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**THE KOREAN WAR JUNE-OCTOBER 1950:
INCHON AND STALIN IN THE “TRIGGER VS.
JUSTIFICATION” DEBATE**

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ABSTRACT

China's decision to enter the Korean War in 1950 is a historical puzzle: why would China, a much weaker country, enter into a military confrontation with the United States, a superpower? The rationale for Chairman Mao Zedong's intervention in Korea carries strategic lessons for the contemporary crisis on the Korean Peninsula, as well as for Sino-American relations. Utilizing newly declassified Russian documents made available at the Cold War International History Project from 1994-2004, this paper critically assesses this new evidence concurrently with the existing literature that has emerged so far, and seeks to contribute to the "trigger vs. justification" debate surrounding China's entry. Three shortcomings of this debate are identified: 1) whether Mao would have intervened had the US military stopped at the 38th parallel is difficult to determine; 2) Mao's vacillations up till the very last minute cast doubt on the *justification* argument i.e. offensive intervention driven by revolutionary ideology and politics; and 3) as a result, this ignores the complex dimensions of decision-making and interaction between Stalin and the Chinese leadership, as well as within the Chinese leadership itself. This paper argues that one significant variable overlooked heretofore is the American landings at Inchon on 19 September 1950. This is followed by in-depth analyses of the following three main interactions that Inchon engendered – 1) the policy shifts within the Truman administration; 2) the Stalin-Mao manoeuvres; and 3) the debates and dilemmas within the Chinese Politburo. This paper concludes that it was Inchon, along with additional pressure from Stalin, and not the crossing of the 38th parallel, that triggered China's eventual entry into Korea.

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THE KOREAN WAR JUNE-OCTOBER 1950: INCHON AND STALIN IN THE “TRIGGER VS. JUSTIFICATION” DEBATE

INTRODUCTION

The Sino-American confrontation in the Korean War witnessed the most populous nation as well as the most powerful country at war for the first time. China inflicted on the United States the longest retreat in its military history, and the war spurred American re-armament not undertaken since the end of the Second World War. This watershed event embroiled the two countries in a bitter, expensive, and inconclusive conflict that strained relations for the subsequent two decades. Most importantly, it manifested the Cold War into Asia, in a political and military confrontation of major proportions.¹ Yet, were these foregone conclusions? Why was China, with its stark qualitative and technological inferiority, confident of winning? What compelled China into war, military inferiority and domestic difficulties notwithstanding? This paper focuses on the critical first four months of the Korean War, and engages the pertinent and ongoing contentions about China’s decision to confront the US in Korea.

Many earlier scholars attribute China’s entry into the Korean War to be *triggered* by the US advance across the 38th parallel, and towards the Yalu River.²

Allen Whiting in his classic landmark study *China Crosses the Yalu* amply explored

¹ Jonathan Pollack, “The Korean War and Sino-American Relations”, in Harry Harding and Yuan Ming, eds., *Sino-American Relations, 1945-1955: A Joint Reassessment of a Critical Decade*, Wilmington, Delaware, A Scholarly Imprint, 1989, p. 213.

² See, for example, Melvin Gurtov and Byong-Moo Hwang, *China Under Threat: The Politics of Strategy and Diplomacy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, pp. 25-62; Peter Lowe, *The Origins of the Korean War*, London and New York, Longman, 1986, pp. 189-201; Ronald Keith, *The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai*, New York, St. Martin’s, 1989, pp. 45-7; Robert Simmons, *The Strained Alliance: Peking, Pyongyang, Moscow, and the Politics of the Korean Civil War*, New York, The Free Press, 1975; Richard Whelan, *Drawing the Line: The Korean War, 1950-1953*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1990, pp. 236-8.

the question, and his conclusions enjoy wide acceptance in the West even today. He contends that Chinese xenophobic attitudes, security concerns, expansionist tendencies and Communist ideology were the reasons the PRC entered the war.³ Writing twenty years later, William Stueck argues that the intervention might have been altogether averted had the US adopted different tactics in the aftermath of Inchon, specifically in not crossing the 38th parallel.⁴ A substantial majority of Chinese scholars also share these assumptions, manifested in Chinese publications on the “war to resist America and assist Korea” that appeared in the 1980s.⁵

In the 1980s, fresh Chinese archival sources led to major revisionist interpretations of the conflict.⁶ In Chen Jian’s seminal inquiry into these sources, he discovers that more than a month before the Inchon landing, Chairman Mao Zedong and his colleagues had been inclined to send troops to Korea, and China’s military and political preparations had begun even a month earlier in July. President Truman’s decision to neutralise the Taiwan Straits with the US Seventh Fleet had a profound effect in Beijing.⁷ Hypersensitivity to any hints of American aggression towards China induced Mao to interpret the Fleet deployment as a first step towards American expansion.⁸ These led Chen to conclude that the decisions to intervene went far

³ Allen Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War*, New York, Macmillan Company, 1960, pp. 2-13.

⁴ William Stueck, *The Road to Confrontation: American Policy Toward China and Korea, 1947-1950*, Chapel Hill, The University of Carolina Press, 1981, pp. 254-5.

⁵ See Chen Jian, *China’s Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 226, fn. 5.

⁶ See Chen, *Road*; Zhang Shuguang, *Mao’s Military Romanticism: China & the Korean War, 1950-1953*, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 1995; Michael Sheng, *Battling Western Imperialism: Mao, Stalin, and the United States*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997.

⁷ The Seventh Fleet is the largest of the US Navy’s forward-deployed fleets, operating in the Arabian Gulf, the Indian and the Western Pacific Oceans.

⁸ Gaddis, John Lewis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 78.

beyond the defence of China's border security.⁹ Thus, he contends that Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai's diplomatic warnings are tactics to establish a plausible justification for entering the war, rather than about Mao's reluctance to fight American troops in Korea.¹⁰ Another Chinese scholar, Zhang Shuguang, takes it further and contended that Beijing's decision to intervene was significantly shaped by Mao's optimistic willingness to confront the US in Korea.¹¹ Mao was not intimidated by US firepower and air superiority, and he even believed that the Chinese ground forces, if manoeuvred well, could swiftly obliterate US forces. Although hopeful that Stalin would commit Soviet air power to Korea, Mao was too anxious to face down the "arrogant" Americans to call off the operation when the Soviet leader refused to provide the Chinese infantry with air cover.¹²

However, it appears that neither interpretation is *entirely* correct.¹³ The analyses of conversations between Josef Stalin and Mao by Goncharov *et al.*, and of the debates within Mao's Politburo by Chen, reveal two key considerations that had a profound impact on Mao's strategic thinking. First, Mao faced considerable objections and doubts among his colleagues within the Politburo. Second, Stalin's wily manoeuvres and renegeing on his promises for providing military materiel exposed the vacillations Mao faced. As a result of these two factors, Mao, though predisposed towards sending troops, only issued command at the very last moment – one day before the Chinese People's Volunteers crossed the Yalu on 19 October 1950. In the days leading up to the decision to intervene, there were several days of

⁹ Chen, *Road*, chaps. 4-5. Chen attributes the aggressive strategy both to defensive motivations and to Mao's revolutionary goals, although he stresses the importance of the latter.

¹⁰ Chen, *Road*, pp. 179-181 and Zhang, *Military Romanticism*, p. 85.

¹¹ Zhang, *Military Romanticism*, p. 85.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 78.

indecision on Mao's part, even causing him several sleepless nights.¹⁴ Thus, these two considerations – that the Chinese intervention in Korea was *wholly* triggered by *realpolitik* concerns or that offensive intervention driven by revolutionary ideology and politics provided a convenient justification for executing an extant decision – appear problematic.

Within the present historiographical literature, the revisionist pendulum has swung back to the 38th parallel as the trigger.¹⁵ Thomas Christensen, building on the analyses of Chen, Goncharov *et al.*, and Zhang, argues that the October telegrams between Stalin and Mao demonstrate that Mao entered Korea in October for the same reasons Whiting offered in his classic account – that China felt strategically threatened by American presence in North Korea.¹⁶ However, Christensen asserted that Mao's fears were even deeper than Whiting and other Western analysts have perceived. The 13 October telegram to Zhou reveals that not only was Mao afraid of an immediate American push beyond the Yalu, but also of the long-term economic and domestic political implications if he allowed American forces up to the Sino-Korean border.¹⁷ The timing of Chinese actions also supports the explanation that Zhou's attempt to deter American crossing of the 38th parallel was the "last chance" to avert a military confrontation. This, Christensen argues, is because Mao's initial decision of 2 October to enter the war was made one day after General Douglas MacArthur called for the surrender of all Korean People's Army forces on both sides

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁵ See, Thomas Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947-1958*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 156; William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 39, 125.

¹⁶ Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 156; Whiting, *China Crosses*, p. 172; Shen Zhihua, "China Sends Troops to Korea: Beijing's Policy-Making Process", in Li Xiaobing and Li Hongshan, eds., *China & the U.S.: A New Cold War History*, New York, University Press of America, Inc., 1998, pp. 13-39.

¹⁷ Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 156.

of the parallel. Mao gave his initial orders to form the CPV on 8 October, and American troops began crossing the parallel the next day. That same day Mao informed Kim Il Sung of China's intention to enter the war.¹⁸ Therefore, Christensen concludes that the American crossing of the 38th parallel on 7 October was the triggering event that induced Mao to engage the US militarily.¹⁹ While there is consensus among historians that the decision to cross the 38th parallel was an "incredible blunder" for its triggering effect, consensus does not exist on the reason behind this escalation of the war.²⁰

RE-THINKING THE *TRIGGER VS. JUSTIFICATION* DEBATE

In this paper, I identify three shortcomings within the current debate. First, whether Mao would have intervened had the US stopped at the 38th parallel is difficult to determine, as Mao had prepared for intervention well before the Inchon landings.²¹ This credits the argument that crossing the 38th parallel enabled China to *justify* its entry. However, it should be noted that inclination toward intervention does not equate with justification. Second, Mao's vacillations and indecisions up till the very last minute cast serious doubt on the *justification* argument. The *justification vs. trigger* debate assumes that Beijing's decision to enter was a linear and lucid one, and that China had the wherewithal to activate its troops across the Yalu once Americans crossed the 38th parallel. It also depreciates the significant role of Stalin in precipitating the confrontation. Third, and as a result, this ignores a complex

¹⁸ Ibid., 157.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ James Matray, "The Korean War", in Robert Schulzinger, ed., *A Companion to American Foreign Relations*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2003, p. 277.

²¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know*, p. 81.

dimension of decision-making and interactions between Stalin and the Chinese leadership, as well as within the Chinese leadership.

One significant variable that has been overlooked in the literature so far is the American amphibious landings at Inchon. By analysing the following three main interactions – 1) the discussions and decisions within the Truman administration; 2) the Stalin-Mao manoeuvres; and 3) the debates and dilemmas within the Chinese Politburo – *before* and *after* Inchon, a causal link between Inchon and China’s entry becomes apparent. Utilising newly declassified Russian documents from 1994 to 2004 made available at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars’ Cold War International History Project, I attempt to demonstrate how the Inchon landings had catalytic effects on both Stalin and Mao.²² It was Inchon that convinced them both of the necessity to intervene. Most importantly, as Stalin panicked in the face of KPA disintegration and advancing Americans, he began to focus overwhelmingly on the complicated and grave task of stopping the American advance without drawing the USSR into war with it. These occurred *before* Americans crossed the 38th parallel, thus attenuating the causal effects of the US crossing. Historian Walter LaFeber insightfully observes that America’s crossing of the parallel represented the political dimension of the turning-point of the Korean War.²³ But as scholars heretofore analysed Inchon through a military lens, the political dimensions of Inchon as more

²² Documents from the Archive of the President, Russian Federation [henceforth APRV] – through the Cold War International History Project *Bulletin*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Virtual Archive [available]: http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.Collection&class=New%20Evidence%20on%20the%20Korean%20War

²³ Walter LaFeber, “Crossing the 38th: the Cold War in Microcosm”, in Lynn Miller & Ronald Pruessen, eds., *Reflections on the Cold War: A Quarter of a Century of American Foreign Policy*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1974, p. 86; see also, James Matray, “Truman’s Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea”, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 66, No. 2, September 1979, pp. 314-33.

than a mere “masterpiece of amphibious ingenuity”²⁴ was ignored. In turn, three critical links were overlooked – first, *how* American policy was fine-tuned as a result of the Inchon success, which precipitated the drive up to the Yalu; second, *how* Inchon convinced Mao of the necessity to intervene; third, and more importantly, *how* Inchon convinced Stalin that Mao *had to* intervene. Stalin’s abiding anxieties about a direct Soviet-American military clash – and his evident role in overseeing the broad directions of Sino-Soviet strategy in the autumn of 1950 – virtually guaranteed that China rather than the USSR would bear the principal responsibility and risk in assisting North Korea. In the final analysis, Inchon altered China’s calculus of intervention, transforming its revolutionary forward policy into a defensive necessity, leading to its eventual entry.

THE INCHON LANDINGS AND AMERICA’S ENTRY INTO THE KOREAN WAR

American involvement in Korea arrived swiftly. Hours after receiving news of North Korea’s attack, it first took the Korean issue to the Security Council of the United Nations, which immediately called for a Security Council meeting for the next day.²⁵ At the emergency session the next afternoon, the US presented a resolution calling on North Korea to cease hostilities and withdraw to the 38th parallel.²⁶ American leaders regarded the resolution as legitimate authority for the use of non-Korean forces to re-establish the 38th parallel as a boundary.²⁷ The Seventh Fleet then proceeded from the Philippines toward Japan, and the air force was to draw up plans

²⁴ David Rees, *Korea: The Limited War*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1964, p. 84.

²⁵ Roy Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu: June-November 1950*, Washington D.C., Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1975, p. 37.

²⁶ Stueck, *Confrontation*, p. 177.

²⁷ Glenn Paige, *The Korean Decision*, New York, Free Press, 1968, p. 121.

to destroy Soviet air bases in East Asia. Next, the State Department drafted a statement elaborating the actions taken by the US, to be presented to Congress on 27 June.²⁸ On 29 June, Truman committed US ground troops onto the peninsula when increased air and naval action failed to halt North Korea's advance.²⁹ Finally, major decisions were made on 26 June at another top-level meeting.³⁰ The situation in Korea had become clearer: North Korea had no intention of obeying the Security Council resolution to end hostilities and retreat to the 38th parallel; South Korean forces desperately needed American assistance to repulse the attack.³¹ On 27 June, Truman publicly released a statement elaborating the actions American undertook, which evoked support and relief throughout America and around the world.³² Just before midnight, the Security Council passed the American proposal, and the gauntlet was thrown – America entered the Korean War.³³

NSC-81

The remarkable efforts in Washington in July succeeded in strengthening the unified command in Korea and staving off its complete collapse.³⁴ On 19 July, President Rhee had cabled Truman: “For anything less than reunification to come out of these great sacrifices of Koreans and their powerful allies would be unthinkable.”³⁵ Truman seemed to agree with Rhee. In a message to Congress on that day, Truman implied that the US would attempt to restore security to *all* Korea, though the

²⁸ *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* Vol. 7, *Korea*, Washington, The U.S. Printing Office, 1976, pp. 160-1.

²⁹ For a detailed secondary account, see Paige, *Decision*; and Stueck, *International*, p. 10.

³⁰ Stueck, *Confrontation*, p. 179; and Schnabel, *Policy*, p. 72.

³¹ Stueck, *Confrontation*, p. 179.

³² Paige, *Decision*, pp. 200-1; and Stueck, *Confrontation*, p. 180.

³³ Appleman, *Naktong*, p. 47.

³⁴ Schnabel, *Policy*, p. 115.

³⁵ Trumbull Higgins, *Korea and the Fall of MacArthur: A Precipice in Limited War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 51.

boundaries were not articulated in his speech.³⁶ The State Department then began plans to advance beyond the 38th parallel. This drew disagreements from George Kennan, then at the Policy Planning Staff, who did not wish MacArthur to head towards the “gates of Vladivostok,” for the Soviet would never have allowed it.³⁷ However, if the objectives of the war were simply to restore the international boundary at the parallel, America would find itself back to where it was before 1949, supporting South Korea at the expense of other more important international strategic goals.³⁸ This was the dilemma Secretary of State Dean Acheson felt when he wrote to Paul Nitze, head of the PPS on 10 July: “In the longer run, if we should succeed in reoccupying the South, the question of garrisoning and supporting it would arise. This would be a hard task for us to take on, and yet it hardly seemed sensible to repel the attack and then abandon the country. I could not see the end of it.”³⁹

Soon a draft memorandum by the PPS was submitted to the State Department on 25 July, to decide upon US policy regarding the advance beyond the 38th parallel.⁴⁰ On 1 September, this directive that had come to be known as “NSC 81” was completed by the National Security Council.⁴¹ Ten days later, Truman approved the directive, advocating military actions north of the parallel. It recognised that “a stalemate freezing the U.N. forces indefinitely in Korea or returning to the *status quo ante* 25 June would be undesirable.” MacArthur could cross the parallel, “provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major

³⁶ Harry Truman, “Special Message to Congress”, 19 July 1950, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1950*, Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1951, p. 527.

³⁷ George Kennan, *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1967, p. 489.

³⁸ Christensen, “Threats, Assurances, and the Last Chance for Peace: The Lessons of Mao’s Korean War Telegrams, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Summer 1992, pp. 122-154, p. 130.

³⁹ Dean Acheson, *Present at Creation: My Years at the State Department*, New York, WW Norton & Co., 1969, pp. 450-1.

⁴⁰ “Draft Memorandum Prepared by the Policy Planning Staff, *FRUS*, p. 469.

⁴¹ “Memorandum by the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, *FRUS*, p. 685.

Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea.”⁴²

INCHON AND NSC-81

MacArthur received Truman’s directive on the morning of the Inchon landings. The daring amphibious operation had caught the North Koreans completely off guard, and reversed American fortunes in Korea. It successfully divided North Korean troops at the waist of Korea – the forces south of the 38th parallel were trapped and the forces north of it were in disarray. Inchon fell, and the KPA’s collapse was imminent.⁴³ It was a turning point not just for the Americans on the battlefield, but also Truman’s recent policy shift.

Ten days after American troops stormed Inchon, the JCS sent a directive for MacArthur’s future operations in Korea to Secretary of Defense General George Marshall. The situation in Korea had become urgent – while reports were encouraging on the military front, the Army G-3 was perturbed that MacArthur would soon reach the 38th parallel “and the limit of his current instructions.” The Inchon manoeuvres had left little time for a prudent consideration of diplomatic alternatives. As MacArthur had previously been ordered not to cross the 38th parallel without specific authority from the President,⁴⁴ it was feared that a delay in definite orders from Washington would break the US forces’ momentum in their advance and thus allow

⁴² “Report by the National Security Council to the President”, *FRUS*, pp. 712-21.

⁴³ Schnabel, *Policy*, p. 173. For a detailed rendition of the Inchon landings, see, Robert Heinl, *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon-Seoul Campaign*, New York, J.B. Lippincott Company, 1958.

⁴⁴ See, “Report by the National Security Council to the President”, *FRUS*, p. 716.

the KPA an easy retreat.⁴⁵ This new “amplifying” directive built on the NSC-81 was approved by Truman on 27 September, and immediately transmitted to MacArthur via the JCS. MacArthur’s military objective was now the “destruction of the North Korean armed forces,” provided there were no major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces’ announcement of intended or actual entry.⁴⁶ MacArthur, following Truman’s directive, agreed to use only South Korean forces up to sixty miles southeast of the mouth of the Yalu River, with the objective of capturing Pyongyang.⁴⁷ That same day, Marshall sent MacArthur a confidential telegram saying, “We want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of the 38th parallel.”⁴⁸

This dispatch reflected a new US position, prodded on by the positive battlefield developments, to avoid any implication that the movement of UN ground troops into North Korea required prior permission from the UN General Assembly.⁴⁹ Indeed true to form, MacArthur replied, “Unless and until the enemy capitulates, I regard all of Korea open for our military operations.”⁵⁰

STALIN AND THE INCHON LANDINGS

It has been argued by Russian scholar Alexandre Mansourov that Stalin’s concern about the American crossing of the 38th parallel was the main reason he decided to arm large numbers of Chinese forces and encouraged them to fight the

⁴⁵ Schnabel, *Policy*, p. 181.

⁴⁶ “Secretary of Defense (Marshall) to the President”, *FRUS*, pp. 792-3.

⁴⁷ Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences*, New York. McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1964, p. 358; and Acheson, *Creation*, p. 453.

⁴⁸ Schnabel, *Policy*, p. 183.

⁴⁹ Stueck, *Confrontation*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ Schnabel, *Policy*, pp. 183-4.

Americans.⁵¹ His evidence is in a ciphered telegram from Stalin to Zhou dated 5 July 1950, in which Stalin stated, “We consider it correct to 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 38th parallel. We will do our best to provide the air cover for these units.”⁵²

Mansourov’s argument, *prima facie*, appears correct. However, he over-emphasises the role of the 38th parallel in Stalin’s calculations. Upon closer examination, it appears that the Inchon landings factored more crucially in Stalin’s mind. First, the North Korean assault on the battlefield had been an overwhelming success. Seoul had fallen on the fourth day of invasion, and the KPA drove through another sixty-five kilometres south of Seoul by the fifth. On 28 June, the North’s 6th Division started crossing the Han River and occupied Kimpo Airfield the next day. On the morning of 30 June, the 8th Regiment crossed the Han River.⁵³ Within three weeks, the KPA drove the South Koreans from the south bank; and by 5 July, everything north of the Han River had been lost.⁵⁴ The North’s onslaughts were to continue through the month of July, before heavy UN reinforcements arrived in Korea at the month’s end, and the US troops establishing the defensive Pusan perimeter in early August.⁵⁵ Thus, at the time of Stalin’s telegram, the possibility of US troops crossing the 38th parallel was slim.

⁵¹ Alexandre Mansourov, “Stalin, Mao, Kim, and China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War, September 16-October 15, 1950: New Evidence from the Russian Archives” in *Bulletin Virtual Archive*, [available at]: http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=373 [accessed on 12 March 2005].

⁵² Ciphered Telegram, Stalin to Roshchin with message for Zhou Enlai, 5 July 1950, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 331, list 79, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7 Winter 1995.

⁵³ Appleman, *Naktong*, pp. 52-3.

⁵⁴ Burton Kaufman, *The Korean Conflict*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1999, p. 7; and Appleman, *Naktong*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ Appleman, *Naktong*, pp. 247-8.

Second, even more illuminating is Stalin's grand strategy. His main goal in Korea was to expand the USSR's buffer zone – and Korea gave Stalin a launch-pad from which he could invade Japan in future conflicts.⁵⁶ Likewise, Korea provided a buffer against future Japanese aggression.⁵⁷ However, in approving an attack on the South, Stalin worried about the USSR being dragged into a direct conflict with America, its more powerful adversary.⁵⁸ Shen argues that Acheson's Press Club speech underpinning the shifting US attitudes toward Korea and Taiwan induced Stalin to agree to and support Kim's invasion.⁵⁹ Stalin had been surprised and alarmed by the swift American entry into the Korean War, as America had displayed palpable nonchalance in Korea.⁶⁰ The year before, on 23 March 1949, Truman had ordered the approximately 7,500 American soldiers to leave South Korea by 30 June 1949.⁶¹ That same month, MacArthur defined South Korea as being beyond the bounds of direct American military responsibility.⁶² Then Acheson went further in a speech to the National Press Club the following year on 12 January 1950, excluding South Korea from the American defence perimeter in the Pacific.⁶³ He stated that "... should such an attack [on South Korea] occur... the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it..."⁶⁴ The USSR and North Korea took this as an explicit hint that America had no intention of fighting for South Korea. However, even though Washington did

⁵⁶ Goncharov, Sergei, Lewis, John & Litai, Xue, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, & the Korean War*, California, Stanford University Press, 1993, pp. 151-2.

⁵⁷ Kathryn Westersby, "Should We Fear This? Stalin and the Danger of War with America", *CWIHP Working Paper*, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ "Shifirtelegramma", from Stalin to Shtykov, 31 January 1950, AVPRF, F. 059a, Op. 5a, D. 3, Pap. 11, Ll. 93, in *Bulletin* No. 5, Spring 1995, p. 9.

⁶⁰ Weathersby, "Stalin, Mao, and the End of the Korean War", in Odd Arne Westad, *Brothers in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 111, n7.

⁶¹ Stueck, *Confrontation*, pp. 153-4.

⁶² John Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War*, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press, 1959, p. 17.

⁶³ Department of State, Bulletin 22, 23 January 1950, pp 111-8, in Kaufman, *Conflict*, pp. 122-8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

not see South Korea as vital to American strategic interests, it was widely acknowledged within the American administrations that maintaining a pro-Western South Korea enhanced American prestige⁶⁵ – a sentiment that Acheson keenly shared. Thus, while excluding South Korea from America's defence perimeter, he nonetheless asserted that an invasion of South Korea would invoke "the commitments of the entire civilised world under the Charter of the United Nations."⁶⁶ Stalin had overlooked this consideration, optimistically believing that America would not intervene when North Korea attacked the South.⁶⁷

Three primary concerns nonetheless remained in Stalin's mind. First, the possibility of US intervention in Korea; second, North Korea's inadequate readiness for war; and third, his perception of the success of the Chinese Communist Party as a double-edged sword – that its rise threatened Soviet dominance of the international Communist movement.⁶⁸ When America entered Korea, not only did Stalin attempt to distance the USSR from responsibility for the invasion, he also discussed the event in his private communications with Terentii Shtykov, the Soviet envoy to North Korea, as though he were negligibly involved in the invasion.⁶⁹ In Stalin's calculations, confronting US intervention would have to involve China.⁷⁰ Thus Stalin consistently stressed the need to obtain Mao's consent for an attack on the South during his discussions with Kim. In the final conversation between Stalin and Kim in April 1950,

⁶⁵ Chen, *Road*, p. 119.

⁶⁶ See, Kaufman, *Conflict*.

⁶⁷ Stalin had approved Kim's request to form three additional divisions, as well as to use the Soviet credit for 1951 to buy Soviet armaments for the three divisions. See, Ciphored Telegram, Shtykov to Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Vyshinsky re meeting with Kim Il Sung, AVPRF, listy 125-6 (fond and opis unavailable); and AVPRF, fond 059a, opis 5a, delo 4, papka 11, listy 145-6, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 95/6, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Shen, "Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War: Stalin's Strategic Goals in the Far East", *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Spring 2000, pp. 44-68, pp. 51 & 54.

⁶⁹ Weathersby, *Fear?*, p. 16.

⁷⁰ Shen, "Sino-Soviet Relation", pp. 62-3.

Stalin urged Kim to consult Mao again.⁷¹ Stalin then cabled Mao on 14 May and informed him that he had agreed to Kim's invasion, but the final decision rested with China and North Korea. If the Chinese were reluctant, the matter had to be postponed.⁷² Clearly, Stalin was seeking to present China with a *fait accompli* where Mao would have no choice but to agree to the invasion and help North Korea when needed.

How then, did the Inchon landings trigger Stalin? The Inchon success and the subsequent disintegration of the KPA had transformed the Korean conflict into a serious military crisis for the USSR. Stalin panicked at the advance of American troops into North Korean territory. In this new, far more dangerous situation, Stalin began concentrating on the difficult and urgent task of finding a way to stop the American advance, without drawing the USSR into war with the US.⁷³ Immediately after Inchon, Kim had dispatched two of his top lieutenants, Pak Il U and Pak Hon Yong to Beijing to ask for emergency help. But they soon learnt that the Chinese had still not determined their own course of actions, and simply replied ambiguously, "we vow to be a power supporter of the Korean people."⁷⁴ Stalin was livid that his grand strategy might be in jeopardy. On 27 September, he convened an emergency meeting of the Soviet Politburo – the first in a series of Politburo meetings assessing the USSR's national interests in Korea.⁷⁵ Afterwards, in a telegram to his two key advisers, General Alexandre Vasiliev, the Chief Soviet Military Adviser to the KPA, and Shtykov, Stalin railed about their "strategic illiteracy" and "incompetence in

⁷¹ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 145.

⁷² "Shifrtelogramma", from Stalin to Mao, 14 May 1950, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* No. 4, Fall 1994, p. 61.

⁷³ Mansourov, "New Evidence".

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

intelligence matters.” They had failed to grasp the strategic importance of the Inchon landings and its grave implications where Stalin did.⁷⁶

More importantly, Stalin began to believe that the advance of American troops could in no way be checked unless the USSR directly intervened – the last thing he wished to do.⁷⁷ On 1 October, Stalin received Kim’s desperate request for help. The Inchon landings had cut off the North’s communication lines; they were surrounded, “torn into pieces” and could not receive munitions and food rations.⁷⁸ Stalin immediately telegraphed Mao and Zhou saying, “[O]ur Korean friends have no troops capable of resistance in the vicinity of Seoul. Hence one needs to consider the way toward the 38th parallel wide open.” He requested that China move at least five to six divisions toward the 38th parallel to aid the KPA.⁷⁹

The cumulative discussions of Stalin’s Politburo meetings between 27 September and 5 October culminated in Soviet policy shift towards Korea. All Politburo members concurred that a direct Soviet-US confrontation in Korea was to be avoided at all costs, even at the risk of abandoning North Korea.⁸⁰ In his memoirs, Krushchev recollected that when the Inchon landings proved a stunning success, Stalin resigned to the idea that North Korea – the buffer that he sought - would be

⁷⁶ Telegram from Stalin to Zakharov and Shtykov, 27 September 1950, APRF, fond 3, opis 65, delo 827, listy 90-93, CWIHP *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

⁷⁷ Evgueni Bajanov, “Assessing the Politics of the Korean war, in CWIHP, 6-7 Winter 1995, [available at]: http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=71 [accessed on 20 March 2005].

⁷⁸ Ciphred telegram, Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon Yong to Stalin (via Shtykov), 29 September 1950, APRF, fond, 45, opis 1, delo 347, listy 41-45, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

⁷⁹ Ciphred telegram, Stalin to Mao and Zhou, 1 October 1950, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 334, listy 97-98, CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

⁸⁰ Mansourov, “New Evidence”.

annihilated.⁸¹ One consequence of the Politburo discussions however, was a decision to increase pressure on Mao to extract an unequivocal commitment from China to enter the war.

Once decided, Stalin set out with increasing heavy-handedness to extract that Chinese commitment. These in turn produce two points of significance. First, Stalin perceived the Inchon landings as a critical prelude to Americans winning the war in Korea. When the KPA began to falter and Seoul eventually fell, he was willing to accommodate the Americans up along the Yalu. Therefore, that the Americans would cross the 38th parallel appeared a spurious consideration. Second, and more important, the Inchon landings provided the catalyst for Stalin to intensify pressure on the Chinese to intervene in Korea – the 38th parallel becoming a convenient and convincing tool to compel Chinese intervention. These, as will be elaborated in the following section, would prove to be a significant move to China's eventual entry in Korea.

TRIGGERING MAO

Mao had given his initial orders to form the CPV on 8 October; one day after American troops began crossing the parallel. Christensen therefore contends that the timing of the American crossing of the 38th parallel was the triggering event that forced Mao to engage the US militarily.⁸²

⁸¹ Jerrold Schecter & Vyacheslav Luchkov, transl. and eds., *Kruschchev Remembers: The Glastnost Tapes*, Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1990, p. 147.

⁸² Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 157.

However, this argument is inadequate on three counts. First, as Mao's initial decision to intervene was made on 2 October, the mobilisation of "volunteers" for war was only a matter of time. The impact of the Inchon landings on Mao's strategic thinking also subsequently eased the role of the 38th parallel. This is not to imply that Chen's *justification* argument is indisputable – his thesis rests on the argument that Mao had been *inclined* to intervene in Korea as early as July, and thus set forth military preparations. As Chen argues, as early as July and August, the Chinese leadership was convinced that China had to prepare to engage in battle with the US in Korea. On 4 August, some even favoured helping the North Koreans destroy the American forces before the US was able to reverse the tide of battle in its favour. However, inclination should not be conflated with an *actual* decision – and Mao did not make his final decision to intervene until 18 October. China was also not equipped to confront the US militarily then – a bone of contention amongst his colleagues. Second, this decision was made only after Mao had reconciled his differences from within his Politburo and with Stalin – two key considerations that cannot be underemphasised. Chen is right insofar as arguing that Zhou's warnings to Pannikar were a delaying strategy.⁸³ Finally, Stalin's telegrams pressuring Mao to act, his threats of sending Kim to set up an exile government in China, as well as his manoeuvres relating to providing air cover – points to the significant role Stalin played in Mao's complicated decision-making process.

Since the outbreak of the Korean War, Mao had been carefully considering the question of sending troops to Korea. His distrust of American intentions had been growing since June when at the beginning of the Korean War, Truman reversed US

⁸³ Chen, *Road*, p.45.

policy of non-interference in the Chinese civil war by sending the Seventh Fleet to block the Taiwan Straits. This guaranteed a sanctuary for “counter-revolutionaries,” provided a base for future American air attacks against the mainland, and suggested to Mao that America might at any time renege on its previous assurance and invade Chinese territory.⁸⁴ Chen uses China’s gradual but systematic military and political preparations for the eventual intervention as evidence for his *justification* thesis. But these gradual contingency decisions made by Chinese leaders, on the basis of coordination with Stalin and the changing military situation in Korea, do not by themselves substantiate his main contention that China’s commitment to radical revolutionary ideals made China’s conflict with America an inevitability. Since the final and irrevocable decision to intervene was made only on 18 October, the series of urgent meetings preceding the final decision could be construed as a contingency plan.⁸⁵ Chen also cites the establishment of the Northeast Border Defence Army as evidence of China taking a “crucial step” to making possible its intervention.⁸⁶ The NEBDA came out of two conferences on 7 and 10 July, chaired by Zhou under the instructions of Mao. Zhou conveyed to the participants Mao’s analysis of the situation, which stressed the necessity of establishing the NEBDA in case China “needed to enter the war.”⁸⁷ However, Shen argues that this plan was drawn up for tactical reasons. Judging from those present at the meetings and the content of the resolutions, China’s emphasis was placed on strengthening defence in northeast China against enemy invasion, and not for offensive motivations.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Hao Yufan & Zhai Zhihai, “China’s Decision to Enter the Korean War: History Revisited”, in Kim, Chull Baum & Matray, James eds., *Korea and the Cold War: Division, Destruction, & Disarmament*, Claremont, Regina Books, 1993, pp. 141-166

⁸⁵ See, Shen, “China Sends Troops”.

⁸⁶ Chen, *Road*, p. 137.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁸⁸ Shen, “China Sends Troops”, p. 23.

Mao convened a Politburo meeting on 4 August to discuss the current situation and China's options. Zhou argued in favour of early intervention, declaring that in order to win the war, China's strength must be added to the struggle. Mao took a different stance, saying that they could prepare for intervention, but the timing could be further decided.⁸⁹ Mao thus instructed Gao Gang to prepare for battle "by the first 10 days of September." But even as Mao was ordering his armies to the front, leading Party members still questioned whether they ought to challenge the "world's foremost imperialist power." Marshall Nie Rongzhen recalls that some of his comrades believed China needed a period of recuperation after years of civil warfare.⁹⁰ "To fight or not to fight" was the central question in Mao's mind, pondered deeply for a long time and from different angles.⁹¹

At the meeting on national defence held on 26 August, Zhou transmitted Mao's instructions that they should have a long-term programme for military building. Although Mao discussed the problem of "dealing with the current situation" in his telegram, his purpose was to ask the Politburo to consider issues regarding the current situation and the three-year programme, and submit opinions to the CCP conferences for the coming November or December.⁹² Thus, from the perspective of China's policy-making at the time, the question of sending troops to Korea had not been put on the agenda.⁹³

ANTICIPATING INCHON

⁸⁹ Richard Thornton, *Odd Man Out: Truman, Stalin, Mao & the Origins of the Korean War*, Washington D.C., Brassey's, 2000, pp. 265-6.

⁹⁰ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 173.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-5.

⁹² Shen, "China Sends Troops", p. 25.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

By August, Mao had come to consider the political-diplomatic front as of secondary importance, and reckoned that China's military involvement was inevitable. This was a direct result of his predicting that the Americans would conduct an amphibious landing on Inchon, and that the KPA would be inadequate to resist the offensive. In early August, Mao had ordered Zhou to prepare a contingency plan outlining Chinese and American vulnerabilities. Within days, Lei Yingfu, head of a section of the General Staff, simulated map exercises and forecast that a US counteroffensive would come probably by Inchon.⁹⁴ Mao immediately sounded a warning to Kim.⁹⁵ However, Kim took no precautions due to his mistrust of China and his preference of dealing with the USSR.⁹⁶ At this point, while the Chinese leadership did consider intervening in Korea as a possibility, they felt that confronting US troops, and especially entering Korea to fight at this time, was to be considered only if absolutely necessary. In addition, these preparations constituted part of their mobilisations for integrated strategic defence, and they had not yet formulated any fighting principles for a major confrontation.⁹⁷

Thus, it is not surprising that when the Inchon landings occurred just as expected, the Chinese leadership was "shocked."⁹⁸ From the NEBDA's headquarters in Shenyang, to Zhongnanhai, the CCP Central Committee in Beijing, people "talked about nothing but Inchon and Korea." Mao also "lost much sleep and consumed many cigarettes" in the days following Inchon.⁹⁹ It is plausible that Mao had secretly wished

⁹⁴ Goncharov *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 171.

⁹⁵ Zhang, *Deterrence & Strategic Culture*, Ithaca & London, Cornell University Press, 1992, pp. 91-3; and Chen, *Road*, pp. 137-148.

⁹⁶ See Shen, "Sino-North Korean Conflict and its Resolution during the Korean War", in *CWIHP Bulletin*, Issue 14-15, Winter 03-Spring 04, pp. 9-11.

⁹⁷ Shen, "China Sends Troops", p. 25.

⁹⁸ See Chen, *Road*, p. 159.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

that the American fortunes would not be reversed, and therefore China need not intervene. What is undeniable though, is that Beijing viewed Inchon with severity. The deteriorating circumstances in Korea after Inchon further endangered China's security interest. Before Inchon, the main battlefield was in South Korea. Now the primary combat zone is approaching the North, inching closer to the Chinese-Korean border and threatening the northeast and China's main source of coal, steel, and water power.¹⁰⁰ Although the Chinese leadership had frequently alleged that the real American intention behind intervention was to threaten China's northeast, they did not treat this seriously until after the Inchon landing.¹⁰¹ When the situation in Korea took a rapid turn for the worse, the Chinese concentrated on putting their combat plans in motion. On 17 September Zhou directed the immediate dispatch of a five-man team to Korea, including Major Chai Chengwen, chief liaison officer of the CPV, and Gao, to familiarise with the conditions as well as to make a reconnaissance of the battlefield terrain.¹⁰² On their way to Korea, Gao asked Chai to read Mao's letter, which stated, "it seems that we have no other alternative but to send troops there. You must lose no time in making preparations."¹⁰³

The remarkable changes that took place in the frantic situation within a few days, the urgent requests of Stalin and Kim, plus China's worry about the prospects of the war, forced Mao to accelerate his decision-making. Upon receiving the emergency message by Kim and Pak in the late evening of 1 October, Mao urgently summoned

¹⁰⁰ Chen, *Road*, p. 159.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 276, fn. 3.

¹⁰² Shen, "China Sends Troops", p. 27.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; Shen Zhihua, "The Discrepancy Between The Russian and Chinese Versions of Mao's October 2 1950 Message to Stalin on Chinese Entry Into the Korean War: A Chinese Scholar's Reply", CWIHP, Bulletin, Winter 03/04, p. 11 and fn. 23, [available at]: http://wwics.si.edu/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=library.document&id=20 [accessed on 23 March 2005]

the Central Secretariat meeting consisting of Mao, Zhou, Zhu De, and Liu Shaoqi. Unable to attain a consensus on sending troops to Korea, they decided to continue the discussion the following day at an enlarged Central Secretariat meeting.¹⁰⁴ Mao then immediately recalled Gao to Beijing for the meeting, and instructed Deng Hua to order the NEBDA to complete its preparations before schedule and get ready for activation.¹⁰⁵

POLITBURO DISAGREEMENTS IN THE OCTOBER MEETINGS

Around 3 p.m., the enlarged meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee began at Zhongnanhai. Those present were Mao, Liu, Zhu, Gao, and Nie. Mao's opening statement revealed his inclination to enter the war at this moment. Underlining the dangerous situation in Korea, Mao explicated that the "question now is not whether or not but how fast we should send troops to Korea."¹⁰⁶ Mao's statement was crucial – for it virtually dictated the outcome of the meeting. The discussion at the meeting then focused on selecting a commander for Chinese troops in Korea.¹⁰⁷ A key person in Mao's quest for backing at home was Peng Dehuai, the commander and political commissar of the First Field Army and the Northwest Military Region. When Lin Biao declined to command troops in Korea on the grounds of poor health, the Politburo decided to ask Peng, who was not present, to take the job. Peng did not arrive in Beijing from Xi'an until late in the afternoon on the 4th, by which time a meeting of the Politburo Central Committee was in progress. A majority of the members and senior military officers there expressed reservations about the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Shen, "China Sends Troops", p. 28.

¹⁰⁶ Chen, *Road*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

decision to enter the war.¹⁰⁸ Among the most outspoken were Zhou, Lin, Ren Bishi, and Chen Yun. They argued that priority ought to be given to overcoming China's huge fiscal deficits and high unemployment rate; that China needed a long period of recuperation after years of civil warfare and had to complete its land reform; that several border provinces and many coastal islands had yet to be "liberated"; that more than a million bandits were still roaming the countryside; and finally, the People Liberation Army's outdated arsenal were no match for the US army.¹⁰⁹ Nie was firmly in the other camp, berating those who believed that should fight the war only as a last resort. Mao, too, stood his ground, and had no doubts that it had become imperative for China to intervene in Korea.¹¹⁰

Before the next meeting the following afternoon, Mao consulted Peng, finding him favourably inclined toward intervention and willing to accept command of the Chinese forces in Korea. Mao asked him to express his views at the upcoming meeting, and he agreed.¹¹¹ When joined by Peng and other advocates of action in the meetings of 2-5 October, Mao expressed fears of China being thrown on the defensive if it did not now deal the Americans a blow. An unchecked American advance in Korea would draw wavering countries and classes to the side of the United States, strengthen the resolve of reactionaries at home and abroad, and encourage the US to send troops to other points along China's border.¹¹² On the same day, the Politburo set 15 October as the date of entry. Peng's subsequent statement, delivered decisively, had shifted the mood of the group. He expressed it was necessary to send troops to

¹⁰⁸ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p.180.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 180-1.

¹¹¹ Stueck, *International*, p. 100.

¹¹² Michael Hunt, "Beijing and the Korean Crisis, June 1950-June 1951" *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 107, No. 3, 1992, pp. 453-478, 465.

Korea. If they lost, it merely meant a few years' delay in liberation. But if the Americans positioned themselves along the Yalu and in Taiwan, it could "find an excuse anytime it wants to launch an invasion."¹¹³ On 8 October, Mao formally issued *The Order to the Chinese People's Volunteers Force* to "support the Korean people's liberation war and resist the American imperialists" in order to protect the common interests of the Korean and Chinese people and that the "Chinese People's Volunteers Force [is to] enter Korea immediately. They should assist the Korean comrades, fight the war against the invaders, and strive for the glorious victory."¹¹⁴ Mao then informed Pyongyang that they have decided to send troops to help them.¹¹⁵

CONTROVERSY OF THE 2 OCTOBER STALIN-MAO TELEGRAMS

As highlighted above, the initial and primary Chinese decision to intervene came on 2 October. This assumption is premised on available Chinese sources, amongst which the most crucial was a telegram Mao sent to Stalin on 2 October after the Politburo meeting. Mao had informed Stalin that Beijing had decided to "send a portion of our troops, under the name of Volunteers, to Korea, assisting the Korean comrades to fight the [United States and Syngman Rhee]." This is also the evidence Chen uses in his analyses.¹¹⁶ However, new evidence from the Russian archives in 1995 produced a markedly different version of Mao's 2 October telegram to Stalin. In the Russian version, Mao conveyed that dispatching Chinese troops to Korea "may entail extremely serious consequences"; "there is no confidence in the success of military operations against American troops"; many comrades in the Central

¹¹³ Peng Dehuai, "My Story of the Korean War", in Li Xiaobing, Allan Millett & Yu Bin, eds., *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2001, p. 32.

¹¹⁴ Nie Rongzhen, "Beijing's Decision to Intervene", in Li *et al.*, *Mao's Generals*, p. 42.

¹¹⁵ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 185.

¹¹⁶ See excerpt of Telegram reproduced in Chen, *Road*, pp. 175-7.

Committee of the CCP urged “caution” and “patience”; and consequently, China had tentatively decided against intervention.¹¹⁷ What ensued from this revelation was academic debate between Chinese and Western scholars pertaining to the two version’s veracity – both versions have now been ascertained to be genuine.¹¹⁸ A plausible explanation would be that Mao did not send the Chinese version because he sought to first overcome resistance in the Politburo, as well as to bargain for more Soviet assistance by appearing hesitant, but was ultimately persuadable.¹¹⁹ For Mao to go such lengths, to the extent of angering Stalin, demonstrates that the disagreements within Mao’s leadership cannot be downplayed. Certainly, Mao wanted a Politburo consensus before he gave Stalin his word.

“SHOULD WE FEAR THIS?”

In the Russian version of the 2 October telegram, Mao did leave an opening by informing that a “final decision” had not been taken, and Mao was ready immediately to send Zhou and Lin to the Soviet Union to personally consult Stalin.¹²⁰ The availability of documents from recent openings of communist sources in January 2000 threw more light on this crucial moment in the Korean War – Stalin’s strongly-worded response to Mao’s 2 October telegram [Russian version], pressing for Chinese intervention. Brushing aside concerns about the risks of sparking a world war, Stalin retorted, “Should we fear this? In my opinion, we should not, because together we

¹¹⁷ Ciphred Telegram from Roschin in Beijing to Stalin, 3 October 1950, conveying 2 October 1950 message from Mao to Stalin, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 334, listy 105-106, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

¹¹⁸ See Mansourov, “New Evidence”, Shen, “Discrepancy”, Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, pp. 159-60.

¹¹⁹ Shen, “Discrepancy”; Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*, p. 160.

¹²⁰ Ciphred Telegram from Roshchin in Beijing to Stalin, 3 October 1950, conveying 2 October 1950 message from Mao to Stalin, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 334, listy 105-106, CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

will be stronger than the USA and England.”¹²¹ In addition, Stalin had also replied that he would be happy to meet Zhou and Lin for discussions.¹²² The contents were read to Mao by Alexei Roshchin, Soviet ambassador to the PRC on 6 October 1950; thereafter Roshchin cabled Stalin that Mao was “in full agreement” with his assessment of the current international situation. Roshchin also conveyed Mao’s request for Soviet materiel and air support.¹²³

In analysing Roshchin’s telegram, James Hershberg surmises that it still casts doubt over whether Stalin’s message influenced China’s ultimate decision to enter the war. However, Mao must have received Stalin’s telegram amidst a series of tense Politburo meetings of the Central Military Commission on 6 October, where Zhou had presided at the Juren Hall.¹²⁴ This telegram was a call for action, and Shen believes that Mao was “obviously upset” by Stalin’s strong words.¹²⁵ What is unclear is whether Mao had already prevailed upon his Politburo to agree to intervention, in which case Stalin’s message would be superfluous, or whether Mao was able to use this fresh evidence of strong Soviet desire for Chinese entry to convince remaining detractors of the necessity for intervention. Only full circumstantial notes or minutes of the CCP Politburo sessions can decisively resolve the issue.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, the important factor had now come to the issue of Soviet provision of air support. Mao had replied that he could activate not five to six, but at least nine divisions that were ready to embark “in the next few days.” However, Mao cautioned against haste,

¹²¹ Draft Ciphred Telegram from Stalin to Mao Zedong, 4 October 1950, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 14-15, Winter 03-Spring 04, pp. 375-6.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

¹²³ Ciphred Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 7 October 1950, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 14-15, Winter 03-Spring 04, pp. 377-8.

¹²⁴ Shen, “China Sends Troops”, p. 30.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ James Hershberg, “Russian Documents on the Korean War, 1950-53”, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 14-15, Winter 03/ Spring 04, p. 371.

believing that it was better for the Americans to advance deeper into the North so that the Chinese could more effectively counter-attack. What was finally left was the “issue of aviation” – where air cover from the Soviet Union for Chinese ground troops in Korea were critical.¹²⁷

MUTUAL MANOEUVERS AND SOVIET AIR SUPPORT

On 8 October Zhou and Lin, along with interpreter Shi Zhe and Kang Yimin, the confidential secretary of the CCP Central Committee’s Administration Office, left for the USSR to secure Soviet military support. The Stalin-Zhou talks of 9 and 10 October are crucial in understanding the evolution of the Soviet-Chinese alliance and the terms of the Chinese entry into the Korean War. What is puzzling in Mao’s affirmative reply is that historians have consistently claimed that when Zhou met Stalin for talks, he told the latter that the CCP Politburo had decided not to send troops to Korea due to logistical and financial difficulties, as well as domestic opposition to intervention.¹²⁸ On this count, Chen and Shen had relied on the recollections of Shi Zhe, confirmed by newly declassified Russian documents from the AVPRF.¹²⁹ Without further evidence pertaining to instructions Mao had given to Zhou prior to his departure, it is difficult at this point to conclude the real motivations behind Zhou’s words. However, that Stalin had received and comprehended Mao’s 7 October telegram can be confirmed by Stalin’s reply to Kim on 8 October, “... [Mao] will dispatch to Korea nine, not six divisions, but [he said] that he will send them not now, but after some time. He also requested that I receive his representatives [to

¹²⁷ Ciphred Telegram from Roshchin to Stalin, 7 October 1950, in CWIHP, Bulletin 14-15, Winter 03-Spring 04, p. 377.

¹²⁸ See, Chen, *Road*, Zhang, *Military Romanticism*.

¹²⁹ Chen, *Road*, p. 198, Shen, “China Sends Troops”, p. 30, Shi Zhe, *The Memoirs of Shi Zhe*, Beijing, Central Archives and Manuscripts Press, 2001, and Mansourov “New Evidence”.

discuss] a detailed plan of military assistance to Korea.”¹³⁰ In addition, Mao had also informed Kim on 6 October that he would come to his assistance. Stalin would know that even as Zhou was speaking, Chinese supplies and advance units were being mobilised for intervention. It thus seemed likely that in this “obvious bit of obfuscation” Zhou was acting on Mao’s orders to accentuate the Chinese Politburo’s perceptions of war risks, and that they conjured their hesitation as a negotiating tool to obtain the best possible deal from Stalin.¹³¹

However, Stalin was familiar with this kind of tactics. Further, he would not be easily pressed by the Chinese as he should have learnt from the North Koreans that the Chinese had made the decision to enter the war.¹³² Thus Stalin first explained why he could not enter the war and why China should – to the Chinese it is possible to help the Koreans, but to the Soviets it was not. The Second World War had just ended and the USSR was not ready for the Third World War. The Americans too could not wage a war on two fronts – in both China and Korea. Since there would be no war in China, China could help.¹³³ Stalin then enumerated the dire consequences of China’s staying out of the war. Since Korea could only be preserved for one week at most if it did not have reinforcements, “they” – the USSR and China - must take into account all contingencies and devise concrete countermeasures and plans. Stalin also warned the Chinese that the task of accommodating Kim’s exile government and absorbing Korean refugees could place a heavy burden on them, and they should be prepared.¹³⁴ Zhou reportedly was stunned at what he heard. He backed away from his initial tough

¹³⁰ Letter, Stalin to Kim Il Sung (via Shtykov), 8 October 1950, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 347, listy 65-67, CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

¹³¹ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 188; Chen, *Road*, p. 199.

¹³² Chen, *Road*, p. 200.

¹³³ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners.*, p. 189.

¹³⁴ Chen, *Road*, p. 197.

stance and enquired if Stalin would provide air cover should China intervene.¹³⁵ Stalin first articulated that the USSR was not well-positioned to provide troops because the Russian border with Korea was too small and that they had already announced a complete withdrawal from Korea. Sending troops there would thus entail a confrontation with America. He suggested that China send its troops and that he would provide sufficient military equipment and war material for the Chinese, defending China's northeast and coastal areas as well as covering the Chinese troops along the Korean side of the Yalu. The discussion then focused on *what if* and *when* Soviet air force would enter Korea. Stalin once more insisted that Soviet air force needed more preparations and was unable to cover Chinese troops into Korea.¹³⁶ As a result of their inability to reach an agreement, it was reported that Stalin and Zhou would send a joint telegram to Mao to keep him updated.¹³⁷ However, contrary to Chen and Goncharov *et al.*, Stalin and Zhou did not agree to send a joint telegram the next day, on the 11th, to Mao. Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov also did not call Zhou after the latter's arrival in Moscow with "startling news" of Stalin's reneging in his promise for military equipment.¹³⁸ Mansourov charges that these are probably stories elaborated by Zhou's associates in order to convince Mao that Stalin, not Zhou's, inflexibility was to be blamed for the breakdown of talks; and more importantly, that China should not fight alone in Korea – a belief Zhou held from the beginning.¹³⁹ Mansourov argues that in reality, Stalin had reiterated his willingness to provide the CPV with air support if Mao sent his troops to Korea. Nonetheless, on 11 October, Zhou did inform Mao that Stalin "did not express his objections to the CCP

¹³⁵ Mansourov, "New Evidence"; Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners.*, p. 189.

¹³⁶ Chen, *Road*, p. 198.

¹³⁷ See, Mansourov, "New Evidence"; Shen, "China Sends Troops".

¹³⁸ Mansourov, "New Evidence"; see also, Chen, *Road*, p. 200; Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, pp. 190.

¹³⁹ Mansourov, "New Evidence".

Politburo's decision not to send troops."¹⁴⁰ This placed tremendous pressure on Mao, who upon receiving the news, sent an order on the 12th to his top commanders in the Northeast to retract the order of intervention given on the 9 October, and the Ninth Army was to remain in place and not move out.¹⁴¹

As all hopes for immediate Soviet support for the Korean War effort waned, Mao began to have second thoughts of his own, albeit reluctantly. After 11 October, he spent a sleepless seventy hours mulling over his options. Nothing in his past experience had quite prepared him for a full-scale conflict with the most powerful nation in the world.¹⁴² The continuous existence of reservations on entering Korea made Mao reluctant to issue the final order.¹⁴³ On 13 October, an emergency meeting of the Politburo re-ignited the heated debate regarding the merits of China's intervention in Korea. Mao now had to decide on the complex question of whether they would intervene without direct Soviet air support. Since early October, after the decision to enter the Korea war, Mao and his colleagues had been acting on the assumption that Chinese troops would have sufficient support from their Soviet comrades. After careful consideration, especially upon evaluating the serious consequences should China fail to intervene in Korea, the participants then reached the consensus that China was still in a position to fight the Americans even without Soviet assistance. They would now depend on the principles of self-reliance, emphasising that an army with higher morale could beat an enemy with superior equipment. They also believed that if the US occupied the entire Korean peninsula, China's immediate security as well as the fate of the revolution in East Asia would be

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Chen, Road, p. 200.

¹⁴² Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 343, fn. 132.

¹⁴³ Chen, Road, p. 207

in severe danger. As a result, the meeting reaffirmed that “whether or not the Soviets would dispatch its air forces to Korea, we would go ahead.”¹⁴⁴ Mao immediately cabled Zhou about the decision to intervene. Due to the lack of air cover, Mao decided that the troops would only engage the ROK forces in the initial stages of battle.¹⁴⁵

Currently, there is lack of evidence pertaining to the discussions in this particular meeting, specifically how Mao’s Politburo “reached a consensus” to intervene, despite Stalin’s refusal to provide assistance. Clearly, there is more to meet the eye. And indeed, as will be revealed, Mao nevertheless held out hopes for Stalin to change his mind, repeating his plea for air support in a telegram to Stalin immediately after the meeting, and his Politburo still harboured doubts over the wisdom of intervention.

THE FINAL DECISION

Stalin received two extremely urgent telegrams from Mao on 14 October at 3.20 a.m., informing him that China had finally decided to send troops into North Korea. Once more, Mao requested for Soviet air support.¹⁴⁶ Although Mao had again decided to send troops, he was not sure whether the USSR would lease the military equipment or provide air support. Therefore in his 13 October telegram to Zhou, he had instructed Zhou to “stay in Moscow for a few more days” to discuss this further with Stalin.¹⁴⁷ This time, the USSR agreed to provide China with military equipment in the form of credit loans and sixteen air regiments to cover the Chinese volunteers fighting

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ciphred Telegram, Roshchin to Stalin, 14 October 1950, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 335, listy 1-2, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

¹⁴⁷ Shen, “China Sends Troops”, p. 33.

in Korea.¹⁴⁸ Stalin also immediately dispatched a handwritten note to Kim via Shtykov to “postpone temporarily” his evacuation order sent the day before.¹⁴⁹ When Stalin received further clarifications and proof from Beijing that this time Mao was earnest, he dispatched another telegram to Shtykov for Kim, saying that, “... the Chinese comrades at last made a final decision to render assistance to Korea with troops.” In addition, the USSR had decided would provide the armaments required for the Chinese troops.¹⁵⁰

On 15 October, Mao cabled Gao and CPV commanders that it had been “decided” that the CPV would cross the Yalu River on 18, or latest 19 October.¹⁵¹ Mao then cabled Gao and Peng once more on the 17th asking him to “get ready” for intervention, and informed him that a formal order would be issued on the 18th. Meanwhile he asked Gao and Peng to return to Beijing for discussions.¹⁵² Once more, the persistent Politburo reservations about entering the war, together with the fact that Zhou would be returning to Beijing on the 18th, made Mao reluctant to issue the final order. He decided to postpone again the CPV’s entry until he and his Politburo could meet with Zhou to “receive a first-hand report” on Stalin’s stand.¹⁵³

MAO GOES AHEAD

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴⁹ In Mao’s stubborn refusal to commit troops in Korea, Stalin had cabled Kim, asking him to evacuate to China. Ciphred Telegram (handwritten note), Stalin to Kim Il Sung (via Shtykov), APRF fond 45, opis 1, delo 347, listy 74-5, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

¹⁵⁰ Ciphred Telegram, Stalin to Kim Il Sung, 14 October 1950, APRF, fond 45, opis 1, delo 347, list 77, in CWIHP, *Bulletin* 6-7, Winter 1995.

¹⁵¹ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 196.

¹⁵² Chen, *Road*, p. 207.

¹⁵³ Chen, *Road*, p. 207.

On the 18th, the Politburo met to debrief Zhou. Peng reported on the reservations expressed by the CPV commanders, especially their concerns regarding the lack of Soviet air support in Korea. Zhou replied that Stalin had promised to supply them with as much equipment as they needed, and Soviet air support would be extended to Chinese territory, especially the industrial centres in the northeast. Furthermore, it was likely that the Soviet air force would enter operations in Korea within a month.¹⁵⁴ Mao listened, but was increasingly fixated on the fact that enemy troops would be reaching the Yalu in a few days. Finally, he told his comrades that no matter what the difficulties were, they “should not change the decision to send troops, nor should they delay the time of action.”¹⁵⁵ Just before the meeting ended, Mao revealed a cable from Stalin and said, “[Stalin] writes that we have to act.” None of the participants in the meeting “dared speak against it,” and the question of sending Chinese volunteers to Korea was thus settled.”¹⁵⁶

This last telegram is revealed by former Soviet diplomat and scholar Andrei Ledovskii in his study of the “Gao Gang-Rao Shushi affair,”¹⁵⁷ quoting “un-named Chinese sources” who were present at that meeting. The exact timing at which Mao received this telegram is crucial for a judicial reconstruction of this final critical moment. It would have pinpointed at which stage of Mao’s vacillations the telegram had influenced him. Another disconnect is why the Politburo members “dared not speak against” Stalin’s call to action this time, when they had done so previously.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Andrei Ledovskii, *The Case of Gao Gang and Rao Shushi*, Moscow, Institut Dalnego Vostoka, 1990, p. 73, in Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 197.

¹⁵⁷ A power struggle within the CCP leading to the 1954 purge of Politburo member Gao and Party Organisation Department head Rao Shushi, who were accused of illicitly trying to seize control of the Party. See, for example, Frederick Teiwes, *Politics and Purges in China: Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms, 1950-1965*, Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe, 1993.

Only a full analysis of the telegram's contents can resolve these two puzzles. Goncharov *et al.*, in quoting Ledovskii's revelation, also fail to elaborate. But it is noteworthy that Goncharov *et al.* had presented this evidence in a manner that hints it being a telegram of consequence.¹⁵⁸

One other consideration that had emerged from that meeting was how the imminent American advance up the Yalu enhanced Mao's anxiety, pushing him towards the edge of the final decision. As I have argued earlier, this complicates both the traditional *justification* and *trigger* assertions that 1) China had been prepared for intervention and the Americans' crossing of the 38th parallel provided a justification for entry; and 2) China sprang into action the moment Americans crossed the parallel. On the first argument, I have highlighted that China was indeed not prepared to enter Korea, and its domestic military mobilisation was aimed at preventive border defence. The Soviet provision of air support was also an important calculation, as were the disagreements within the Chinese Politburo. On the second argument, I have also stressed that China did not "spring into action" the moment the Americans crossed the parallel. The final decision was made on 18 October – ten days after non-ROK troops pushed across the parallel – and even then, the attention was about the Americans approaching China's borders, and not that the parallel had been crossed.

¹⁵⁸ Goncharov *et al.*, *Uncertain Partners*, p. 189. Ledovskii is indeed a long-standing "China hand" in Moscow who was an influential adviser during the Soviet era and enjoyed privileged access to closed archives in the 1990s.

CONCLUSION

The Inchon landings of 15 September 1950 were a pivotal event in the Korean War, not simply for its dazzling success and the way it turned the tide on the battlefield, but also how it sparked a series of events that led to eventual Chinese intervention. In the wave of events sparked by Inchon, it seemed difficult to eradicate the impressions that were forming in the Truman administration – that Inchon presented a Korean War victory on the cheap.¹⁵⁹ To both Mao and Stalin, Inchon was the harbinger of having Americans up along their borders, posing an intolerable threat. For China, maintaining its forces on the border indefinitely against potential US transgressions would have been politically and fiscally expensive at a time when it had not yet resolved its domestic resistance, and when its economy had yet to recover from the ruinous Second World War. Moreover, Mao viewed the presence of American forces in Indochina, the Taiwan Straits and Korea as an embarrassment to his regime which might further galvanise his ideological foes at home and abroad.¹⁶⁰ Mao's siege mentality was one critical aspect that Truman's administration failed to grasp, which subsequently brought forth the disastrous collision. Stalin, on the other hand, keenly felt Mao's fears – but felt even more for the USSR's physical security, and in the course of events, displayed his proclivity for high-stakes gambling, at the expense of China and North Korea. The disintegration of the KPA as a result of Inchon had transformed the Korean conflict into a serious military crisis for the USSR. Stalin had panicked at the advance of American troops into North Korean territory. Stalin thus focused overwhelmingly on the difficult and urgent task of finding a way to stop the American advance without drawing the USSR into war with it. Ultimately,

¹⁵⁹ See, Matray, "Truman's Plan", pp. 328-9.

¹⁶⁰ Christensen, "Threats", p. 148.

Stalin was prepared to jettison North Korea to the enemy – something Mao could never allow – and therein gain the upper hand.

So far, the arguments about Chinese intervention in Korea have revolved around the 38th parallel to resolve the *trigger vs. justification* debate. This is unsurprising since scholars have concentrated their analytical markers on the 38th parallel and on Mao. The Inchon landings have also been rigidly cast as one of the most brilliant expeditions in military history, and nothing more. As a consequence, the political and long-term strategic implications Inchon had on Mao and Stalin escaped careful scrutiny. More importantly, the role of Stalin in prodding Mao as a result of his assessments of Inchon has also been overlooked when analysing China's progression into intervention. This paper has attempted to break out of the current academic stalemate by going past the arguments of *trigger* – defensive intervention driven by national security concerns; and *justification* – offensive intervention driven by revolutionary ideology and politics altercations.¹⁶¹ By examining what has been overlooked – the variable of Inchon and its impacts on the Truman administration; on Stalin; and then on Mao – a causal link between Inchon and China's entry becomes discernible. Without Inchon, the 38th parallel would have remained what it originally was – a cartographical line on the map from which the two superpowers adjudicated each other's intentions. It was the success of Inchon that reversed American fortunes on the peninsula and paved the way for its crossing of that artificial marker, galvanising Stalin and Mao into a complicated dynamic that led to China's eventual entry.

¹⁶¹ I am grateful to Li Nan for this invaluable piece of advice.

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