

The Psychology of the Korean War: The Role of Ideology and Perception in China's Entry into the War

Michael M. Sheng

Volume 22, Number 1, Spring 2002

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs22_1art05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sheng, M. M. (2002). The Psychology of the Korean War: The Role of Ideology and Perception in China's Entry into the War. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 22(1), 56–72.

The Psychology of the Korean War: The Role of Ideology and Perception in China's Entry into the War

by *Michael M. Sheng*

Michael M. Sheng is Associate Professor of History at Southwest Missouri State University.

A half century ago, the compound effect of the Communist victory in China, the Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb, and the Beijing-Moscow alliance shocked the Western world. President Harry S. Truman's scary words about communism overthrowing Western civilization seemed to ring true. The shock wave drastically intensified when the North Koreans invaded South Korea in June 1950. Deeply in fear of the "falling domino," the Truman administration secured the sanction of the United Nations in the absence of the Soviets, and the US-led military forces started pushing the northern invading forces back.

In late September, the triumphant UN forces under General Douglas MacArthur's seemingly invincible command crossed the 38th parallel. While the UN troops were marching toward the Yalu River, Washington's intelligence analysts insisted that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would not intervene, and their prediction continued to hold even after some Chinese prisoners of war (POWs) had been caught. Given China's war-torn economy and the weakness of the military of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) analysts were convinced Beijing had no reason to involve itself in the Korean conflict.¹ There is little wonder why the Americans were so surprised when massive Chinese Communist forces with Soviet air cover emerged in front of them, pushing them back south of the 38th parallel. "It's an entirely new war," a war for which MacArthur and other American policy makers and analysts failed to prepare themselves.

Since then, the rationale of Beijing's decision to intervene in Korea has become an issue hotly debated by many. The conventional wisdom holds that Mao and his associates were Chinese nationalists and, facing the daunting challenges of consolidating their power and reconstructing the war-torn economy, the last thing they wanted was to go to war in Korea. Some even argue that the CCP tried to be friendly with the United States during and after World War II, only to be rejected by Washington's unevenhanded China policy, which pushed the CCP into Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's embrace. Even after the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance of 1950, Chinese leader Mao Zedong and Stalin were at odds. The Korean War was in part Stalin's plot to draw Beijing into a fight with the United States so that Mao would not have a chance to lean toward Washington.² Others, however, stress the CCP's Leninist ideology, revolutionary experience, the "middle-kingdom" mentality, as well as security concerns, to explain Beijing's decision to intervene and the solid foundation of the Sino-Soviet alliance during the Korean crisis.³

This article will focus on the psychological dimension of Beijing's policy process, contending that the clash in Korea was logical and predictable because Mao's perception

of the inevitability of war with US-led imperialism confronted Washington's perception of a global struggle against Communist expansion to save the Western civilization. Mao defined China's national security interest in the context of international confrontation between the Soviet-led East the US-led West. He therefore had his own "domino theory:" if North Korea fell, China might be the next. This internationalist outlook compelled Mao to minimize the potential conflict within the Communist camp to reinforce the Sino-Soviet alliance. Mao's decision was not simply a reaction to what the United States did or did not do; his confident expectation of a quick victory over UN forces encouraged him to provoke a fight with the capitalist/imperialist West in general, and the United States in particular, and Korea happened to be his favored battleground.

Almost as soon as the Americans intervened in Korea and the Seventh Fleet entered the Taiwan Strait at the end of June 1950, the CCP's long-standing suspicion of and hostility toward the United States turned into bellicosity. The Communists were convinced that direct armed struggle with the Americans had become inevitable. Only three days after Washington decided to intervene in Korea, Beijing shifted its military focus from the Taiwan Strait to Korea, at which point in time China's border security was far from being threatened. On 30 June, Mao informed Xiao Jinguang, the commander-in-chief of the CCP navy, that he had postponed the timing for liberating Taiwan, and preparation for confronting the United States in Korea took first priority.⁴ On 7 July, Zhou Enlai chaired a meeting of the CCP Military Committee, at which a decision was made to form the *Dongbei Bianfangjun* (Northeast Defense Army) immediately. Su Yu, the CCP general previously responsible for the military operation against Taiwan, then was appointed as the commander of the Northeast Defense Army (NDA), which initially would include four infantry armies and three artillery divisions. All of these troops were ordered to complete their assembly in the Manchurian border area by the end of that month.⁵ If the name *bianfang* (border defense) of this newly formed military force implied its defensive nature, Mao made it clear from the very beginning that the task of the NDA was not to defend the Sino-Korean border, but to take a forward position in Korea. Accordingly, the military training program of the NDA was geared toward fighting the Americans across the Yalu River.⁶

Why did Mao seem to be eager to pick a fight with the United States in Korea and act overtly aggressive, when the UN forces were still hard-pressed by Kim Il Sung's North Korean armies in South Korea? Mao revealed part of his perception of the conflict at a Politburo meeting on 4 August. He said that if the US imperialists gained the upper hand in Korea, they would become cockier, and would threaten further Communist China. Mao's fear of the domino scenario was expressed in a Chinese proverb: *chengwang chihan* (once the lips are taken away, the teeth are exposed to the cold). Therefore, Mao insisted that Beijing assist its North Korean comrades by sending Chinese volunteers. Although the timing of this could be decided later, Mao continued, the preparation for it should start immediately.⁷

Zhou Enlai echoed Mao. He said that it would be disadvantageous to world peace if the North Koreans were defeated, because the Americans would become more rapacious. To achieve victory in Korea, the Chinese factor must be added to the struggle, and that

would stimulate a change for the better of revolutionary forces worldwide. Apparently, Beijing did not perceive the necessity of Chinese intervention in Korea only in terms of self-defense of China's border. For the CCP leadership, the result of the Korean crisis would be substantive as well as symbolic. An American victory would mean a major setback for world revolutionary forces politically and psychologically. The rampant reactionary forces then would step up their offensive against what Mao termed the world "revolutionary front" and Communist China might very well be the next target. If the concern over the "credibility" of the United States and the fear of the "domino scenario" figured large in Washington's Cold War policy thinking, Mao's determination to establish the "credibility" of the Communist world and to stop the falling domino in Korea played an important role in Beijing's decision to assist Kim Il Sung.

On the technical level, Nie Rongzhen, then the Chinese chief of staff, may be right in explaining Mao's approach to the Korean conflict before the Inchon landing. He said that Mao felt in August that although the North Koreans were pushing toward the south, their northern rear was unprotected. The United States would not accept defeat and its further exercise of naval and air power might very well defeat Kim's forces. Consequently, Mao pushed for the completion of the Chinese preparations to invade Korea.⁸

On the conceptual level, Zhou Enlai was more revealing of Beijing's strategic perception. Since Chinese leadership was firmly convinced that a direct military confrontation with the US was inevitable before June 1950, the question was only when and where it might take place. Beijing thought three places were likely locations for the anticipated military clash with the United States: the Taiwan Straits, Vietnam, and Korea. Beijing further calculated that since the navy and air force of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were weak, the Taiwan Strait was not an advantageous choice. Vietnam was so far away that the logistics could be a problem. Besides, the French, not the Americans, would be the direct enemy in Vietnam, and Beijing intended to teach the United States, not France, a lesson. In comparison, Korea would be the most advantageous location for Beijing to fight US imperialism, because it was close to the Soviet Union, from which the vital military assistances would come.⁹ Zhou stated the case unequivocally:

The confrontation between U.S. imperialists and us was inevitable; the question was the choice of location. This was not a decision for the imperialists to make only; we had our say, too. The American imperialists decided [to have this showdown] in the Korean battlefield, this was advantageous to us, and we decided to confront the Americans and assist the Koreans [by our own choice]. Looking back, it is understood that everything considered it would have been much more difficult for us if [we had chosen] Vietnam to fight, let alone the off-shore islands [in the Taiwan Strait].¹⁰

Clearly, Beijing's perception of the Korean conflict and China's position in it transcended the narrowly defined national interest of China. It placed China in the middle of a global struggle between the Soviet-led socialist-Communist camp and the American-led capitalist-imperialist camp, and the PRC's fate hinged on the well-being of the former. It was the combination of the sense of inevitability of war with the United States and the

fear of the domino effect the fall of North Korea might trigger that pushed Mao to respond to the US entry into the Korean conflict in an aggressive manner.

On 5 August, Mao telegraphed Gao Gang, the commander and commissar of the NDA, that "there will probably be no fighting [for the NDA] in August, but [it] should be prepared for combat in early September. Every unit should be ready within this month in order to move to the front to fight."¹¹ To carry out Mao's instructions, Gao called all division commanders to a meeting on 11 August, but those who attended believed that it was impossible to be ready and move into Korea that month. Gao telegraphed Mao on 15 August, suggesting that the time for sending the NDA to Korea be postponed. On 18 August, Mao replied. While being agreeable to Gao's suggestion, he pressed Gao to pick up speed, emphasizing the NDA "must complete all preparations before September 30."¹²

By the end of August, however, the situation in Korea was increasingly gloomy for the Communists, and Mao appeared to be growing edgier. On 27 August, he thought it necessary to increase the strength of the NDA, and he telegraphed Peng Dehuai proposing that 12 armies be called upon to reinforce the four armies already near the Sino-Korean border.¹³ In accordance with Mao's order, Zhou Enlai chaired another military meeting on 31 August. The meeting decided that the NDA would be strengthened to include 11 armies with 700,000 troops, which would form three echelons with the 13th, 9th, and 19th Army Corps in sequence.¹⁴ On 9 September, the Chinese Military Committee (CMC) ordered the 9th Army Corps in the Shanghai area and the 19th Army Corps in the northwest to congregate along the railways, in order to move into Manchuria quickly when they were called upon.¹⁵ The ball of China's preparedness for war in Korea against the US was now rolling fast, and it was only a technical issue for the Chinese to decide the timing for intervention. That time came in October 1950.

The politics of international alliance are always messy. People seem to be willing to forget how difficult it really was for US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to agree on the Atlantic Charter in August 1941, which sealed the fate of the British Empire. The scholarly opinion on the Sino-Soviet alliance in the West seems to swing erratically from the perception of "monolithic communism" of the 1950s to the concept of the "lost chance" after President Richard Nixon's visit to China in February 1972.¹⁶ These black-or-white conceptions of the Sino-Soviet alliance do not coincide very well with historical reality, which seems to be increasingly colorful and nuanced as we learn more about what actually happened from newly available Chinese and Russian sources. One of the intriguing issues surrounds the Mao-Stalin communications in early October 1950 with regard to the Chinese entry into the Korean conflict.

After McArthur's landing campaign at Inchon in mid-September, the UN forces were approaching the 38th parallel and North Korea's final defeat seemed certain. On 1 October, Kim Il Sung sent an urgent telegraph to Stalin, asking for direct Soviet and Chinese military participation in Korea. Stalin then sent Mao a cable, suggesting that at least five or six divisions of Chinese volunteers move forward toward the 38th parallel at once. Mao called a Politburo meeting immediately. The meeting continued and enlarged

the next day, and Gao Gang was summoned to Beijing to take part in the discussion. In his telegram to Gao, Mao again pressed for immediate completion of the NDA's preparations. He stated that at present the question was not whether or not to send troops to Korea, but how quickly they could be sent.¹⁷

To this point, Mao seemed to be determined and consistent in pushing for an aggressive policy of intervention in Korea. The Chinese records show that Mao's consistency continued, and he never wavered from his commitment to his duty as a good "Communist internationalist." A telegram from Mao to Stalin on 2 October 1950 in Beijing's archives in Mao's handwriting lends support to this characterization:

1. The CCP decided it necessary to send the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) to fight the Americans in Korea, because "if Korea were completely occupied by the U.S. . . . the American invaders would be more rampant, and such a situation would be detrimental to the entire East." China was "prepared to wipe out the invaders . . . and drive them out of Korea." China was also prepared "for the American declaration of war on China," and for the possibility of American aerial and naval attacks against many Chinese industrial cities and coastal areas. But, if American troops would be annihilated quickly and effectively in Korea, the war would not last for very long, even if the US declared war on China.
2. According to Mao, every US infantry army had 1500 pieces of artillery, while the Chinese army had only 36 pieces. But the defeat of the Americans was possible, if the Chinese could concentrate four armies to annihilate one US army completely and thoroughly. Thus, an additional force of twenty-four divisions would be sent to Korea.¹⁸

The trouble is that this portion of the document, although clearly of Mao's handwriting, does not bear his staff's signature or the time it was sent. This indicates that Mao drafted this telegraph, but it was probably not sent. The fact that it cannot be found in Moscow's archives reinforces this probability. Instead, researchers have found another document that came from Mao on the same day, which was sent to Stalin from N.V. Roshchin, the Soviet Ambassador in Beijing. Mao apparently dictated the text of the telegram to the Soviet ambassador, which explains why it is not found in Beijing's archives. In this document, Mao seemed to waver and hesitate, which contradicted the determination and aggressiveness he had been demonstrating so far. Chinese troops were poorly equipped, he said, and might well be pushed back by the UN forces. If China sent volunteers to Korea, the US-China war could drag the Soviet Union into the conflict. "Many comrades in the Central Committee judge that it is necessary to show caution here," Mao explained. He then suggested that Beijing should not send Chinese volunteers immediately, but "actively prepare our forces" for a more opportune time in the near future. He ended by noting that "This is our preliminary telegram," and if Stalin agreed, Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao would be sent to meet with him in person.¹⁹

Upon receiving Mao's message through Roshchin, Stalin must have been surprised with dismay. As early as 5 July, he was told by the Chinese that they would "concentrate immediately 9 Chinese divisions on the Chinese-Korean border for volunteers' actions in North Korea in the event of the enemy's crossing the 38 parallel." And Stalin also promised "We will do our best to provide the air cover for these units."²⁰ Now when the

Americans were marching north of the 38th parallel, Mao suddenly changed his mind! Without the Chinese ground troops, North Korea definitely would fall, and Stalin was not about to commit Soviet ground forces to save Kim. In fact, Stalin on 13 October advised Kim to prepare to evacuate his remaining forces to China and the Soviet Far East. On the same day, however, Mao informed Stalin that the Chinese had decided to send ground forces into Korea, and Stalin immediately telegraphed Kim to cancel the earlier decision of evacuation. Stalin was glad and relieved.²¹

In light of the new Russian documents and the discrepancy between the Chinese and the Russian versions of Mao's 2 October 1950 telegram, some scholars question the authenticity of the Chinese version, and accordingly the "uncertain partners" thesis seems to gain additional momentum. These writers believe that ideology did not count for much in the alignment of the Korean conflict. Furthermore, the Chinese national interest was incompatible with that of the Soviet Union, while Mao and Stalin were more adversaries than comrades. In contrast, the Chinese hesitation and their back-and-forth discussion and bargaining with Stalin between 2 and 13 October 1950 were a normal part of the politics of alliance. The fundamental underpinning of the Sino-Soviet alliance was the common identification of the US-led Western "imperialist" powers as the enemy and the source of the threat. The solidarity of the "socialist" states in the name of the world "revolutionary front" remained solid, in spite of differences between Mao and Stalin. Even during the 11 days of Chinese hesitation, Sino-Soviet disagreement was far from reaching a crisis, their commonality prevailed, and Chinese volunteers marched into Korea shortly thereafter. In short, it was a normal process in the politics of international alliance, and there is no room for a speculative thesis of genuine discord between Mao and Stalin.

There was nothing unusual about Mao's hesitation before he could secure Stalin's commitment to sending weapons and Soviet air cover. If it is entirely understandable that Roosevelt would not give the "shoot-on-sight" order before Churchill committed to ending the British Empire in the postwar era, it should not be a surprise that Mao held back his commitment to sending Chinese troops into Korea before he secured his bargain on Stalin's commitment on Soviet military aid and air cover. The fact that the unpublished portion of the Chinese version of Mao's telegram is an extensive list of military hardware Mao requested from Stalin testifies to the same bargaining taking place between the two; the Russian version of the telegram can be seen as just another way for Mao to achieve the same bargain.²² Responding to Mao's message, Stalin said on 3 October 1950:

1. When Korea fell, it would become the "USA springboard of a bridgehead for a future militaristic Japan against China."
2. Since behind China "stands its ally, the USSR," the Americans had to take into consideration the Sino-Soviet alliance, and the USA was not ready for a big war that involved both China and the USSR.
3. If the US and UK decided to fight a war with China and the USSR out of consideration of prestige, "Should we fear this? In my opinion, we should not, because together we will be stronger than the USA and England If a war is inevitable, let it be waged now."²³

Comparing Stalin's telegram with the Chinese version of Mao's of 2 October, the similarities between the two men's perceptions becomes apparent. Because they both shared the fear of the "domino effect" and the loss of the "credibility" of the Communist world, they had a solid foundation upon which they could iron out their differences. In fact, Mao continued his course of action before 2 October in active preparation for the military intervention of the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) in Korea, in spite of his telegram to Stalin stating that he was not prepared to send troops into Korea immediately. Since Lin Biao, Mao's original choice as the commander of the CPV, was opposed to committing Chinese troops in Korea, Mao called Peng Dehuai to Beijing. On 6 October, the Chinese high command meeting worked out the details of military planning.²⁴ On 7 October, Mao told Stalin that "he will dispatch 9, not 6, divisions" to Korea. Mao, however, also said that the Chinese divisions would not be sent now, "but after some time." And Mao wanted Stalin to receive Zhou Enlai in person for further discussion.²⁵

Mao seemed to take a two-track course of action. To Stalin, he committed Chinese volunteers in principle, while sending Zhou to iron out details on the Soviet military aid and air cover. At home, he pushed for immediate readiness for crossing the Yalu. On 8 October, Mao issued an order: "Change the Northeast Defence Army into the Chinese People's Volunteers, and move it into Korean territory immediately." In the order, he echoed Stalin: "The general international and domestic situation in current time is in our favor, and the final victory will be ours, if we are determined and brave, good at uniting with the Korean people and fighting against the invaders." On the same day, Mao sent a telegram to Kim, informing him of the decision to send Chinese volunteers, and the desire of Peng Dehuai to meet Pak Il-yu in Shenyang to discuss details on the CPV's entry into Korea. Peng at the same time left Beijing for Shenyang, where he met Pak in the evening of that day. Peng also had a meeting with his subordinates and demanded that all preparations be completed within ten days.²⁶ In the evening of 9 October, Peng telegraphed Mao to propose that all the Chinese troops at the border area, including four armies, three artillery divisions, and three anti-aircraft artillery regiments, be sent to Korea at once. Mao approved the plan on 11 October, and Peng scheduled to meet Kim on the same day.²⁷ The Chinese military intervention in the Korean War now was in its full swing.

However, Stalin appeared to have second thoughts about providing the Chinese with air cover immediately upon the Chinese entry into the conflict. On 8 October, when Peng Dehuai and Gao Gang left for Manchuria, Zhou Enlai flew to the Soviet Union to meet Stalin. When the meeting took place on 10 October, Georgi Malenkov, Laverenti Beria, Anastas Mikoyan, Vyacheslav Molotov, and other top Soviet leaders also took part in the meeting, which lasted from seven in the evening to five the next morning. According to Shi Zhe, Mao's Russian interpreter who accompanied Zhou, Stalin began the conversation with a gloomy picture of the military situation in Korea. Zhou responded that China also faced serious difficulties and that "it would be better for us not to enter the Korean War."²⁸ Zhou was apparently carrying out Mao's two-track course of action. Twenty years later when Mao and Zhou met with Kim in 1970, Mao told the Korean leader that when Zhou went to see Stalin, Beijing had two alternatives on the table: if Stalin provided air cover, the Chinese troops would enter into Korea; otherwise, the

Chinese volunteers would not cross the border. At the meeting with Zhou, Stalin agreed to send arms for 20 divisions to Manchuria immediately, but he was reluctant to send the Soviet air force to participate directly. He told Zhou that the Soviet air force was not ready yet, and Soviet airplanes would not go beyond the Yalu River for at least two or two-and-half months.²⁹

This made Mao hesitant to push forward the Chinese incursion into Korea. At 8 p.m. on 12 October, he telegraphed Peng that the CPV stay where they were to wait for further instructions.³⁰ Peng and Gao Gang also were told to return to Beijing immediately, and a Politburo meeting was held on 13 October. The central issue was whether or not the CPV should cross the Yalu without Soviet air cover. The result was revealed in Mao's telegram to Stalin via Zhou on that day, which conveyed the "unanimous opinion" of the Politburo that the CPV would intervene. Mao stated that the Chinese entry into the Korean War would "greatly enhance [our] interests in China, Korea, the Far East, and the world. Otherwise, by allowing the enemy to press to the bank of the Yalu, the domestic and international reactionary air would blow higher, and it would be disadvantageous to every side concerned."³¹

Why did Mao succumb to Stalin in the bargaining process? Stalin cabled Kim on that day to instruct him to retreat to China or the Soviet Union, since the Chinese were not coming to his assistance. Mao now faced an ultimate decision. Did he really want to sit tight and see the fall of North Korea? He might also have concluded that Stalin in fact was having difficulty sending the Soviet air force immediately, but would do so as soon as he was ready and in the near future. Their shared interests and fear of the "domino effect" made it necessary for Mao and Stalin to minimize their differences in the pursuit of a common cause. Thus, Mao ordered the Chinese troops into Korea without the Soviet air cover, and Stalin sent the Soviet air force shortly thereafter.

Mao's mood, however, appeared to be influenced by Stalin's hesitation to send the Soviet air force immediately. If in his unsent telegram of 2 October Mao expected a quick victory by destroying large numbers of American troops in Korea, he now was not certain about a quick victory. Without Soviet air cover, Mao's strategic aims in the immediate following six months were quite limited. On 14 October, Mao telegraphed Chen Yi to instruct the 9th Army Corps to leave the Shanghai area, but not to move into Manchuria immediately, as his first telegram on 12 October had indicated. Instead, it should be moved into Shandong, and wait for further instruction there.³² In his telegrams to Zhou Enlai on the same day, Mao explained that if all four infantry armies and three artillery divisions were positioned north of the Pyongyang-Wonsan line, it might deter the enemy from pushing north, and the CPV might win some time to become better prepared. Should the enemy continue to push northward, the CPV would be able to destroy two to three South Korean divisions. But if the enemy would not push toward the north for six months, the CPV would not attack the Pyongyang-Wonsan line either. After six months, the CPV would be better armed and trained, and then it could launch a major offensive against the Pyongyang-Wonsan line. Mao even suggested that if the enemy would not attack northward, half of the CPV troops might withdraw to Manchuria for training,

which would make logistics easier; and they could be sent back to the front whenever a major battle was expected.³³

Technically, Mao at this point seemed to be indecisive about the exact date to intervene in the Korean War. He telegraphed Gao Gang on 15 October at 1 am to order that the CPV cross the Yalu on 18 October, or not later than the next day. Only four hours later, Mao cabled Gao again to propose that it would be better if the CPV could start to cross the Yalu on October 17, so all the troops then gathered at the border area could be in Korea within 10 days.³⁴ Because of Mao's instructions, a regiment of the 42d Army crossed the Yalu at midnight on 16 October. However, the next morning, Mao changed his orders again. He cabled Peng that the operation to cross the Yalu should be postponed until 19 October, and Peng and Gao should fly back to Beijing immediately. This delay was due to a message from Zhou Enlai in Moscow, which informed Mao that he would return home on 18 October. "The timing of sending troops [to Korea] should be finalized after Zhou's return," Mao told Peng and Gao.³⁵

After having made the decision for intervention on 13 October, Mao instructed Zhou to remain in the Soviet Union to further iron out the details of Soviet military aid and air cover.³⁶ We do not know the exact nature of the agreements Zhou brought back. According to Chen Yi, when Stalin learned that Beijing had decided to send troops to Korea even without Soviet air cover, he was so moved by the CCP's selfless "internationalism" that he was tearful.³⁷ Eventually, Stalin sent two air divisions to participate by the end of 1950. All the Soviet pilots were dressed in CPV uniforms and were instructed to identify themselves as Russians-Chinese if they were captured by the enemy.³⁸ Judging from these CCP materials, Stalin's message that Zhou brought back to Beijing was encouraging. In the afternoon of 17 October, Peng Dehuai received a telegram from Deng Hua and Hong Xuezi, the commanders of the 13th Army Corps. They argued that without air cover and adequate anti-aircraft guns, it would be very difficult to hold their position against US air raids. They suggested that the CPV should wait until next spring to join the war. In the meeting of 18 October, Peng reported this opinion from the rank and file to Mao. But Mao was now determined. He stated that the timing for the CPV to cross the Yalu should not be postponed any longer, "even if there is 'heaven-sent' difficulties." After the meeting at 9 pm, Mao sent the final order to his lieutenants at the front, and the full-scale operation to cross the Yalu started the next day, as four armies and three artillery divisions poured into Korea.

In light of the new information, the old interpretations are apparently open to serious challenge. In contrast to the Cold Warriors' argument of the 1950s, which depicted a monolithic and insatiable Communist world expansionism, Stalin turned out to be more restrained. Moreover, Mao probably would not have committed the Chinese ground forces in Korea had the US-led forces not crossed the 38th parallel. And a monolithic World Communist movement taking orders from Moscow seems to be more of a paranoid illusion than an informed assessment. The revisionist interpretations of the 1960s and 1970s seem to swing to the other end of the spectrum, which claimed that there was not coherence whatever in the Moscow-Beijing alliance, while Mao and Stalin, driven by their own national interests, were plotting against one another as adversaries.³⁹

The new Chinese and Russian documents seem to point at somewhere in between these two extreme positions, and both interpretations are in need of revision.

As the head of their own states, Stalin and Mao naturally would incline to thinking and acting in accordance with their perception of their own national interests and security. Nationalism, however, is inadequate to explain their policy behavior. If one defines Roosevelt and his policy as "internationalism," and his isolationist opposition as "narrow nationalism," one has to admit that both Stalin and Mao were "internationalists" because they perceived their national interests and security through a Leninist internationalist lens. They shared the same fear that if North Korea fell, they would be the next targets for the "more arrogant U.S. imperialists." Mao had every reason to bargain hard to secure Stalin's commitment to military aid and air cover. But when he learned that the Soviet air force was not forthcoming in the initial period after the Chinese volunteers crossed the Yalu, he decided on 13 October to cross the Yalu anyway, albeit with much hesitation.

It seems that there were three factors in Mao's perception precipitating his decision to order Chinese entry into the Korean War, and each factor had a counterpart on the American side of the equation. First, on the global level, just as the Americans saw a worldwide Communist plot for expansion, Mao was convinced that there was a US-led worldwide reactionary camp, which was aimed at the new regime in China as one step toward the destruction of the "revolutionary front" of the world. Thus, the events taking place in Korea were not perceived as a localized phenomenon, but an integral part of the global struggle. That was why Mao linked the defeat of the "Korean revolutionary forces" with the whole situation in East Asia, and the destruction of US military forces in Korea with a situation favorable to the "revolutionary front" of the world and China.

If on a subconscious level the Chinese felt obligated to reciprocate their North Korean comrades, Mao apparently elevated this simple sentiment to a conscious level, which might be called "proletarian internationalism." Mao's internationalist outlook was deep-seated. In late 1945, when World War II had just ended, the CCP came to the following conclusion: "The central problem in the [postwar] world is the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. The reflection of this [global] struggle in China is the struggle between Jiang Jieshi and the CCP."⁴⁰ Mao did not take the struggle against Jiang's Guomindang (GMD) as a purely domestic matter. Neither did he judge the Korean conflict as a regional event.

With such an internationalist outlook, the CCP certainly would advocate the solidarity of what he called a "revolutionary front" headed by the Soviet Union. As previously shown, Beijing and Moscow already had discussed the matter of Chinese participation in the Korean conflict before the CCP Politburo meeting on 2 October, and Stalin had agreed to send the Soviet air force to cooperate with the CPV ground force. Although the Soviet air force went into the Korean War a bit later than Beijing requested, Stalin after all honored his promise. And Mao decided to intervene even without the Soviet air cover.

At the Politburo meeting on 4 October, Mao expressed this "revolutionary internationalist" outlook rather explicitly. After participants argued over various domestic

disadvantages of entering the war, Mao said: "What you have said sounds reasonable. But it would be shameful for us to stand by seeing our neighbors in perilous danger without offering any help." If China could stand by when North Korea was in peril, Mao argued, then, the Soviet Union could do the same when China was threatened. "Internationalism [then] would be mere empty talk."⁴¹ Since the CCP perceived the postwar world politics in terms of the "two-camp struggle," solidarity and mutual assistance within the socialist camp was essential to both world revolutionary forces and China's survival in the face of a perceived US-led anti-Communist onslaught.

Conditioned by his radical vision of the postwar world order, when the CPV was pushing toward the 38th parallel in December 1950, Mao insisted that the Chinese must cross the Yalu not only for military reasons, but for political reasons as well. "If we stop north of the 38th parallel," he told Peng Dehuai, "it will be very disadvantageous for us politically." After the campaign in early December, he explained that "the so-called 38th parallel was an old concept in people's minds, and it has disappeared after this campaign (in early December). If the CPV had not crossed the parallel, many speculations would have arisen. If we can score another campaign in the first half of January [1951] . . . it will greatly encourage the democratic front of the world, as well as the people in various capitalist countries," Mao believed. "It will certainly be a new blow to the imperialist [camp]."⁴² Obviously, Mao did not take the military action of the CPV in Korea simply as a matter of Chinese national security, which, in Mao's mind, was closely linked with the global struggle of the "democratic front" and the "good people" in capitalist countries against the imperialist camp headed by Washington.

Second, Mao's long-standing anti-Americanism continued to be a decisive factor in Beijing's policy thinking. Mao's antagonism to the United States was to a large extent ideology-driven. Influenced by Vladimir Lenin's theory of imperialism, Mao and the CCP leadership considered the United States the leading imperialist power after World War I and therefore responsible for China's predicament. To pursue its imperialist gains in China, the United States was the master behind various Chinese "running dogs," from the regional warlords in the 1920s to the Jiang government in the 1930s and 1940s. In the fall of 1940, while China was in a battle with Japanese invaders, Mao was opposed to the possibility of a Sino-American alliance and the US entry into the war against Japan. His reason was that if the United States, allied with the GMD government of China, could defeat Japan, the CCP would be the next target for the GMD-US alliance. Thereafter, a US-dominated China would become the springboard to the assault on the Soviet Union. Mao thus considered the US-GMD alliance and its victory over Japan the "darkest scenario." After the Seventh Fleet anchored in the Taiwan Strait and the UN forces intervened in the Korean War, Mao was convinced that a clash between the United States and Communist China was inevitable. Based on this judgment, Beijing's suspicion of and hostility toward the United States became bellicosity. War planning and preparation started in the very early stage of the Korean conflict.⁴³

Since Korea was the chosen battlefield for the inevitable war with the United States, Mao not only decided to fight the United States in Korea, but also prepared to face US attacks on mainland China. For the same reason, Beijing's initial goal was not to "scare" the

enemy in order to achieve a negotiated settlement with a possible North Korean concession, as some scholars have suggested.⁴⁴ Instead, as Mao's unsent telegram of 2 October explicitly stated, Beijing aimed at the total destruction of US forces in Korea, especially the Eighth Army, in order to settle the score once and for all.

Third, like MacArthur with his cocky attitude and underestimation of Beijing's willingness and capacity to fight the Americans in Korea, Mao also underestimated the US military capacity, and predicted a quick and thorough victory over the United States. In his telegram of 2 October, Mao revealed his miscalculation that if the Chinese had air cover and sufficient firepower, it was possible in one campaign to destroy one US army (including two infantry and one mechanized divisions) with four Chinese armies. However, reality soon forced him to change his mind. In his telegram of 1 March 1951, Mao predicted that the enemy would not withdraw from Korea unless a large part of its troops were eliminated, and that took time:

Therefore, it is possible for the Korean War to become protracted, and we should be prepared for [it to last] at least two years . . . Our troops must be prepared for a long war, and in several years, destroy several hundreds of thousands of Americans. Let them know how difficult it will be. Only then will they withdraw [zhinan ertui] and the Korean problem will be solved.⁴⁵

In his telegram to Peng Dehuai on 26 May 1951, Mao further recognized that it was impossible for the CPV to encircle and eliminate a US division or even a regiment, not to mention an army. He proposed that each CPV army should aim at destroying only one company at a time.⁴⁶ By then, Mao must have realized that he had grossly underestimated the US Military capacity. But that underestimation already had precipitated the decision to enter the Korean War.

In sum, if China's "security concern" was Beijing's motivation for entering the Korean War, Mao defined China's security needs not only in terms of border security or a friendly regime in neighboring territories, but also the well-being of the Soviet-led world "revolutionary front" in its struggle with the US-led reactionary camp. This two-camp vision minimized the potential conflict among the parties of the "revolutionary front" and solidarity was apparently the dominant feature of the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang alliance. Beijing's initial objective was not simply to deter the UN forces in order to maintain the status quo along the 38th parallel, but to defeat thoroughly the US-led international forces in Korea. The psychology of adverse perceptions figured significantly in the contributing factors which precipitated the Korean conflict.

Endnotes

1. Woodrow Kuhns, ed., *Assessing the Soviet Threat* (Langley, VA: Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 1997).

2. This thesis is implied in Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). Richard C. Thornton in *Odd Man Out: Truman, Stalin, Mao and the Origins of Korean War* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2000) makes this speculative thesis the central argument in the book. For a more balanced and better informed account of the international politics of the Korean conflict, see William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

3. See, for example, Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

4. *Xiao Jinguang huiyilu* [Xiao Jinguang's Memoir], vol. 2 (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe), p. 26. See also Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng" [The Tortuous Process toward the Final Decision to Enter the Korean War], *Dangshi yanjiu ziliao* no. 4 (1991), pp. 7-13.

5. See Mao Zedong's letter to Nie Rongzhen, 7 July 1950, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Collection of Mao Zedong's Writings after the Establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), hereafter referred to as *Wengao*], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1989), p. 428. See also, Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng." On 13 July, an order was issued by the Military Committee that the 13th Army Corps, including four regular armies, be moved from Central China to Manchuria, and three other artillery divisions and four anti-aircraft artillery regiments would join them to form the NDA, which was then 260,000 strong. See Zhang Tinggui, "Kangmei yuanchao zhanzheng gaishu" [A brief account of the war of resistance to the US and assistance to Korea], *Dangshi yanjiu yu jiaoxue* no. 6 (1988), pp. 1-11; Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou* [On the eve and after of Peng Dehuai's appointment to direct the war of resisting America and aiding Korea] (Beijing: Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Historical Materials Press, 1989), pp. 111-59.

6. Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng." Xu is a member of the Strategic Research Office at the Defence University in China, and he refers to Su Yu's appointment as "the selection of a commander to lead the army to enter Korea (*ruocao renxian*)." Su Yu was ill and the command apparatus of the National Defense Army (NDA) did not come into being until it was converted into the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) in October. Before that, Gao Gang was in charge.

7. See Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda juece yu shi jian de huigu* [Recollections on Several Important Policy Makings and Events] (Beijing: Zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1991), p. 43.

8. See *Nie Rongzhen huiyilu* [Nie Rongzhen's Memoir] (Beijing: Jiefangjun chubanshe, 1984), pp. 733-735. Xu Yan's article "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng" conveys the same idea. It should be noted that Nie Rongzhen referred

to the situation in August, and did not explain why Mao started pushing the readiness of the military forces of the CCP to intervene before that month.

9. See Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng." See also Nie's memoir, p. 738. Nie was still of the opinion even in the 1980s that "if [the Chinese] had let the U.S. imperialist plot in Korea succeed, the U.S. would have forced us to combat it in another battlefield. That would have made us much disadvantaged." According to Chinese sources, Beijing was involved in the North Vietnamese struggle against the French at the same time. See Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

10. See Zhou Enlai's speech at the CPV cadre's gathering, 17 February 1958, in Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng."

11. See Mao's telegram to Gao, Wengao, pp. 454-55; Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaiishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou*.

12. Mao's telegram to Gao, 18 August 1950, *Wengao*, p. 469.

13. Mao's telegram to Peng Dehuai, *Wengao*, p. 485.

14. Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng."

15. Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaiishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou*.

16. The "lost chance" school holds that the Chinese Communists were "margarine Communists," and their true nationalist nature made them always at odds with Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin. Accordingly, it was the stupidity of Washington's policy that pushed Mao away and into Stalin's arms. Therefore, the West lost a chance to win over the CCP against the Soviet Union. For more detailed discussion, see Michael M. Sheng, *Battling Western Imperialism: Mao, Stalin, and the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

17. For Mao's telegram to Gao, see *Wengao*, p. 538. For Kim Il Sung's and Stalin's telegram, see Cold War International History Project *Bulletin* (hereafter *CWIHPB*), issues 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996), pp. 108-19.

18. *Ibid.*

19. For the texts of the two versions of Mao's 2 October 1950 telegram, and two different interpretations of them, see Alexandre Mansourov's article and attached Soviet documents in *CWIHPB*, issues 6-7, pp. 94-119; and Shen Zhihua's article and the Chinese documents in *CWIHPB*, issues 8-9 (Winter 1996/1997), pp. 237-42.

20. See Stalin's telegram to Zhou on 5 July 1950, *CWIHPB*, issues 6-7, p. 113.

21. *CWIHPB*, issues 6-7, pp. 118-19.
21. See Shen Zihua's article, *CWIHPB*, issues 8-9.
23. For Stalin's telegram to Mao on 3 October 1950, see *CWIHPB*, 6-7, pp. 116-17.
24. Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng."
25. *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, pp. 116-17.
26. For Mao's order, see *Wengao*, pp. 543-45. See also, Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, pp. 195; Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng."
27. For Mao's telegram, see *Wengao*, p. 548. Peng also asked when and how much air force could be sent to Korea. Mao replied that the air force was not ready yet. For Peng's telegram, see Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou*; Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, pp. 195-96.
28. Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, pp. 196-200.
29. See *ibid.*; Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou*; Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng."
30. For Mao's telegram, see *Wengao*, p. 552. On 12 October, Mao telegraphed Chen Yi to instruct that the 9th Army Corps be sent to Manchuria immediately. But a bit later that same day, Mao telegraphed again to order that the 9th Army Corps stay at its present location and await further instructions.
31. See *Wengao*, p. 556.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 557.
33. For Mao's two telegrams to Zhou on 14 October, see *ibid.*, pp. 558-61.
34. For Mao's telegrams to Gao on 15 October, see *ibid.*, pp. 563-64.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 567; Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou*; Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng."
36. Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War*, pp. 203-204.
37. Xu Yan, "Chubing ruchao canzhan juce zuihou queding de quzhe guocheng." This is confirmed by many Chinese sources. For instance, see Hong Xuezhi, *Kangmei yuanchao*

zhangzhen huiyi [Recollections on the War of "Resisting the U.S. and assisting Korea"] (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 1991), p. 27.

38. Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai, "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited," *China Quarterly*, 121 (March 1990). According to another Chinese source, from October to December 1950, the buildup of the Soviet air force in China reached 13 divisions, 12 fighter, and one bomber. See Wang Dinglei, *Dangdai zhongguo kongjun* [Modern Chinese Air Force] (Beijing: Shehui kexue chubanshe, 1989), pp. 78-79.

39. I consider the "uncertain partner" or the "odd man out" thesis as the continuation of this revisionist school of interpretation.

40. See the Party Center's directive of 28 November 1945, "Directive of the Strategy of Struggle Against the U.S. and Jiang." It is available in United Front Department and the Central Archives of the CCP, ed., *Zhonggong zhongyang jiefang zhanzheng shiqi tongyi zhanxian wenjian xuanbian* [Selected documents of the Party Center on the united front during the war of liberation] (Beijing: Dang'an chubanshe, 1988), p. 32.

41. Hao and Zhai, "China's Decision to Enter the Korean War"; see also, Zhang Xi, *Peng Dehuai Shouming Shuaishi Kangmei Yuanchao de Qianqian Houhou*.

42. See Mao's telegrams on 13, 29 December 1950, *Wengao*, pp. 722-23, 741-42.

43. For more information about the CCP's long-standing anti-Americanism in the pre-1950 period, refer to Michael M. Sheng, "Maoist Dualism and the Chinese Communist Foreign Relations, 1935-1949," PhD dissertation, York University, 1991.

44. According to Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Huang, the CPV's initial attack on UN forces was a "warning shot" intended "to check the enemy toward the Yalu River . . . and to force the Americans to reconsider their goal of total victory in Korea." Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Huang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1980), pp. 52-53.

45. *Junshi wenxuan*, pp. 349-51. The phrase "*zhinan ertui*" reflected a deep-seated CCP conviction: like any other reactionaries, determined by their class nature, the US imperialists would not give up their attempt to destroy the Chinese revolution unless they were defeated. Therefore, an offensive approach to defeat them was the only effective method of defense. In the Communist's mind, this conviction had been proven by previous experience in dealing with the US-backed Jiang regime, and Mao tried to prove it again in dealing with the Americans in Korea.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 352-53.