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The Wrong War:
The Soviets and the Korean War, 1945-1953

Introduction

General Omar Bradley, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, in 1951 called America's deepening involvement in the Korean conflict, "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy."¹ He was concerned that the U.S. had entered the war without sufficient consideration of its consequences, and that the widening commitments there might distract from the more important military task of deterring possible Soviet attacks in Western Europe. For almost everyone involved, the Korean War was indeed the wrong war: something they did not want, that they participated in only reluctantly. Engaged in a bruising political fight over the "loss" of the Kuomintang regime on the Chinese Mainland, the Truman Administration felt compelled to resist communist "aggression." The French and British went along in Korea in order for the sake of the infant Atlantic Alliance. The new Chinese leaders, having just won their revolution, hardly needed a major war, but could not countenance Western troops on their Yalu River border. Several times the war drove the two regimes on the Korean peninsula to near-collapse. After three years of grinding destruction, both sides were forced to settle for essentially the status quo ante bellum. The war was thus both profound tragedy and horrifying proxy for World War III.²

For the Soviet Union, the Korean Conflict was definitely the wrong war. Officially neutral, the Soviets nonetheless were vilified by both sides. U.S. officials saw Stalin as the puppet master for the Communist side, while the Chinese resented being the water carrier for the socialist camp and (along with their North Korean allies) grumbled about inadequate Soviet supply efforts. A newly minted superpower, the Soviet Union was reduced to handwringing from the sidelines, in constant fear of confrontation with America. Believing his junior ally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), would have little trouble defeating the U.S.-backed Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south, Soviet leader Josef Stalin apparently gave

his consent to a DPRK attack. Miscalculating possible U.S. responses, he quickly distanced himself from the war, while seeking a negotiated end to the potentially threatening conflict. He nonetheless supported Chinese intervention in order to keep American forces away from the Soviet border.³

Since the conflict ended, the genesis of the war has been viewed in scholarly literature from at least three different points of view. Until the 1970s, the prevailing view held that the war was planned in Moscow and heavily supported by Beijing, and began with an unprovoked attack by the North. Decisions were taken within the realm of high politics, i.e., they were driven primarily by concerns for national interests and national security. Revisionists in the 1980s, influenced by the Vietnam War experience, asserted that the conflict was part of an ongoing Korean civil war, and that the North Koreans did not depend greatly on their Russian and Chinese allies in the opening stages. Revisionist scholarship focused more on domestic factors than international relations in decision making. The release of Russian and Chinese documents in the 1990s returned attention to the centrality of high level decision making, as it added nuance and shading to earlier images of the war. Stalin, Mao, and Kim indeed made most of the key decisions that led to war, but recent literature on the war, notably by Sergei Goncharov, et al. and Kathryn Weathersby, suggest that a more nuanced approach focused on key leaders provides the best insights into how the decisions were made.⁴

How were the key decisions that shaped the war taken? Were nation-state, bureaucratic, or individual actors most important? This article indicates that, in the Korean case, Stalin was the key decision maker, and only he had the power to determine whether war would be launched. Mao and Kim were secondary players, the former through his endorsement of the attack, and Kim through his constant urging of forceful reunification of Korea from 1949 onward. This analysis thus indicates the importance of key communist leaders in conflict decision making during the early Cold War.

Understanding the origins of the Korean national division can help illuminate North

Korea's postwar development, the conditions under which the Soviets intervened in localized wars, and the nature of such intractable conflicts. Using Korean War studies written since the conflict, this article examines the Soviet role in the Korean War, from the initial division of the country in the late 1940s through the armistice in 1953. It asserts that the Soviet role was more nuanced and ambiguous than thought at the time; Soviet leadership illustrated strongly realist thinking on issues of national interest. It approved the conflict in its opening phase, encouraged prolongation of war during intermediate stages, but then sought ways to end the war when it became a burden for post-Stalinist foreign policy. After the death of Stalin in early 1953, the Soviet leaders thought that improving relations with the West was more important than continuing the Korean conflict.

The Roots of Conflict and NSC-68

Korea had been an area of vital strategic interest to the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union from at least the end of the nineteenth century. During World War II, Soviet intentions in Korea were simple: short of outright domination, Stalin had as a maximum objective control of at least the northern segment as a border buffer. At a minimum, he would settle for influence in Korea through a strong Communist Party.⁵ Korea originally surfaced as a minor issue at wartime Allied political conferences, when it was initially yielded to Soviet control. The finally agreed-upon division of Korea into Soviet and American sectors of occupation was done in a very haphazard manner. Lacking a trusteeship agreement, and unable to land in Korea due to the suddenness of the Japanese capitulation in August, 1945, U.S. War Department officials proposed splitting the peninsula at the 38th Parallel in order to "place the capital city [Seoul] in the American zone" and prevent a total Soviet takeover.⁶ Stalin accepted the demarcation at once to maintain good relations with the Americans and perhaps obtain a quid pro quo concerning Allied occupation of Japan. Only this restraint prevented the total Soviet occupation of the peninsula.⁷

The American and Soviet positions in Korea hardened, in part, because they were preoccupied with swiftly moving events in the Middle East and, especially, Central Europe. From the beginning of the Cold War, America saw Soviet attempts to control Korea in regional and global terms. By 1949, the apocalyptic linking of Europe and Asia, China and Russia hardened into NSC-68, the blueprint for America's global containment strategy.⁸ Cold War policy had been made on an ad hoc, reactive basis since the Greek Crisis in 1947. Truman used each new crisis during the first years of the Cold War to extend U.S. policy incrementally. Meanwhile, a major bureaucratic battle between George Kennan and Paul Nitze over the nature of Containment preoccupied policymakers. Kennan envisioned Containment as operating at vital chokepoints in defense of key U.S. interests, while Nitze called for global containment of communism wherever it threatened to succeed. NSC-68 was a "fundamental policy reassessment" done in the light of the "loss" of China and explosion of the Soviet bomb, both in 1949. It viewed communism as a "coordinated global movement," and so cast aside any differentiation of central and peripheral interests. It also called for tripling of U.S. defense spending to counter the communist threat. U.S. President Harry S Truman had not accepted the document's recommendations by the outbreak of the Korean War, but then quickly changed his mind and endorsed them. Secretary of State Dean Acheson noted that the war shifted the NSC-68 recommendations from theory to "immediate budget issues." Some have charged that U.S. policymakers set the whole thing up, and maneuvered the communists into attacking South Korea, but John Lewis Gaddis contends that there is no "convincing evidence" of this assertion.⁹

The Creation of Two Koreas

The Americans and Soviet positions in Korea hardened, in part, because they were

preoccupied with swiftly moving events in the Middle East and, especially, Central Europe. Both the U.S. and Soviet Union stayed in Korea in the late 1940s, with “neither side prepared to withdraw for fear that the other might not.” The Korean standoff also showed the degree to which “peripheries can manipulate centers,” as both superpowers settled on despots that seemed best able to restore order.¹⁰ The Soviets entered Korea much better prepared than the Americans for the task of administering the strongly nationalistic land. Throughout the war, they had kept close relations with indigenous Korean communists. The Soviets employed a number of Korean Soviet citizens, and there were up to 100,000 Korean cadres and guerrillas operating out of Siberia.¹¹ However, Soviet commander Col. General Ivan Chistiakov apparently had no set blueprint for the takeover when his forces moved into the peninsula, and used whoever was willing to help consolidate control, including non-Communists and Christians.¹² The Soviets also relied heavily on the local “people's committees” that had sprung up at the end of the war, a leftist force not directly under their control.¹³ The early months of Soviet control were accordingly marked by caution, resulting in a greater degree of local autonomy than in Eastern Europe.¹⁴ Throughout their occupation, the Soviets generally respected indigenous Korean practices, and tolerated a regime much closer in style to the coalition politics of Yugoslavia than to the rigidly Stalinized states of Eastern Europe, and as close in sympathy with the Chinese Communists as with their Russian comrades.¹⁵ Perhaps the Soviets felt less threatened by a more flexible regime on the Asian periphery than on their much-invaded western frontier.

From the beginning, though, the Soviets seem to have settled on 33-year-old Kim Il Sung to head the North Korean state. Kim's early career involved connections with both anti-Japanese guerrillas and the Soviet Red Army. The Soviets brought him to the North in October, 1945, believing him capable of forming a “pliant, obedient elite” that would not cause any trouble for the Soviet Union.¹⁶ In 1946 and 1947, Kim began to use his growing control of the North's army to dominate the Korean Workers' (i.e., Communist) Party and eliminate non-communist opposition. Nonetheless, Kim's group ruled in concert with indigenous and pro-Chinese

communists. Even under occupation, Kim used no more than 200 Soviet advisors in the years prior to the Korean Conflict.¹⁷ Kim did not entirely trust his powerful Soviet comrades, as he may have feared incorporation into the Soviet empire, à la Eastern Europe and desired greater autonomy. Due to guerrilla ties, he often found it easier to work with the Chinese.¹⁸

Although the Soviets granted a measure of internal control to Kim, they negotiated directly with the U.S. over the future of Korea, but those negotiations went essentially nowhere. Hoping to use international means to consolidate a friendly regime, the Soviets formally accepted the notion of trusteeship at a Moscow Foreign Ministers conference in December, 1945. Due to South Korean opposition to the trusteeship idea, the U.S. backed away from its prior support, just as the previously lukewarm Soviets embraced it.

Meanwhile, talks on economic cooperation between the two zones accomplished little. As in Eastern Europe, the Soviets stripped the North of industrial hardware left over from the colonial period. Next, the Joint Commission to determine conditions for Korean reunification broke down in mid-1946 over the issue of which organizations to consult on unification elections.

The Soviets wanted to exclude any groups opposed to trusteeship, effectively most South Korean non-communist groups, because the U.S. was backing the conservative regime of Syngman Rhee (Lee Sung Man) in the South. Excluding these groups, they felt, provided the only way to unify the country under a friendly regime. The Americans understandably rejected the Soviet proposal, and the Joint Commission stalled. Reconvened the next year, the commission could not get beyond this impasse.¹⁹ Soviet General Shtikov suggested joint withdrawal of occupation forces, but this too was rejected by the Americans as probably leading to communist takeover.²⁰

Blocked on the commission, and now linking Korea to developments in Europe, the U.S. in 1947 proposed creation of a U.N. commission to oversee unification elections to be held in May, 1948. A resolution to that effect passed the General Assembly, and a commission was dispatched to Korea. The Soviets refused to participate in subsequent elections, believing them a

ploy to unite Korea under Rhee, and encouraged leftist resistance to elections in the southern zone. As a result, these elections produced a U.N.-approved regime only in the South, i.e., the ROK under Rhee.²¹ The Soviets and Kim promptly held their own people's committee elections, leading to establishment of the DPRK in September, 1948.²² Having eliminated all opposition in the North, and working with southern Communists, Kim would have had an excellent chance to win the U.N. elections. However, the Soviets may have linked U.S. moves in Korea with Anglo-American cooperation in Germany and American hegemony in Japan, and so felt elections too risky at that time.²³

From that point on, and until the outbreak of war, neither the Soviets nor the Americans seriously considered further negotiations on Korea's ostensibly temporary status. The hardening of the American position related to the ongoing debate over containment within the Truman administration,²⁴ while the Soviet stance was powerfully connected to geopolitics in the Asian region, i.e., 1) control of North Korea allowed them to strengthen their position in Manchuria, 2) U.S. troops in the South still were a potential threat to Soviet territory, and 3) tight U.S. control of nearby Japan raised the possibility of a future American-Japanese alliance in Asia.²⁵

The DPRK safely launched, Soviet forces withdrew from the North in January, 1949,²⁶ and American forces left the South in June of that year; both superpowers left behind detachments of advisors. In the last year before the conflict, periodic attention focused on a series of border incidents along the 38th parallel, accompanied by repeated invasion threats from both sides, especially from the South.²⁷ Events in Korea were largely overshadowed by the successful Communist revolution in China. The unexpectedly quick rise of a huge new communist power would force the Soviets to renegotiate their relationship with China and reevaluate their Far Eastern strategic policy.²⁸

The Attack

Conventional Approaches. Few things were as shrouded in mystery during the Cold War as

the actual role, if any, of the Soviets in the North Korean attack across the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950. At the time, most Western observers accepted President Truman's assertion that it had been ordered by the Kremlin and represented "the ultimate Stalinist subversion and affront."²⁹ According to conventional thought, the attack must have been Soviet-directed because it was so well-planned and because no one believed that North Koreans would resist Russian orders. There have been a number of variations on this theme in the literature. For instance, some observers contended that Soviets planned and directed the war effort "as a means of counteracting the Americans' unilateral move to conclude a separate peace with Japan," as the Soviets feared erection of an Asian NATO and the rehabilitation of Japanese militarism enough to approve drastic action to force Japan's neutralization.³⁰ Success in Korea might both intimidate the Japanese and force the U.S. to agree to a demilitarized Japan. Alternatively, the U.S. would increase her commitment to Japan by reducing her presence in Europe, and the Soviets might thereby increase their overall influence in East Asia.³¹ Others have suggested the Soviets were thinking in purely military terms. With the pending reversion of Soviet bases at Dalian and Port Arthur to China, the warm water ports of South Korea may have beckoned. All in all, the operation promised "great advantages...with minimal risks."³²

Another variation on conventional explanations comes from the realist school of international relations. The attack, realists assert, was purely a matter of power politics. It suggests that Acheson's much commented-on speech to the National Press Club in February, 1950, which neglected to include Korea within the U.S. East Asia defensive perimeter, convinced Stalin an invasion would "permit a relatively inexpensive North Korean unification of the country" or "an easy tidying-up operation."³³ The U.S. would not respond to the attack because the prevailing desire in Washington to pull back from the Asian mainland (prevalent in the Defense Dept.). Stalin miscalculated the American response, they add, by not realizing that war would force a U.S. policy reevaluation and the acceptance of a minority activist viewpoint (represented by the State Dept.).³⁴ Other variants stress Soviet desire to reassert their leadership

in the Communist world because of the advent of the People's Republic of China (PRC), or to boost their reputation in Asia through forceful Korean reunification.³⁵ Still others lay the blame at the feet of "tragic" and confused American foreign policy of the early Cold War period, which effectively encouraged Kim while undermining democratic elements in the ROK.³⁶

Revisionist Approaches. Revisionist perspectives on Kim's attack began to challenge the conventional view in the 1960s. Famed China hand Edgar Snow thought the Soviets supported the attack to drive a permanent wedge between China and the U.S.³⁷ Some revisionists think that superpower division of the peninsula in 1945 only postponed resolution of pent-up conflict, but could not prevent an eventual explosion. In fact, they almost echo official DPRK rationalization of the attack as retaliation for a ROK attack the same day.³⁸ Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings insist that finding fault for the attack is irrelevant, since the real Korean War was a civil war between rightists and the Left that began in 1945. The full-blown conflict of 1950 grew out of guerrilla wars in the South and border incidents in 1949-1950, which they say were in turn determined by the issues of independence and unification.³⁹ Cumings also insists that Acheson's speech omission of Korea was intentional, as he did not wish to reveal secret military agreements with the Rhee regime.⁴⁰

Cumings massive study of the war's origins does not discuss Soviet or Chinese decision making in detail, and has only a little to say about Stalin's thought processes. He seems far more interested in the process by which the conflict became a "war for containment," i.e., ratifying the containment strategy set out in NSC-68, and then a "war for rollback" of Communism.⁴¹ Thus, he assesses Soviet-North Korean and Chinese-North Korean interactions only generally: the DPRK was never a "docile" Communist regime à la Eastern Europe, pro-Soviet Communists were never numerous in the DPRK hierarchy, and Pyongyang followed a much more autarkic economic policy than did the Soviets. Cumings says that North Koreans came to view the Soviets as only marginally helpful in their struggle against, first, the Japanese, and then the South

Koreans; he concludes that the Soviet-Korean relationship was “more complex and troubled than usually thought.”⁴²

Having shared the revolutionary struggle in northern China, the North Korean leadership was closer in outlook to Mao and his associates. Kim “shrewdly” sent some of his best troops to fight in China, and in doing so, got a safe staging area, removed the Chinese Nationalists as potential enemies, and made the victorious Chinese beholden to him in any future struggle.⁴³

Cumings suggests that, though it is impossible to determine who really started the Korean War, three competing “mosaics” provide a possible answer. The Korean peninsula was a tinderbox, and could have erupted into war any time from mid-1949 on. The first mosaic is the conventional story of the war’s early days, in which the North launches an unprovoked surprise attack all along the 38th Parallel. The third is Pyongyang’s version, in which the South began the war with a general attack, and the KPA merely responded. The second, which Cumings finds more compelling, is a more complicated story in which the ROK Army attacked a town across the border (Haeju), and then the North sprung its well-prepared surprise.⁴⁴

Others present revisionist ideas, noting for instance that Kim may have feared Rhee would follow through on his frequent invasion threats, or that he had to “strike before Rhee could stabilize his precarious position through his usual repressive measures”.⁴⁵ Also, Kim may have sought to trap the Soviets into supporting forceful unification.⁴⁶

Khrushchev Remembers. Even if one considers North Korea's attack part of a civil conflict, it merely removes the question of Soviet involvement one step. Future Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, at the time one of Stalin's closest advisors, provides one of the most comprehensive Soviet accounts of Soviet policy during the Korean conflict. Khrushchev states that the idea for the attack was completely Kim's, and does not try to suggest the South started the war. Kim, he says, presented the notion to Stalin, insisting the attack would ignite a spontaneous popular revolt

in the South. Stalin seemed interested, but asked Kim to come back with a more detailed plan. When Kim returned, Stalin expressed concern about possible American reaction, but apparently neither seriously questioned nor discouraged Kim since, as Khrushchev puts it, “no real Communist would have tried to dissuade Kim...from his compelling desire to liberate South Korea from...Rhee and from reactionary American influence. To have done so would have contradicted the Communist view of the world. I don't condemn Stalin for encouraging Kim.”⁴⁷

He also says the Soviets had been "giving arms to North Korea for some time" and that the Soviet air force was at the time protecting Pyongyang, the DPRK capital.⁴⁸ (Halliday and Cumings, on the other hand, think neither Soviet shipments nor the presence of advisors were significant).⁴⁹

Khrushchev implies that Stalin quickly grasped his miscalculation of the American response, and therefore pulled Soviet advisors out of Korea. Stalin would not even allow any ranking military advisors to be associated with the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang. Khrushchev also mentions Soviet dismay at the absence of revolution in the South and Kim's failure to crush the U.S.-ROK forces at Pusan.⁵⁰

Post-Cold War Documentation. Post-Cold War scholarship has brought to bear previously unavailable documentary resources on questions of the war's origins. The emerging picture fleshes out Khrushchev's points, and indicates that Stalin's first priority was to avoid military conflict with the U.S. It suggests that Kim Il Sung doggedly pressed Stalin to approve the invasion, but that the Soviet leader was initially reluctant until he had time to reassess its broader implications for Soviet-American and Sino-Soviet relations. Stalin then gave final approval of the attack to Mao, in order to solidify Moscow-Beijing ties, avoid direct Soviet participation in the conflict, and make the Chinese responsible to support the North Koreans, should America

intervene.

Sergei Goncharov, John W. Lewis and Xue Litai are among the first to use these sources to paint a more vivid behind-the-scenes picture of pre-war decision making. Stalin's main prewar concern was how a Korean war would affect relations with America, and so Kim was "merely a pawn in Stalin's grand chess game." Stalin urged an aggressive approach on Kim in spring, 1949, but did not call for invasion. Kim repeatedly asked for Soviet approval, and felt that he had to act quickly, since guerrilla tactics and negotiations had not worked, and the Rhee government was consolidating its political hold on the south.⁵¹

The Goncharov volume contends that the oft-cited December 1949 and February 1950 Kim-Stalin meetings in Moscow actually did not occur, though Kim continued to press through cables and letters for an attack on the South. Stalin sympathized with Kim but, before April, 1950, did not endorse an invasion. Stalin had hopes of "drawing a line between China and the West" but, at the Mao-Stalin summit in December, Mao was even more cautious than the Soviet leader. In early 1950, Kim stressed that America was unlikely to intervene, and Stalin began to feel that if a war could be concluded quickly, the U.S. would probably not get involved.⁵²

Kim needed a definitive answer, and so asked for a secret meeting in March, 1950. The Korean leader made a strong case, based on four points (likelihood of a quick victory, possibility of an uprising in South, guerrilla activities directed at the southern government, and the lack of time for the U.S. to participate in the conflict). Stalin "consented" to attack, but wanted consultations with Mao to be held before final approval. This made Mao at least partly responsible for any failure, and allowed Stalin to say that he had given the final decision to Mao.⁵³

Kim met Mao in Beijing in May. Chinese Marshall Peng Dehuai reported that Mao "disagreed" with the attack, and was more interested in invading Taiwan, but there was no way to oppose the Korean operation. China was trying to reunify, and could not deny the Koreans the same chance. Mao offered to send troops to the border, but Kim said the war would be over soon

and so were not needed. Stalin quickly endorsed Mao's decision but, anticipating Mao, had already stepped up arms and equipment shipments.⁵⁴ Stalin also sent back advisors to guide war planning—who did not share any information with the Chinese. Chinese planners were in a bad situation, knowing an attack was coming, but not knowing when.⁵⁵

As the war began, both Soviet and Chinese leaders' assessment of the conflict shifted. Stalin mulled long and short-term assessments of possible American responses; Mao supported the conflict as a revolutionary struggle, but had doubts about the wisdom of it. He quickly concluded that U.S. actions, especially stepped up support for the Nationalist government in Taiwan, were aimed at China.⁵⁶

The North Korea International Documentation Project documents indicate Stalin's keen interest in Korean affairs both before and during the conflict. He seems especially sensitive about antagonizing the Americans and is wary about starting the war. Both Kim and Mao seem eager to gain Soviet approval for their actions.⁵⁷ Weathersby summarizes many of these key documents in the late 1990s, supporting some of the Goncharov, et al. conclusions and adding new insights.

Like Goncharov and his fellow authors, she notes the lengths to which Stalin would go to avoid war with the U.S.⁵⁸ Even so, Stalin's strategic thinking had become more aggressive in 1949, and he worried about a possible revival of Japanese militarism. Kim asked Stalin several times for permission to attack the South; Stalin only approved in early 1950, and then agreed to send necessary arms and equipment. North Korea strongly depended on the Soviets, and the Soviets maintained a high level of control over North Korean operations. In fact, the original attack's planning and preparation came from the Soviet Union. Stalin did not intend the attack as a "test" of the West's commitment, and only agreed to sanction it when he thought the U.S. would not intervene.⁵⁹ Weathersby adds that Truman was wrong thinking that the Chinese collaborated with Moscow in planning the attack. In fact, the Kim-Mao meeting in May, 1950 was just a formality. Since he had just formed an alliance with the Soviets, Mao was in no position to deny Pyongyang's request.⁶⁰

Gaddis believes that Stalin felt the prospects for revolutionary advance were stronger in Asia than in Europe, where the Soviets had been effectively blocked. He also was concerned about the American-sponsored revival of Japan. Added to this was Stalin's "opportunism," i.e., his propensity to go forward wherever he thought there might not be much resistance. Acheson's ill-considered speech in January, 1950, along with an NSC strategy review the Soviet leader may have seen, could have led Stalin to conclude that the U.S. would not intervene in Korea. Kim assured Stalin that the U.S. would probably not intervene. Though initially reluctant, Mao gave his approval, for two reasons: Kim's portrayal of Stalin as more upbeat about the invasion than he actually was, and Mao's desire to maintain tenuous Soviet support for his projected invasion of Taiwan (Stalin had initially been skeptical of this operation).⁶¹

Jonathan Haslam's recent Soviet foreign policy history essentially is in accord with Goncharov, et al. and Weathersby accounts of the war's genesis. Kim first put forth the idea of the invasion in Moscow in March, 1949, and did not receive any encouragement; Stalin was "characteristically evasive" at the meeting. The Soviet Union was not prepared militarily for a major war in 1949-1950, and Western analysis assumed that Moscow did not want a major war, or even a local one. Stalin wanted Mao to agree to any war, to keep key details from him, and to ensure that China would support North Korea if the U.S. intervened.⁶²

Stalin suspicions of Mao grew toward the end of 1949. He feared Chinese rapprochement with the U.S., and so wanted to tie China more closely to the Soviet Union. At the March-April, 1950 meeting with Stalin, Kim asserted that the U.S. was unlikely to intervene, and stated that he needed to attack in late June because delays could compromise security, and the Korean rainy season could hinder operations in July. Mao was loath to have a summit with Kim unless the Korean leader had Stalin's support for an invasion. Mao was worried about possible involvement of Japanese troops in the conflict. Once Kim assured him that the Soviet leader had approved the attack, Mao met with Kim and approved the operation.⁶³

Perhaps the most mysterious aspect of Soviet behavior during the early part of the war

was the absence of a Soviet delegation at the U.N. The Soviets were at the time boycotting the U.N. to support PRC demands to take the Chinese seat in the Security Council, but their absence may have been a means to avoid responsibility for or connection with the attack.⁶⁴ Free from the threat of a Soviet veto in the Security Council, this absence allowed the Americans to pass resolutions condemning the DPRK attack as "aggression" and recommending U.N. members states, if they wished, to come to the aid of the ROK. In fact, the U.S.-led war effort in Korea was to stand as the only use of the U.N.'s collective security function. Revisionists Halliday and Cumings think the Soviets may also have hoped American use of the U.N. would suck the U.S. into a draining war that would distract attention from Europe, or possibly to destroy the effectiveness of the U.N.⁶⁵ However, subsequent Soviet behavior may undermine this notion. They quickly seemed to recognize their error in yielding U.N. sanction to the U.S., returning to the U.N. after only a few weeks away,⁶⁶ and used the U.N. at least three times to try to end the war. The first in July, 1950 was an attempt, through India, to reestablish the status quo ante bellum in exchange for PRC representation in the U.N. The U.S. rejected this proposal because it still could leave South Korea open to aggression. The second in October, 1950 was a proposal by Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vishinsky for withdrawal of foreign troops and a Korea-wide election. Since the U.S. was in the midst of its invasion of the North, it also rejected this proposal. The third involved meetings between George Kennan and Soviet U.N. Ambassador Jacob Malik, discussed below.⁶⁷

Post-Cold War scholars' overall agreement breaks down on this issue. Gaddis believes that Stalin may have kept the Soviet ambassador from attending the U.N. for political-strategic reasons. With a U.N. resolution in hand, the U.S. would be less likely to declare war, possibly against China, that might trigger Soviet treaty obligations with Beijing.⁶⁸ Vladislav Zubok says that Stalin wired the Czech president that the Soviets had deliberately avoided the crucial U.N. votes, in order to get the U.S. bogged down in an Asian war. If North Korea failed in its southern invasion, China would come to its aid, and a Sino-American war would be good thing because it

would allow the Soviets time to rebuild their military.⁶⁹ Haslam disagrees with Gaddis and Zubok, and asserts that Stalin realized his mistake in not having a representative at the U.N., and sent Ambassador Malik in July to block any further action in the Security Council. Thus, the Americans presented their next major resolution in the General Assembly, where they controlled a majority of votes.⁷⁰

The Duration

From the beginning of direct U.S. involvement in the war, the Soviets sought both an end to the war and preservation of North Korea as a friendly border buffer. When U.S. forces approached the Soviet frontier, the latter took precedence; when the two sides settled into a grinding stalemate, the former became more important. To Cold War era scholars, Chinese involvement in the war was far less ambiguous than that of the Soviets. Chinese strategic interests were fairly obvious (though apparently not to the Americans). Intervention came after warnings to U.N. forces not to cross the 38th Parallel, and later not to approach the Yalu River. Chinese were motivated, first, by desire to repay North Korean help in their revolution (large numbers of Koreans served in the PLA during the civil war, and so Mao may have found it difficult to deny help to the DPRK), to defend their border, and to supplant Soviet influence in Korea. Intervention became a chance to promote Maoist ideology and halt "American imperialism."⁷¹ They were also alarmed and angered by American linkage of the lingering Taiwan problem with the Korean War. They had been preparing to invade Taiwan in June, 1950, when the U.S. interposed the Seventh Fleet between Chiang Kai-shek and the PRC, and now feared Chiang's forces might be used against the Mainland. Nonetheless, they still sought to avoid war until the last moment, moving their forces slowly, continuing to send signals, fading away after initial attacks on U.N. forces.⁷² In his classic study, Allen S. Whiting suggests this

had to do with “the political importance of intervention in relation to its expected effect on U.S.-Japan relations, China's role in Asia, and the security of the regime against subversion or attack from domestic anti-Communist groups assisted by American or Nationalist forces, or both.”⁷³

Khrushchev suggests that Stalin was aware of Chinese intentions all along, and felt the Chinese could be useful in keeping Western armies away from Vladivostok. Chinese Premier Zhou En-lai met Stalin shortly before the Chinese intervention and agreed to give "active support" to North Korea.⁷⁴ Stalin apparently decided it would hold Soviet power in readiness to prevent attacks on China, while it “shift[ed] the burden of American resentment and hostility onto Communist China, and in turn persuade[d] or pressure[d] Peking to hold itself in readiness to pull its chestnuts out of the fire.”⁷⁵ Richard C. Thornton goes further, suggesting that Stalin saw Korea as a “tar baby” that could tie down China and make it less threatening.⁷⁶ Allen R. Millett is more conservative, stating that Stalin wanted to “spread the risks” of the war by involving the Chinese.⁷⁷ In the absence of Chinese intervention, Stalin apparently had no plans to intervene in any case, even if U.N. forces approached the Soviet border.⁷⁸ However, the Soviets did take the precaution of moving five army divisions to their Maritime Province near the Korean border.⁷⁹

Stalin's overriding imperative as the war continued seems to have been avoiding a confrontation with the U.S. He was apparently willing to sacrifice the DPRK, if necessary, because there is no indication that Soviet intervention on the ground - even under the guise of volunteer units - was ever given serious consideration. The Soviets' main role for most of the war was to supply equipment to the DPRK and the PRC,⁸⁰ though a squadron of Soviet "volunteer" pilots flew MIG-15 jet fighters in combat with U.N. aircraft, to test these new jets and gain

experience for their pilots.⁸¹ However, the Chinese resented Stalin's distancing from the conflict and "the paucity of Soviet aid,"⁸² and the Koreans became "extremely bitter about the slowness and meagre quantities of Soviet aid" early in the war.⁸³ Even on a simple matter such as military aid, the Soviets hesitated to expand their involvement.

Post-Cold War scholarship has added significantly to the picture of Maoist decision making, underlined various contentions of conventional scholarship, but adding more nuance and thought-out motivation. Jian Chen suggests that PRC leader Mao Zedong played the dominant role in decision making on Korea, and had multiple motives for intervention, most notably bolstering the new regime and spreading revolution to neighboring countries.⁸⁴ In the months before intervention, Goncharov and his collaborators note, Mao expected eventual Chinese involvement, carefully weighed Korea contingencies, and ordered the PLA to prepare for war. After the Incheon landing by U.S. forces in September, 1950, Mao felt that the danger to China had substantially increased, but the decision to go to war was still difficult for him. As soon as U.N. forces crossed the 38th Parallel, it was decided to send "volunteers" to fight in North Korea. There was significant resistance to a full commitment within the CCP, but Mao argued that a U.S. presence in the north would threaten Chinese and Soviet interests. On October 13, Mao carried the day with strong arguments for intervening early, rather than waiting for Kim's government to retreat into China. Stalin reneged on previous promises of support, but the Chinese forged ahead with their offensive in North Korea.⁸⁵

Gaddis asserts that Mao's decision to intervene was driven by his assessment of U.S. strategic moves. He interpreted the Korean intervention, sending of the U.S. fleet to the Taiwan Strait, and aid to the French in Indochina as parts of an American "invasion" of Asia. Mao apparently had intended to intervene for some time, but "got cold feet" due to doubts among the Chinese leadership. Stalin's persistent pressure to help the North Koreans, along with promises (never fulfilled) of air cover, pushed Mao to decide for the eventual intervention. Stalin was prepared for either contingency: a Sino-American war or the fall of North Korea. In neither case

would the Soviets participate in the war, and Stalin let Mao decide which one would happen.⁸⁶

Haslam agrees that Stalin was hedging his bets, preparing for either Chinese intervention or complete North Korean collapse. After Incheon, Stalin warned Kim to withdraw his forces north and into China, while pressuring Mao to intervene.⁸⁷

The North Korea International Documentation Project documents note that Stalin sees a prolonged war as useful to the communist cause. The Soviet leader frequently gives Kim Il Sung and Mao detailed advice on military tactics and political or negotiating strategy. Stalin's specific war messages include: encouragement of the North to keep fighting after the Incheon reversal, approval of training for North Korean pilots (but only in China), acceptance of the basic American negotiating position to accept the frontline as the demarcation line, agreement at various points to send more advisors and military aid. Also noteworthy is Soviet disbelief of frequently stated DPRK claims of biological warfare by U.S. forces in the North.⁸⁸

Weathersby believes that, above everything, the documents show the lengths to which Stalin would go to avoid war with the U.S.⁸⁹

The Soviets generally were not happy about the course of the war, and had mixed feelings about the conflict throughout. Though the war tied down extensive American forces, and made China dependent, it improved Mao's position vis-à-vis the Soviets and weakened Soviet influence in North Korea.⁹⁰ Accordingly, though the Soviets wanted peace in Korea, it may not have a top priority for them.

Negotiations and the End Game

By spring, 1951, both the Soviets and Americans felt the situation in Korea had stabilized sufficiently to prevent defeat, but neither side seemed able to win an outright victory.⁹¹ The Soviets, along with the Chinese, felt it was now time to seek an end to the war. George Kennan, who had just left government, on May 31 met privately with Malik, who expressed his desire for "a peaceful solution...at the earliest possible moment," and suggested the Americans contact the

Chinese and North Koreans directly. The American embassy in Moscow tried to do this, but was twice rebuffed. Malik next gave a speech June 23 advocating negotiations, which Truman answered with a speech containing a "cautious overture." U.S. ambassador to Moscow Alan Kirk then called on Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko June 27 for clarifications of the Soviet position. Gromyko suggested the "belligerents" meet for discussion on the battlefield, and confine their talks to military matters. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson decided that U.N. commander Matthew Ridgway should call for direct negotiations in Korea. This he did on June 29, the Chinese immediately accepted, suggesting negotiations begin at Kaesong, just inside the Communist lines, on July 10.⁹²

So began the longest, most frustrating phase of the war, "the talking war."⁹³ After initial argument over whether the final armistice should be at the 38th Parallel or the current battle front, the Communists accepted in principle the latter by February, 1952. The remaining seventeen months of negotiations were consumed by the issue of voluntary repatriation of prisoners of war.⁹⁴

As in the war itself, the Soviet Union played an offstage role in the negotiation drama. Her successful orchestration of the opening of peace talks resulted from a third major attempt to bring the two sides together.⁹⁵ A joint PRC-DPRK team negotiated for the Communist side, but the Chinese seem to have dominated their Korean colleagues (the Chinese were eager, and the North Koreans reluctant, to talk).⁹⁶ The team apparently cleared, or at least discussed, important matters with Moscow. On a number of occasions, the Soviets probably prodded or forced their Asian comrades to adopt a particular position. For example, the Communist negotiating team wanted to hold out for a settlement at the 38th parallel, but Moscow seems to have pushed them to accept the frontline for the ceasefire. The Soviets also occasionally raised political or propaganda issues, such as germ warfare, that found their way into the talks.⁹⁷ If the Soviets desired a quick end to the conflict, they did not push for it, and Stalin indicated that he thought drawn-out negotiations would hurt the U.S. and its allies most. They may have felt that the need

to talk was urgent, but actual peace merely desirable.⁹⁸ Weathersby says recent documents indicate that when the war settled into a stalemate, Stalin told Communist negotiators to be tough. The Soviet leader said that the U.S. had more need for a settlement, and continuing the war would keep America bogged down in Asia.⁹⁹

By 1952, the peace talks moved to the more neutral site of Panmunjom, might have dragged on indefinitely but for two dramatic changes in early 1953. First, Dwight Eisenhower, upon taking office as U.S. President in January, "unleashed" Chiang to attack Mainland China (at the time only a potent gesture toward China), and began to drop hints that he might use nuclear weapons in Korea or China if a satisfactory settlement was not soon reached. Weathersby feels that, based on recently released documents, Eisenhower's nuclear threats had little effect on the Communists. Instead, Stalin's successors were "uncertain" about how to proceed, and wanted to end the war as a way to clear the slate with the U.S.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, and more importantly for the Soviets, Stalin died in March. Stalin's successors, an initially unstable collective leadership, saw the Korean problem as an irritating burden that they wanted to unload. They also were aware that North Korean society was under serious stress because of massive U.S. bombing, and they looked with consternation upon the political effects of the war: a massive U.S. military buildup, solidification of the NATO alliance, and conclusion of a U.S.-Japan peace treaty, as well as American protection of Taiwan, funding of the French war effort in Indochina, and U.S. stockpiling of nuclear weapons.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the period occasioned the Soviets' own military buildup in response to Western moves, and this was having a draining effect on the USSR's limited postwar economic resources.¹⁰²

Following Stalin's death, events moved quickly. Nominal Soviet leader Georgi Malenkov (supported by Stalin deputy Lavrentiy Beria) issued another call for peace, and the collective leadership brought back the seasoned V.M. Molotov, who had been removed as Foreign Minister by Stalin. After top-level consultations at Stalin's funeral, the Sino-Korean negotiators accepted a U.N. proposal to discuss the exchange of sick and wounded prisoners. This broke the logjam, and

an exchange was agreed upon in April. A general agreement on prisoners was set in May. The only remaining issue was Rhee's refusal to accept the nearly completed agreement. The heaviest Communist attacks of the war then nearly buckled U.N. lines, and the U.S. reluctantly decided to take responsibility for ROK compliance. This final obstacle removed, the two sides signed the armistice, and fighting finally ceased at the end of July.¹⁰³

Conclusion: the War's Effect on the Soviets

For the Soviet Union, the Korean War was in many ways the wrong war, but it played a crucial, yet indirect, role in it. Stalin and the post-Stalinist leadership exhibited classical realist thinking about Soviet national interests, i.e., national interests, national security, and maximization of national goals took precedence over other foreign policy considerations. Whatever his motivations, which apparently centered on both global and regional considerations, Stalin at least consented in Kim's attack on South Korea. He probably thought that, despite clear risks, the war was likely to yield benefits in both traditional strategic and geopolitical terms. In international relations terms, it has been suggested that Stalin was a defensive realist, i.e., seeking only sufficient power to maintain the balance of power, so that no other power can endanger either the overall international system or a country's own,¹⁰⁴ yet the Soviet leader's realism was much more idiosyncratic than this would suggest. Stalin pragmatically, albeit often misguidedly, employed any means necessary to protect the territorial integrity of the Soviet homeland.¹⁰⁵ His "paranoia" (and occasional rigidity) about the external environment was manifest by the 1930s, and then powerfully shaped by the Soviet Union's World War II trauma.¹⁰⁶ In Korea, he took special pains to not involve Soviet forces in the war, so as to avoid military conflict with the U.S. Stalin's endorsement of the risky North Korean scheme may also be taken as an illustration of normal Soviet foreign policy decision making, the "operational code" outlined by Alexander George, i.e., initiating an exploratory action in a fluid context to see what results can be obtained.¹⁰⁷ The code may amount to little more than a combination of classical realism and

Marxist-Leninist imperatives, and the leadership styles of post-Stalinist officials differed markedly from Comrade Stalin's approach, but it summarizes common Soviet foreign policy approaches. It may have seemed a near-perfect set-up: a swift blow by a proxy without any direct Soviet connection. The Soviets would derive all the benefits, and none of the blame.

Once it became clear that the Americans would not let the North Koreans get away with devouring the South, the overriding imperative became preventing global war (objective 1), or even a military confrontation with the U.S. Like China, the USSR did not want U.S. forces on its border (objective 2) or the fall of the DPRK (objective 3). Obviously, Objective 1 was more important than Objective 2, and thus Objective 2 became more important than Objective 3. Preventing global war meant a nearly complete hands-off policy. Keeping U.S. forces away from the border necessitated (but could not require) Chinese intervention. North Korean survival was desirable, but could be sacrificed to objectives 1 and 2. All this is in keeping with George W. Breslauer's scheme of Soviet foreign policy role priorities. Objective 1, then, involved a superpower role, Objective 2 the continental power role, and Objective 3 the leader of world communist movement role.¹⁰⁸ In this sense, rational decision making can be seen as the overriding factor at work in Soviet decisions related to the development of the Korean conflict following the initial attack. Overall, such objectives fit Stalin's realist foreign policy; to the end, he put major foreign policy decisions emphasizing spheres of influence and protection of borders above ideological considerations. Unexplained incidents such as the Soviet absence from the U.N. Security Council at the time of Kim's attack, or the murkiness of Soviet consultations with Kim, may be in part explained by Stalin's idiosyncratic leadership style.

The Korean War was a turning point for both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and led to the globalization of the Cold War. The Soviets saw the changes brought about in U.S. strategic thinking, such as the adoption of NSC-68 and its huge military buildup, as negative outcomes and unintended consequences of the war. The Korean War years coincided with Stalin's final years, and began when another communist state--North Korea--took aggressive action

semi-independently of Moscow. For the first time, yet another communist state, China, led the socialist world in its politico-military response to a major crisis. Stalin's maneuvering of China into the war bound the two communist giants together short-term, and the PRC had no relations with the U.S. for over twenty years, but mistrust contributed to the later Sino-Soviet split. Soviet and Chinese leaders did not see eye-to-eye on various issues. These included differing assessments of Stalin's reign, whether or not to pursue "peaceful coexistence" with the U.S., and the proper way to promote domestic economic development. This sense of mistrust that began with Mao's visit to the Soviet Union in late 1949 boiled over in the late 1950s, leading to the Sino-Soviet split in 1962 and a brief border war in 1969. The alliance remained together for "negative rather than positive reasons," but could not hide "underlying friction."¹⁰⁹ China's pride in fighting superpower America to a stalemate, combined with her perception that she was doing the Kremlin's dirty work and not getting much support in return, motivated a more independent postwar foreign policy.¹¹⁰ The Chinese, along with the North Koreans, were proving themselves quite unlike the more docile Communists of Eastern Europe.

For a time, the Soviets were forced to focus exclusively on Asia, and for the first time Moscow gave significant support to a Communist revolutionary movement in a developing country away from its borders, viz., Vietnam. There were to be certain similarities between the Korean and subsequent Vietnam Wars, but the Soviets did not make the later American mistake of equating them in strategic terms. Once again, though, the Soviets would wrangle with the Chinese over the appropriate socialist response to an American war in Asia.¹¹¹

Ultimately, the USSR did not derive much tangible benefit from this wrong war. Stalin got the worst of both worlds, held responsible for the outbreak of the war, yet castigated for not sufficiently coming to the aid of fellow Communists. Ultimately, the Soviets may not have had much choice. Stalin's personalist style of decision making, occasional disregard for details, and ad hoc probing method made a step-wise approval of Kim's attack possible. His sensitivity to superpower relations ensured that he would not enter the war, but only gradually seek peace.

The post-Stalin collective leadership's nervousness about the situation it inherited then forced it to quickly wrap up this Asian misadventure.

Since the Chinese saved the Kim regime, Soviet influence in North Korea fell off after the armistice.¹¹² Stalin's "highhanded, cynical" treatment of North Korea taught Kim "lessons" about the need for self-reliance, and warped Pyongyang's foreign policy throughout the Cold War.¹¹³ In the post-Korean War era, a "Korean triangle" developed, in which the DPRK played off Soviet and Chinese influence to gain control of internal affairs and stay independent of her two large fraternal neighbors in pursuing an "assertive foreign policy, aimed at Korea's reunification under Communist rule."¹¹⁴ Kim Il Sung used the post-war environment to purge anyone perceived as not completely loyal, including several key figures with ties to the Soviets.¹¹⁵ Despite the Kim dynasty's continuing desire for reunification, Pyongyang never precipitated another major conventional strike south of the DMZ. Today, unification is only slightly closer today than when Kim Il Sung launched his risky attack in 1950. Post-Soviet Russia maintains cordial ties with the DPRK, but China has gained the preeminent external influence in the impoverished socialist state.

Endnotes

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- ⁶ Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: the Unknown War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 16.
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⁴⁰ Cumings (2011), 72-3.

⁴¹ Cumings (1990), 757-75.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 328-49.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 374-76.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 568, 615-21.

⁴⁵ Dobbs, 189-90; Paterson, 479. The Rhee government's first four years were precarious, involving a constant struggle by Rhee to stay in office and the opposition to remove him. His Liberal Party performed poorly in the 1950 parliamentary elections, and he had to put down frequent insurgencies and guerrilla movements in various parts of the country.

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⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 146-7, 149.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 149-50, 153.

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