



Discuss the Role of Soviet Union in the Outbreak of Korean War

Rui Xue

Beijing International Studies University

xuerui0911@163.com

Abstract. In June 1950, the Korean War broke out, profoundly affecting the landscape of East Asia and the China-Soviet-US triangle. The war thus became an important point in the history of the Cold War. This study will take the origins of the Korean War as its research theme. Using archival research and case studies, it will draw on government diplomatic archives, memoirs and scholarly commentary etc., to explore the role played by the Soviet Union, the leader of the socialist camp at the time, and the Soviet-Korean and Soviet-China interactions at the time in relation to the launching of the Korean War. The study points out that, given the importance of the Soviet Union to the North Korea at the time and the North Korea's dependence on it, the North Korea needed the approval of the Soviet Union to wage the war. At the same time, changes in US-Soviet and Sino-Soviet relations, as well as Kim Il Sung's confidence in the rapid completion of the reunification of the Korean peninsula allowed Stalin to eventually agree to this decision by North Korea.

Keywords: Korean War, Soviet-Korean relations, Soviet-US relations, Soviet-China relations

1 Introduction

At the end of World War II (WWII), the Soviet Union's troops went to the northeast of China and fought against the Japanese army there in August 1945. After that, Soviet armaments entered the Korean Peninsula and quickly took control of northern Korea. Subsequently, on the advice of the United States, the U.S. and the Soviet Union established their military occupation zones on the Korean peninsula, using the 38th parallel as a dividing line [1]. On 25 June 1950, the North Korean People's Army, under the orders of Kim Il-sung, entered South Korea and the three-year Korean War began. The most immediate reason for this war was Kim Il-sung's desire to end the peninsula's division and establish an independent and unified Korean government. However, the Soviet Union played a vital role in Kim Il-sung's decision. It is significant to understand how the Soviet Union influence the breakout of the war because it can help us know the Soviet Asia strategy and the relations among members within the socialist camp during the early period of Cold War. This essay will argue that North Korea could not start a war without the consent and support of the Soviet Union, and the latter agreed

to Kim Il-sung's decision for certain reasons. This essay will first analyse the role of the Soviet Union and North Korea in their relations and then explore why Stalin agreed to go to war.

2 Soviet Union's influence on North Korea

Kim Il-sung's government had to have the approval of the Soviet Union if it wanted to start the Korean War. As a member of the socialist camp, North Korea was strictly limited by the Soviet Union as the camp leader, and North Korea should keep pace with the Soviet Union. In February 1945, under the Yalta agreement, Korea was placed under international trusteeship [2]. From then on, to consolidate Soviet position and strategic interests in North-East Asia, the Soviet Union continued to exert influence over the military occupation zone. In June, the report of the Second Far Eastern Front of the Soviet Foreign Ministry pointed to the need to effectively prevent Korea from becoming a base for future aggression against the Soviet Union. 'The establishment of friendly and close relations between the Soviet Union and Korea' would guarantee the independence of Korea and the security of the Soviet Far East effectively, which had to be reflected in the future establishment of a Korean government [3]. In August, Soviet troops occupied the northern part of the Korean peninsula.

To maintain the post-WWII situation of cooperation between the Soviet Union and the United States and to dispel the suspicions of the West, the Soviet Union did not directly establish a government ruled by a communist organisation in the occupied areas but advocated a multi-party bourgeois coalition government based on a wide range of anti-Japanese groups [4]. But with the outbreak of the Cold War and the growing confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States in Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States change their policy of cooperation on the issue of Korea.

In response to the US preparing for a separate government in Southern Korea, the Soviet Union was stepping up the formation of a Korean government based on a series of Soviet-oriented changes in the areas under its control. On the economic front, the Soviet Union helped establish economic systems in North Korea, following Soviet model. For example, it carried out land reform, currency reform, nationalized sectors of industry, banking and transport to ensure the dominance of the state economy in the composition of the economy [5]. On the political front, the Soviet Union helped the communist forces integrate by establishing and developing the Workers' Party of Korea. It also placed Korean leaders under Soviet influence and control by sending many Soviet experts to provide guidance in various sectors, supervising and inspecting the public speeches of Korean leaders, and appointing key cadres in the army and so on [6]. Among them was Kim Il-sung, who was one of the battalion commanders of the 88th Infantry Brigade in the Soviet Far Eastern Military District and later returned to Korea to participate in the integration of the communist organisations through Soviet arrangements [7]. On the military front, the Soviet Union help to establish an officers' school, a naval police academy and a conventional air force, which is essential for the establishment of the Korean People's Army in February 1948 [8]. After the Soviet-

oriented transformation was completed, the government of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was formed in September.

These historical facts show that Soviet influence and control over North Korea since 1945. And that major decisions of the DPRK had to be negotiated with the Soviet Union before being implemented. In fact, during a visit to the Soviet Union in March 1949, Kim Il-sung mentioned a military solution to the reunification of the Korean peninsula. Still, Stalin rejected this idea, citing the military disadvantage of North Korea, the agreement between the Soviet Union and the U.S. on the 38th parallel, and the concerns that the U.S. would intervene [9]. And in August, Kim Il-sung repeatedly proposed this kind of idea, and Stalin rebuffed it again, believing that the DPRK could only counter-attack if South Korea launched an attack to the DPRK [10].

3 *North Korea's dependence on Soviet Union*

In addition, the DPRK, lacking in its strength, could not wage war without the support of military personnel and materiel and equipment from the Soviet Union. Although the DPRK had established a People's Army, the army was still poorly organised, manned and equipped. At the end of 1948, the DPRK's armed forces consisted of only one infantry division, one infantry brigade, one police brigade and one air force battalion [11]. The vulnerability of the DPRK's army became more apparent when the Soviet and American forces withdrew from Korea, and the South Korean regime of Yi Seung-man proposed an attack on the DPRK by force [12]. In April 1949, a telegram to Stalin stated that in the face of frequent South Korea's provocations to the 38th parallel, the North Korea should take appropriate measures to counter potentially broader subversive activities [13]. In another telegram to Stalin in May, the Soviet ambassador to North Korea stated that South Korea had significantly increased the number of military forces to carry out its plans for an armed invasion of North Korea [14]. At this time, however, the military strength of North Korea could not cope with South Korea's threat. Afterwards, to ward off potential threats of attack and to consolidate the security of the Soviet Union in the Far East, Stalin decided to give more military assistance to the DPRK. For example, in terms of army expansion, he helped the DPRK form a new mechanized brigade, create an independent tank regiment, form a mixed aviation division [15]. It also provided the DPRK with many weapons and equipment, such as armoured fighting vehicles, self-propelled artillery, and fighter planes [16]. In addition, with Stalin's approval, Kim Il-sung also transferred back Korean troops and equipment from the Chinese army [17]. Soviet assistance increased North Korea's military capacity to resist a South Korean attack and gave Kim Il-sung increased confidence in a successful attack on South Korea.

Due to the Soviet Union's control over North Korea and North Korea's dependence on the Soviet Union, Kim Il-sung had to obtain the Soviet Union's consent to launch the Korean War. In this respect, the Soviet Union's decision played a crucial role in the 6·25 War.

4 Stalin's approval to start Korean War

In 1950, Stalin changed his previous advocacy of defensive military preparations in North Korea. On 17 January, Kim Il-sung again suggested that he wanted to take the military initiative and quickly occupy the South Korea. On 19 January, the Soviet ambassador to North Korea, Shtetkov, reported Kim Il-sung's idea to Stalin. By 30 January, Stalin replied that he was willing to meet with Kim Il-sung and offer him help [18]. After receiving Stalin's reply, Kim Il-sung intensified his preparations for war. In the following two months, he again proposed to the Soviet Union the issue of military assistance, such as adding three more infantry divisions and using the Soviet loan to purchase Soviet weaponry in advance, to which the Soviets agreed [19]. In April, Kim Il-sung visited the Soviet Union and met with Stalin, who formally agreed to Kim Il-sung's plan for an active offensive [20]. In May, at the request of the Soviet Union, Kim Il-sung negotiated with Mao Zedong about the war, and Mao pointed out that China was willing to provide military [21]. With the Soviet Union's agreement, military assistance, and China's support, the North Korean army officially launched an offensive on 25 June, and the Korean War broke out.

5 Reasons why the Soviet Union agreed to Kim Il-sung starting a war

In March 1949, Stalin explicitly replied to Kim Il-sung that he did not agree to an active attack. When Mao Zedong visited the Soviet Union at the end of the year, Stalin also agreed with Mao that he hoped to maintain peace [22]. But in January of that year, Stalin's attitude towards starting a war changed. There were three main reasons behind this change.

First, as far as US-Soviet relations were concerned, the possibility that the US did not intervene deeply in the Korean peninsula made the Soviet Union believe it was feasible to start a war. At the beginning of the Cold War, the Soviet Union's approach towards the capitalist camp led by the US was to adopt a conservative and defensive policy. In contrast, within the socialist camp, there was an extensive reorganisation to unify the member states' thinking and pace of action. In addition, the strategic focus of the US-Soviet Cold War was concentrated on Europe. To avoid confrontations on two sides, which would have led to further diplomatic passivity, the Soviet Union maintained the Yalta system as much as possible in the Asia and avoided a direct conflict with the US on the Korean peninsula. However, on 30 December 1949, to create a split between the Soviet Union and China, the US National Security Council issued the US Position on Asia. It stated that the US should make every effort to maintain its overall position in the Philippines, the Ryukyu Islands and Japan and that Taiwan was not important enough for US military action [23]. In January 1950, President Truman and Secretary of State Acheson made separate speeches excluding Taiwan and the Korean peninsula from the US Pacific defence line [24]. These gave Stalin the impression that if an armed conflict occurred on the Korean peninsula, the US might adopt a passive avoidance attitude. Furthermore, according to the transcript of a conversation between

Mikoyan and Mao Zedong in 1956, before the Korean War, Soviet intelligence deciphered a US telegram which stated that MacArthur reported to Washington that the US should refrain from intervening in the event of a military conflict between the North and South Korean regimes [25]. Public statements by the US leaders and internal cables from the top indicated that the American relatively negative reaction in the outbreak of war, which significantly reduced Stalin's concerns that the US would intervene, making it possible for Stalin to agree with Kim Il Sung to start the fight.

Another related reason was that Kim Il-sung proposed attacking South Korea and completely reunifying the Korean peninsula rapidly, rather than fighting a protracted war. This would have given the United States insufficient time to respond, and the Soviet Union would not have been dragged into the war. In January 1950, Kim Il-sung said that the Korean People's Army could take the Ongjin peninsula in three days and Seoul in a few days if a general offensive were launched [26]. According to Khrushchev's recollection, when Kim Il-sung visited the Soviet Union in April, the Soviet authorities were inclined to believe that if the war was fought quickly, American intervention would not happen, although Stalin still expressed concern about whether the US would intervene. And Soviet leaders expressed their blessing for Kim Il-sung to achieve victory [27].

Thirdly, Stalin's decision is examined in the context of Sino-Soviet relations. Stalin's consent to Kim Il-sung's Korean War was partly based on his desire to use the reunification of the Korean peninsula to gain access to the unfrozen seaports in the Pacific, thereby compensating for the loss of Soviet interests in northeastern China because of the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty in 1950. As early as the 19th century, Russia was aware of the importance of the Liaodong in northeastern China and Korean peninsulas for Russia's strategic interests in Asia. In March 1898, the Russian government signed the Treaty of Lushun and Dalian with the Qing government, which made Russia lease the port of Lushun and Dalian Bay on the Liaodong Peninsula from China [28]. However, the failure of the Russo-Japanese War caused Russia to lose its rights in northeast China. In 1945, after the US dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, to avoid Japan's early surrender and missed opportunity to sign a treaty with China, Soviet troops entered northeast China and launched a full-scale attack on the Japanese forces. Fearing that Soviet troops might occupy northeastern area in the long term or hand over power in this region to the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese Kuomintang government signed Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance with the Soviet Union [29]. Under this treaty, the Soviet Union was granted ownership and operation of the Changchun Railway in China; obtained the port of Lushun, which became a Soviet military base; and made Dalian a free port, with the director of the port to be decided by the Soviet Union [30]. Through its control of the Dalian, Lushun and Changchun railways, the Soviet Union regained a natural unfrozen port on the western coast of the Pacific Ocean and a transportation route to these ports from Soviet Europe areas. However, in 1949, the Communists gained control of mainland China. After many negotiations between Mao Zedong and Stalin, the Soviet Union and China signed a new treaty in 1950, which stipulated the Soviet Union handed over the administration of Dalian to China and China immediately took the overall property in Dalian; the Soviet Union gave up

leasing Lushun as a naval base; and no later than 1952, all the rights and property of Changchun Railway returned to China [31].

With the new Sino-Soviet treaty, the Soviet Union lost the ports and transport routes acquired through the 1945's treaty with the Kuomintang government. However, as an alternative, Pusan, Jeju and Incheon on the Korean peninsula, which is close to north-eastern China, could as well have served as unfrozen ports of the Soviet Union in the Pacific. Indeed, A report to Stalin by the Soviet Foreign Ministry in 1945 advocated the importance of these ports as strategic areas should be raised, and it also stated that the Soviet Union should control them under its military jurisdiction [32]. Yet, these strategic areas were later under the South Korean regime. Kim Il-sung could have helped the Soviet Union gain access to these natural harbours if he had reunified the Korean peninsula successfully.

6 Conclusion

To sum up, the DPRK government was influenced and controlled by the Soviet Union in every way from the beginning of its preparatory process, and the decisions of the DPRK government had to be in line with the Soviet government. In addition, the DPRK itself had to receive assistance from the Soviet Union to wage war because of its lack of armaments and personnel and its economic backwardness. These two reasons determined the leading role of the Soviet Union in waging Korean War. And considering the reasons concerning US-Soviet relations, Sino-Soviet relations, and Kim Il-sung's assurance of a quick end to the war, Stalin agreed to Kim Il-sung's decision. The Korean War thus broke out. However, this article focuses only on the Soviet role in the occurrence of the war but does not examine its role in the whole process of this war. For example, it does not explore how the Soviet Union influence China's decision to send volunteers to fight in Korea despite the harsh conditions at home, and how the Soviet Union influence the end of the war after three years. Therefore, it is recommended that more researchers focus on the Soviet Union's interactions with North Korea and China throughout the Korean War, which would provide more knowledge of the Soviet Union's control to states and the counter-control of them in the socialist camp in Asia in 1950s.

7 Reference List:

1. Shen, Z. (2016). *Outline of the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
2. Shen, Z. (2017). *The Last "Celestial Empire": Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung and Sino-North Korean Relations*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
3. Weathersby, K. (1993). *Soviet aims in Korea and the origins of the Korean War, 1945-1950: new evidence from Russian archives*. [Online]. Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Available from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/soviet-aims-korea-and-the-origins-the-korean-war-1945-50-new-evidence-the-russian>. (Accessed: 25 November 2021)

4. Shen, Z. (2015). 'The Soviet Union and the Construction of the North Korean Regime', *Russian, East European & Central Asia Studies*, 2015.3(4), pp. 20-32.
5. Shen, Z. (2015). 'The Soviet Union and the Construction of the North Korean Regime', *Russian, East European & Central Asia Studies*, 2015.3(4), pp. 30.
6. Lankov, A. (2007). *Crisis in North Korea: The Failure of De-Stalinization, 1956*. Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
7. Zhou, B. (1991). *Northeast Anti-Japanese Guerrilla Diary*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
8. Shen, Z. (2013). *Mao Zedong, Stalin, and Korean War*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House.
9. Bajanov, E. (1992). *Assessing the politics of the Korean War, 1949-51*. [Online]. Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Available from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/cwihp-bulletin-67>. (Accessed: 9 December 2021).
10. Shen, Z. (2013). *Mao Zedong, Stalin, and Korean War*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House.
11. Shen, Z. (2015). 'The Soviet Union and the Construction of the North Korean Regime', *Russian, East European & Central Asia Studies*, 2015.3(4), pp. 31.
12. Niu, J. (2018). *The Cold War and the Origins of Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*. Boston: BRILL.
13. Shen, Z. (2003). *Korean War: declassified documents from the Russian archives*. Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.
14. Shen, Z. (2003). *Korean War: declassified documents from the Russian archives*. Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.
15. Niu, J. (2015). *Echoes of History: The Legacy of World War II and the Modern East Asian Order*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
16. Niu, J. (2015). *Echoes of History: The Legacy of World War II and the Modern East Asian Order*. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
17. Shen, Z. (2017). *The Last "Celestial Empire": Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung and Sino-North Korean Relations*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
18. Shen, Z. (2013). *Mao Zedong, Stalin, and Korean War*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House.
19. Shen, Z. (2003). *Korean War: declassified documents from the Russian archives*. Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.
20. Weathersby, K. (1993). *Soviet aims in Korea and the origins of the Korean War, 1945-1950: new evidence from Russian archives*. [Online]. Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Available from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/soviet-aims-korea-and-the-origins-the-korean-war-1945-50-new-evidence-the-russian>. (Accessed: 25 November 2021)
21. Zhang, X. (2015). *Resist US aggressors and aid Korea*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
22. Shen, Z. (2016). *Outline of the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
23. The United States. the National Security Council (1949). *The Position of the United States with Respect to Asia*. Available at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v06/d7> (Accessed: 14 November 2021)
24. Tao, W. (2016). *The History of Sino-US Relations Volume 1*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House.
25. Shen, Z. (2013). *Mao Zedong, Stalin, and Korean War*. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House.

26. Shen, Z. (2003). *Korean War: declassified documents from the Russian archives*. Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.
27. Khrushchev, N.S. and Khrushchev, S. (2005). *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
28. Xue, T. (2011). *A Brief History of Sino-Russian Relations*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
29. Shen, Z. (2016). *Outline of the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
30. Shen, Z. (2017). *The Last "Celestial Empire": Mao Zedong, Kim Il Sung and Sino-North Korean Relations*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press.
31. Shen, Z. (2016). *Outline of the History of Sino-Soviet Relations*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press (China).
32. Weathersby, K. (1993). *Soviet aims in Korea and the origins of the Korean War, 1945-1950: new evidence from Russian archives*. [Online]. Washington, DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Available from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/soviet-aims-korea-and-the-origins-the-korean-war-1945-50-new-evidence-the-russian>. (Accessed: 25 November 2021)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

