meeting of the CCP on 4 August, emphasized that 'if the US wins the war, it will become more arrogant and pose a threat to China. We must help North Korea'. Mao thus instructed Gao Gang, commander and political commissar of the Northeast Military Region, 'to prepare a full operation plan by early September'.<sup>58</sup> On 13–14 August, Gao Gang chaired a meeting of high-level commanders of NEBDA and argued for an early intervention of Chinese troops, stating that 'it is advantageous for us that, in taking the initiative now, we assist the KPA and could wipe out the enemy outside our territory'. Mao gave his approval of Gao's opinion immediately.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, on 26 August 1950, Zhou Enlai stated with regret that 'for the last two months [July and August] ... To defeat Syngman Rhee and liberate the Korean Peninsula ... We organised the NEBDA but have not put them to use'.<sup>60</sup> Zhou and Gao's statement clearly showed the Chinese leadership's strategic considerations at that time.

By late August, the war entered a stalemate at the Naktong River, and North Korea's victory became uncertain. However, this did not weaken China's determination to send troops. By this time, the CCP leadership, however, modified its strategy from 'quick victory' by sending Chinese troops to 'divide the enemies and defeat one by one in a long haul'. On 26 August, Zhou Enlai stated, 'We should prepare to destroy the enemy in the prolonged war',

the KPA should retreat to the northward so as to spread out the enemy and achieve the goal of victory by defeating pockets of enemy forces one by one ... The final responsibility for destroying these [US] forces is squarely on our shoulders.<sup>61</sup>

This demonstrates that China was willing to fight guerrilla warfare in south of the 38th parallel alongside the KPA for the long haul. China was still firmly committed to intervening in the Korean War to achieve victory.

<sup>56</sup>Telegram from Shykov to Stalin, 20 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 352–5.

<sup>57</sup>Telegram from Shykov to Stalin, 15 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 303–5.

<sup>58</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Mao Zedong's Manuscripts since the Founding of the PRC] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1987), 454–5.

<sup>59</sup>Junshi kexueyuan junshi lishi yanjiubu, *kangmei yuanchao zhanzhengshi* [A History of the War to Resist America and Assist Korea] Vol. 1 (Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 2011), 99; Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao*, 469.

<sup>60</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi and Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun junshi kexueyuan, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* Vol. 4, 43–50.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

## A setback in China's early troop dispatch: Stalin's opposition

The North Korean leadership also wished for the intervention of Chinese troops from the early period of the war.<sup>62</sup> On 5 July, the KPA had its first battle with the US ground forces, i.e., the Smith Battalion. On the same day, Kim told Soviet Ambassador, T. Shtykov, that 'some comrades at the KWP leadership have lost confidence in winning the war because of US air raids and the participation of the US ground forces, arguing that we should request the PRC government to send troops.'<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, on 13 July, Kim Il-sung, in receiving Shtykov, directly raised the need for the PRC's participation in the war again.<sup>64</sup> On 19 July, Kim Il-sung expressed his dissatisfaction to Shtykov that 'KPA ground operations were practically halted because of US air raids.' He quoted Mao's statement: 'If the DPRK asks for Chinese troops to be dispatched, China is ready to send troops. And for this purpose, we have already prepared 320,000 soldiers, four army corps', and he called for Moscow's agreement.<sup>65</sup>

When he received no answer from Stalin, Kim Il-sung sent his secretary Mun Il to Shtykov to deliver an ultimatum: 'The situation in the battlefields is seriously deteriorating. Therefore, the KWP Politburo will discuss requesting the dispatch of Chinese troops. We are planning to ask the Chinese comrades to send troops.'<sup>66</sup>

Stalin could remain silent no longer. On 28 August, Stalin replied to Kim Il-sung, stating,

You should not be embarrassed by the fact that the KPA does not have solid victories in the war against the interventionists. Victories are sometimes interrupted by delays in the advance or even by some local set-backs ... The DPRK is not alone now. It has allies, who are rendering and will render it aid.

Stalin continued to say, 'The position of the Russians during the Anglo-French-American intervention in 1919 was several times worse than the position of the Korean comrades at the present time.' Finally, Stalin promised, 'If it is necessary, we can offer additional assault aircraft and fighter aircraft for the Korean air force', and he affirmed that the 'Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union has no doubt that soon the interventionists will be driven out of Korea with ignominy.'<sup>67</sup> However, Stalin made no mention of Kim's request for dispatching Chinese ground troops, implying that he had a negative opinion on this matter.

After the outbreak of the Korean War, Stalin hoped that the KPA would swiftly advance to the South in order to achieve a quick victory, without giving the US the chance to interfere.<sup>68</sup> On this matter, Stalin agreed with Mao. In fact, Mao's decision to send troops early would

<sup>62</sup>Chen Jian and Goncharov insist that Kim Il-sung did not want China's help. Particularly, Chen Jian argues that in the initial stage of the war, Kim Il-sung believed that 'direct help from Beijing was neither necessary nor desirable, especially if such help would strengthen the position of the (Yan'an) opposition factions within the North Korean Communist Party': See Chen, *China's Road to the Korean War*, 134, 156; Goncharov et al., *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War*, 163.

<sup>63</sup>Telegram from Shykov to Stalin, 7 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 168–71.

<sup>64</sup>Telegram from Shykov to Stalin, 15 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 303–5.

<sup>65</sup>Telegram from Shtykov to Stalin, 20 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 122, listy. 352–5; Telegram from Shtykov to Gromyko, Date were not given, AVPRF, fond. 0102, opis. 6, delo. 48, papka. 21, listy. 109–69.

<sup>66</sup>In a telegram to Stalin, Ambassador Shtykov provided his personal view, stating that 'Kim Il-sung has lost his confidence completely in gaining a victory on his own, continuing to attempt to seek our approval on this issue': Shtykov to Vyshinsky, 28 July 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 127, listy. 666–9.

<sup>67</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Kim Il-sung via Shtykov, 28 August 1950, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 347, listy. 5–6; Telegram from Stalin to Kim Il-sung via Shtykov, 28 August 1950, AVPRF, fond. 059a, opis. 5a, delo. 4, papka. 11, listy. 155–6.

<sup>68</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Shtykov, 6 July 1950, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 140, list. 140.

have best suited Stalin's interest. This being the case, the question arises as to why Stalin remained silent and rejected the proposal of Mao and Kim Il-sung. Based on declassified Russian diplomatic files, the reasons are as follows.

First, China's participation might have led to an escalation into a Third World War, which explains why Stalin reacted cautiously to the sending of dozens of Soviet military advisers to the war-frontlines and to Seoul.<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, Stalin had already secured China's promise to send troops if the US troops crossed the 38th parallel, which would at least secure the safety of North Korea. Stalin probably judged that sending hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops to south of the 38th parallel would give the US an excuse to expand the scale of the war and buttress its claim that the Korean War was a prelude for a full military offensive by the Socialist Bloc.

Second, by mid-July, the KPA's victories and the commitment of tens of thousands of US troops to the Asian theatre had given Western Europe a 'petrified fright'.<sup>70</sup> It seems that Stalin was quite satisfied with the international situation created by the Korean War. On 27 August, Stalin, in an oral message to Klement Gottwald, President of Czechoslovakia, said:

The US is not as militarily powerful as it claims to be. In addition, it is clear that the United States of America is presently distracted from Europe in the Far East... Giving us an advantage in the global balance of power.

Stalin analysed the future situation of the Korean War, saying, 'If the Americans continue to be tied down in the Far East and pull China into the struggle for the freedom of Korea ... It would provide the time necessary to strengthen socialism in Europe'.<sup>71</sup> He expected that the Korean War would last for a few years, at a minimum. It is certain that Stalin's goal in the Korean War changed from 'winning a quick victory' to 'binding the Americans hand and foot in Asia as long as possible'. From this strategic perspective, China's early intervention would actually undermine Stalin's plan, if it lead to a quick victory in the war. It was only natural that after Stalin sent the abovementioned oral message, he expressed a negative position towards Kim's proposal on the following day.

Third, as America became involved in the Korean War, the Soviet Union secured an upper hand in its ideological propagation. In an oral message to Klement Gottwald, Stalin stressed:

America became entangled in a military intervention in Korea and is now squandering its military prestige and moral authority. Few honest people can now doubt that America is acting as an aggressor and tyrant in Korea and that it is not as militarily powerful as it claims to be.<sup>72</sup>

Therefore, from the perspective of ideological propaganda, should the Chinese enter Korea before the Americans crossed the 38th parallel, it would be disadvantageous to the Soviet Union.

By the end of August, there was a divergence in the positions and goals of Kim Il-sung and Mao, who wanted an early dispatch of Chinese troops to win a war, and Stalin, who wanted to prolong the war in the Far East. Because of Stalin's negative attitude, China lost

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<sup>69</sup>William Stueck argued that 'for the short term, this development (Chinese involvement) would further China's dependence on the USSR, yet it would also increase the likelihood of global conflict. For the long term, China's assumption of the major burden in Korea could lead to an erosion of Soviet control over international communism': see Stueck, *The Korean War*, 65.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>71</sup>Telegram from Stalin to Gottwald, 27 August 1950, RGASPI, fond. 558, opis. 11, delo. 62, listy. 71–2.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*

its best opportunity to dispatch troops to the war. Mao could only promise Kim Il-sung that China would send troops 'if the American troops landed at Incheon, Nampo or Wonsan'.<sup>73</sup>

In conclusion, for both Mao and Kim, the crossing of the 38th parallel by US troops was not the prerequisite condition for the entry of Chinese troops.

### The Incheon landing and China's shift in attitude

On 15 September 1950, UN troops, led by the US, began to land at Incheon. As the UN troops were advancing towards Seoul, American troops in southeast Korea simultaneously made a northward move, breaking the KPA's Naktong defensive perimeter. At this time, the war situation completely reversed in favour of the UN troops. The US air force bombed the bridges and railways from China to the frontlines, destroying most of them. In response, contrary to his earlier promise, Mao began to express caution about sending troops.

First, on 20 September 1950, Mao sent a special instruction to Zhou Enlai and Gao Gang 'not to inform anybody that we have an intention of dispatching troops to Korea'.<sup>74</sup>

Second, Mao sought to resolve the war through UN mediation, while dissuading US troops from crossing the 38th parallel by deploying Chinese troops along the Sino-North Korean border. To this end, Zhou Enlai on 18 September told Soviet ambassador Roshchin and military advisors Kotov and Konnov that,

Currently, the Western countries are not ready for a large-scale war. They worry about the Soviet and Chinese participation in the Korean War. Under this circumstance, simply moving our troops from the south to the north near the Sino-North Korean border would be enough to sow anxiety in the UK and the US.

Concurrently, Zhou added that,

the reason for the PRC to participate in the UN is because both Moscow and Beijing support a peaceful resolution of the Korean War. If the US attitude changes in favor of accepting the PRC's participation in the UN, then the Chinese representative is ready to attend the UN to discuss the matter.<sup>75</sup>

Four days later, on 22 September, Mao again underscored the same point, emphasizing that 'we cannot exclude the possibility of the American imperialists exiting the current situation in the Korean War through negotiations without sustaining further damage to their troops'.<sup>76</sup>

Mao and Zhou's statements reveal that China's position had significantly changed from that of July and August. In short, China's goal was no longer to drive the American troops from the Korean Peninsula; rather, it was to prevent the US forces from crossing the 38th parallel, either through UN negotiations or with a 'bluffing' strategy designed to protect the North Korea.

After the successful Incheon landing, the Chinese leadership began to speak about the negative domestic sentiment toward intervention as well. On 22 September, Liu Shaoqi delivered to Ambassador Roshchin that the bourgeoisie, the leaders of democrat parties, and some young soldiers assumed either a 'wait and see' or an 'opposed' attitude.<sup>77</sup> Anti-war

<sup>73</sup>Telegram from Shtykov to Gromyko, 21 September 1950, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 125, listy. 86–8.

<sup>74</sup>Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Mao Zedong nianpu: 1949–1976* Vol. 1, 195–6.

<sup>75</sup>Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 18 September 1950, APRF, fond. 45, opis. 1, delo. 331, listy.123–6.

<sup>76</sup>Torkunov, *The War in Korea 1950–1953*, 101–2.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

public opinion spread quickly among Communist Party members and senior cadres, as the possibility of a war with the US increased with the Incheon landing.

On 27 September, Chinese Ambassador to Pyongyang, Ni Zhiliang, reported that 'there are hardly any defense forces north of the 38th parallel. The situation is very grave. It is likely that the enemy may advance directly into Pyongyang.' On 29 September, Zhou Enlai reported to Mao that 'the American imperialists openly declared that they would march north of the 38th parallel'.<sup>78</sup> On 28 September, the UN forces retook Seoul. On 1 October, MacArthur sent Kim Il-sung an ultimatum, demanding the unconditional surrender of the KPA. On the same day, Stalin and Kim Il-sung requested that Mao send Chinese troops to Korea.<sup>79</sup> However, Mao notified Stalin and Kim Il-sung that China would not dispatch troops, citing 'inferior Chinese military equipment', 'the possibility of expanding a Third World War', 'negative domestic sentiment', and 'the opposition of the majority the CPC's Central Committee members'.<sup>80</sup> By early October 1950, China retreated from the position that it held before the outbreak of the Korean War, i.e., 'if the US troops cross the 38th parallel, China would intervene'.

## Conclusion

Mao Zedong's initial attitude towards the Korean War could be characterised as 'passive'. He did not wish to drag his country into a war, unless the US posed a direct threat to China itself. This passive attitude was maintained, even after the US entered the war and announced that it would dispatch the 7th Fleet to the Taiwan Strait.

However, the Korean War and US military actions created grave ideological and political confusion in China, which worsened after full-scale UN forces entered the Korean War on 7 July. The situation was serious enough to threaten the foundation of the CCP regime. Therefore, Mao judged that North Korea's quick victory, with the participation of Chinese troops, would be in the best interest of the CCP regime and China's security. Mao reversed his earlier promise to Stalin, i.e., that China would not intervene in the war unless US troops crossed the 38th parallel, and began to tell Kim Il-sung and Stalin that China was ready for an earlier dispatch of its troops.

During July and August, Stalin prevented this intervention. Stalin was greatly satisfied with the international situation created by the Korean War, in which the US military was forced to focus on Asia. This suited his world strategy and, therefore, he opposed sending Chinese troops into the conflict too early. However, with the landing of UN forces in Incheon, China's resolve for intervention visibly weakened; it switched its strategy to engaging in negotiations at the UN or military 'bluffing'. Even on 1 October when it was clear that the US army would soon cross the 38th parallel, Mao informed Stalin and Kim Il-sung that if China sent troops, it would have 'negative consequences for China's domestic affairs'.

<sup>78</sup>Jin, *Mao Zedong zhuan: 1949–1976* Vol. 1, 111.

<sup>79</sup>Telegram from Filippov (Stalin) to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, 1 October 1950, RGASPI, fond. 558, opis. 11, delo. 334, listy. 97–8; Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, *Mao Zedong nianpu: 1949–1976* Vol. 1, 200.

<sup>80</sup>As the war situation became worse after the Incheon landing, China's leaders faced with growing domestic opposition for sending troops to Korea. By October, this opposition opinion, initially expressed by minority democratic parties and members of the Chinese army, spread quickly to members of central committee of the CCP: Mao's verbal message to Stalin via Roshchin, 3 October 1950, RGASPI, fond. 558, opis. 11, delo. 334, listy. 105–6; Telegram to Stalin from a representative of the Soviet Army in Pyongyang, TsAMO, fond. 5, opis. 918795, delo. 121, listy. 705–6.



From the establishment of the PRC to late September 1950, when US troops were about to cross the 38th parallel, China's criteria for intervention vacillated, but remained consistently tied to the consolidation of the CCP's domestic power. The American military's crossing of the 38th parallel was not a decisive factor in China's decision to intervene in the Korean War; rather, it was the need to strengthen the CPC's domestic legitimacy through an early victory. Similarly, the claim that China's participation in the Korean War was driven by a desire 'to spread the Chinese Revolution' is not supported by existing evidence.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.