

# Who wanted to go to war over Korea in 1950?

Written by Anna Costa

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ANNA COSTA, AUG 18 2011

### **'Neither Stalin nor Truman nor Mao wanted a war over Korea in 1950': discuss.**

'To want' is a strong word. This essay argues that an unqualified desire for war can hardly be attributed to any of the three leaders, albeit with differences in the way and degree to which this is true for them individually. A concise historiography of the Korean War is followed by a tripartite analysis of the motivations that characterized the three leaders' decision-making in the crucial years and months leading to the Korean War. Shifts observed in their postures are attributed less to underlying changes in their motives than to circumstantially determined and adaptive strategies. Before starting, a caveat: the focus on individuals required by the initial question is especially appropriate in investigating Soviet and Chinese foreign policy, where the leader's personality factor was more preeminent than in the American case; whilst accounting for greater plurality in American foreign policy making, however, this essay is careful to note that Stalin and Mao also faced bureaucratic constraints, and that evidence exists that on balance Truman was not led but did lead in deciding about American intervention[1].

The claim that neither Stalin nor Truman nor Mao desired a confrontation in the Korean peninsula in 1950 challenges the traditionalist position[2] detecting the origins of the Korean conflict in Stalin's wish to expand the Communist bloc at the expense of the US-led West, with Pyongyang and Beijing as mere pawns in Moscow's hands. Here, Truman's decision to go to war was seen as a rational response to Soviet expansionism. This analysis suffered both from the bias of Cold War mentality and from limited access to relevant primary sources. After 1970, accessibility to classified US government files resulted in revised interpretations of the origins of the conflict[3]. The two volumes of *The Origins of the Korean War* by Cumings broke new ground in focusing on the pre-war years and emphasizing the civil origin of the conflict. Other scholars[4] challenged the traditionalist overemphasis on Stalin's alleged machinations whilst retaining a strongly international angle in their analysis. The contributions of revisionist scholarship went not merely towards a more thorough investigation of Soviet motivations, but also towards seeing Korean and Chinese foreign policies as independently motivated rather than purely derivative; a notable investigation of the Chinese side was provided by Jian in *China's Road to the Korean War* (1994). Revisionists also criticized Truman's management of the crisis[5]. Recently released material from the Russian Archives has in turn challenged the revisionist downplaying of Stalin's role in the North Korean attack; Weathersby (1993, 1995), for example, reemphasized Stalin's role behind the scenes of the June attack; her argument, whilst challenging revisionism, is more subtle than the traditionalist one insofar as Stalin's motivations are investigated in depth rather than simply assumed.

### **Stalin**

Pyongyang's reliance on Moscow for politico-ideological guidance and economic and military assistance since 1945 has led traditionalists to interpret Kim Il Sung's unification ambitions as not only supervised and fuelled, but also triggered by, Stalin's own expansionist goals. This interpretation, however, is blind to a substantial body of evidence illustrating how from 1945 until 1950 Moscow's aims were conservative: given American involvement in the South, protection of Soviet economic and strategic interests was pursued 'through the traditional Tsarist approach of maintaining a balance of power in Korea'[6], i.e. through retention of influence in the North.

In September 1949, Moscow was trying to restrain Pyongyang's desire to launch an attack on Seoul. Many a request from the North Korean leader for Soviet advice and assistance were rejected by the Soviet Politburo on the basis that

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such attack was 'impossible' both militarily and politically: not only was Kim's army unprepared to wage war, but also an outright attack on Seoul's reactionary regime could only be conceived were said regime undermined from within[7], as was not the case. Throughout 1949, despite American withdrawal of troops from South Korea and constant demands of support from Pyongyang, Stalin kept at dissuading Kim from waging war on South Korea[8]. In December, he was still explaining to Kim that the Americans would not agree to be thrown out of Korea and that 'the Soviet people would not understand the necessity of a war in Korea, which is a remote place *outside the sphere of the USSR's vital interests*'[9](my italics).

By the spring of 1950 Stalin had changed his mind and was giving moral and material support to Kim's aggressive plans. The *nulla osta* came in April 1950, when the North Korean leader secretly visited Moscow. Why did Stalin shift from chastising Kim's aggression plans to supporting them?

From the end of World War Two in 1945 to the outbreak of hostilities on the Korean peninsula in the summer of 1950 a number of events took place that explains the change in Stalin's position.

Starting by looking at what did *not* change can be helpful. In his memoirs, Khrushchev reports that Stalin had agreed with Pyongyang on the attack because he had to as a Communist, but that he had simultaneously taken the seemingly incongruous decision of recalling all Soviet advisers when Kim was marching on Pusan. When questioned about this, the Soviet leader apparently snapped back at Khrushchev that there should be no evidence of Soviet involvement and the attack was Kim's business[10]. This piece of evidence, along with the exchange between Stalin and Kim reported in a previous paragraph, suggests that the guiding principle and priority of Soviet foreign policy remained narrow national interest.

Of crucial importance in understanding Stalin's decision to support the North Korean attack was his awareness of the strength of indigenous nationalist grievances: a conflict on the peninsula was likely to break out soon and unification by means other than an outright attack was not succeeding –the South Korean regime had, by December 1949, managed to subdue Communist guerrillas[11]. As Khrushchev puts it in his memoirs, Stalin had his doubts and was worried that the Americans would jump into the conflict but Kim's firm belief that a conflict could be won swiftly nudged the Soviet leader into believing that a unified Korea as a *fait accompli* would avoid American intervention[12]. It is possible to hypothesize that Stalin did not so much *want* a conflict in Korea, but that, taking its occurrence as probable, he preferred for it to occur when it did and for Korea to be unified under the aegis of a friendly regime. This propensity was increased by Stalin's constant fear of a resurgent Japan using South Korea as a beachhead for an attack on the USSR[13], a fear in turn aggravated by the concurrent loss of Port Arthur and of other Soviet privileges in Manchuria[14]. Stalin's propensity to support Kim was not, however, fundamentally motivated by insecurity: the year 1949, marked by successful Soviet nuclear experiments and the epochal Communist victory in China, boosted the Soviet leader's confidence and this also played a role in his change of mind.

It was Kim who badly wanted a conflict and made it clear to Stalin that the time was ripe for an attack on the South. In a 19 January 1950 telegram Kim's assurance was reported that the 'people's army now is significantly stronger than the army of Rhee Syngmann'[15]. The same document reports the North Korean leader putting pressure on Stalin by saying that a Communist victory in Korea would follow the Communist victory in China, and that the Chinese would return the support received from their Korean comrades. This piece of evidence not only corroborates the conclusion that the Chinese revolution had an enormous refractory effect on North Korea[16] but also the idea that the situation in China played a crucial role in shaping Stalin's strategic calculus[17].

Sino-Soviet relations have to be looked at to understand Stalin in Korea. Sino-Soviet rivalries, inherited from pre-Communist times, continued even as the two nations found themselves under a common ideological banner. Mao's victory in China was received in Moscow with ambivalence. Whilst strengthening Soviet ideological and other influence in the region and isolating the United States, the nascent Sino-Soviet alliance remained challenged by issues of competition and mistrust, with national interests clashing in a number of ways, and the memory of less than lukewarm support given by Stalin to Mao during the Chinese civil war fresh in the mind of both. Emblematic of these difficulties is the *iter* of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, ratified as early as 1945 but only rendered public five years later after difficult negotiations. The Korean war proved an expedient for Stalin to try and control developments

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in the Far East: avoiding direct Soviet involvement in the conflict, thereby preventing Soviet exposure to direct retaliation from the US and her allies, covertly supporting North Korea and lobbying for Chinese direct military involvement allowed Stalin to reduce the distance between his country and Mao's whilst increasing the gulf between China and the US[18]. Cumings might be right in highlighting Kim's skills in playing Moscow off against Beijing[19] but as persuasive is Goncharov's observation that Stalin was not so much being used as much as he was astutely manipulating and maneuvering 'himself into the enviable position of having everything to gain and nothing to lose'[20].

For Stalin the war was only worthy if fought by others: after North Korea was about to be destroyed by the advancement of MacArthur's forces, and before China saved the day for the Communists, Stalin would still not directly enter the conflict. When Kim was begging him for direct support[21] all the Soviet leader did was send a letter to Mao saying that he was '*on vacation and somewhat detached from events in Korea*', that the situation for their 'Korean friends' was desperate and whether China could do what the USSR was not prepared to do, i.e. get directly involved[22].

A whole series of considerations has been mentioned that concomitantly might have influenced Stalin's change of mind towards supporting Kim's efforts. None of them, however, seems to explain Stalin's motivations fundamentally. My sense is that this is so because Stalin was not very motivated. With no vital Soviet national interest directly at stake in Korea before the outbreak of the war, Stalin acted opportunistically according to his perception of changing circumstances, i.e. a belief that a civil war might imminently break out on the peninsula, that Kim could win it and that if Korea was to be unified it had better be under the aegis of a friendly regime. The nature of Stalin's Korean policy was symptomatic of limited stakes in a war that, if mismanaged, could yield higher costs than benefits, and was epitomized by the Soviet proposed ceasefire between the US-led UN counterattack in the summer of the first year of war and the Chinese intervention which revolutionized the conflict's development.

### **Mao.**

Something that influenced heavily Stalin's strategic calculus was the role China could be persuaded to play in the war. In his pre-war search for allies and resources, Kim exclusively turned towards the Soviets leaving the Chinese in the dark about his ambitions. What matters, here, is Stalin's decision to get China involved, as documented by multiple items of correspondence between Stalin, Kim and Mao. One of many examples is the already mentioned telegram from Stalin to Mao encouraging Chinese provision of troops to the North Korean struggle. With 'Chinese in command at the head, of course'[23].

Mao's initial refusal is based on the undesirability of risking an open conflict with the US or of jeopardizing the domestic consolidation of the young People's Republic[24]. An appendix to the same document contains the Russian view of what motivated Mao's cautious stance: the international situation, the worsening of the position of the Communists in Korea, the intrigues of the Anglo-American bloc through Nehru urging the Chinese to abstain[25]. Unmentioned goes the structural fragility of the newborn Chinese state, which must have constituted an important factor in the Chinese Politburo's reluctance to intervene in the conflict.

Nevertheless, in a telegram that reached Moscow on the 14 of the same month, Mao accepted the request to send troops to North Korea saying that 'if the U.S. troops advance up to the border of China, then Korea will become a dark spot for us and the Northeast will be faced with constant menace'[26]; past hesitations due to the international situation and uncertainty about Soviet assistance overcome, the leading comrades came to the conclusion that intervention was advantageous. Last but not least, given the Sino-Soviet ideological race, the moral imperative addition: 'The Chinese have the absolute obligation to send troops to Korea'[27]. What made Mao decide to intervene despite perplexities in the Politburo?

Jian identifies three fundamental and interrelated rationales underscoring Chinese foreign policy and security strategy in this period: party's revolutionary nationalism, a sense of responsibility towards Asian or world wide revolution and a perceived need for permanent revolution at home[28]. The Chinese decision to go to war can be read as reflecting these three instances: the American deployment of the seventh fleet in the Taiwan Straits was seen

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as a challenge to the PRC's primary nationalistic objective of reunification; MacArthur's troops advancement north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and the perspective of a united Korea indirectly controlled by the US meant having an enemy on the doorstep; fighting for communism could strengthen the ideology's grip within China whilst furthering the country's international aims. Reference to Mao's allegedly challenge-oriented personality[29] can also explain China's deportment in the autumn of 1950.

In sum, Mao did not crave a war as he was busy consolidating his power at home, was facing material and other constraints and did not enjoy strong support from the Politburo. When the American threat came to close, however, the objectives of national consolidation through internal and external communist revolution suddenly became, in Mao's mind, better served by intervention in, rather than abstention from, the war. The validity of this thinking was to be confirmed by China's relatively enhanced international status after the war.

### **Truman.**

Truman did not want a war for several reasons. Although there existed intra-agency disputes about the advisable level of US political, economic and military commitment in Korea[30], a policy of troops withdrawal was consistently stated in 1948 and restated in 1949 by two different National Security Council (NSC herewith) Reports[31]. These documents contain crucial insights about US thinking. They make it clear that US military authorities perceived American military and strategic interests in Korea to be small enough for them to knowingly risk removing a potentially necessary deterrent to Soviet expansion, i.e. US troops. That the timing of withdrawal was not thought to make a difference in terms of deterring an attack from the North[32] is, here, irrelevant: what matters is the readiness to withdraw with full knowledge that this could cause a Soviet-sponsored attack of Seoul. Possibly even more revealing is what follows: US troops should be removed so as to avoid destruction or forced withdrawal caused by a major hostile attack, something that would undermine American prestige[33]. I take this to mean that until at least the end of 1949 not just Truman but the mainstream of the US military establishment did not want a war in Korea, not least because they did not think they could win one cost-effectively.

Truman's reluctance to increase military spending arose not only from the political and military culture of the time but also from personal conviction: he was a legendary fiscal conservative suspicious of political cliques in the military establishment and anxious that a major military buildup in times of peace would lead to the foundations of a military garrison state[34]. Further proof of Truman's pre-war attitudes is to be found both in his words at the breakout of hostilities, that he had done everything he could for five years to avoid the need for direct military involvement in Korea[35]; and in his wartime conduct as he himself describes it: 'I wanted to take every step necessary to push the north Koreans back behind the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. But I wanted to be sure that we would not become so deeply committed in Korea that we could not take care of such other situations as might develop'[36].

A shift occurs in American thinking as policy prescriptions change in the spring of 1950. Calls are made for a more rapid build-up of political, economic, and military strength in the free world as the only course of action consistent with US vital aims, delineating the necessity to 'have the military power to deter, if possible, Soviet expansion, and to defeat, if necessary, aggressive Soviet or Soviet-directed actions'[37]. Truman explicitly says that this more assertive policy was a choice that was 'made firmly and resolutely but not gladly'[38] as the year 1949 and beginning of 1950 brought about threatening changes like the signing of a Sino-Soviet Treaty of Alliance and Friendship in 1950, the victory of the Communists over the Nationalists in China and the successful Soviet nuclear tests of 1949.

In a compelling analysis, May suggests looking at three main factors to understand Truman's decision to enter the war: his personal style, temperament and mental make-up which made him more comfortable deciding than pondering, the cold war logic permeating the period, and his set of beliefs about history[39]. As Truman himself recalls, he took the decision on a plane to Washington thinking Korea was not different from Europe and it would be a mistake to appease the Soviets as it had been a mistake to appease Hitler's aggression. There was no doubt in the US that the Korean war had been planned and engineered by the Soviets as a plan for world domination. In this respect, Korea was seen as vital a symbol of the strength and determination of the west in defending the free world[40].

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Truman did not want a war in Korea but concluded that, there being one, it was better for the US to fight it rather than not. And to fight it when they did, not least for fears that the situation would worsen (e.g. losing the nuclear edge against the USSR). Neither before nor after the North Korean aggression did Truman *want* a war in Korea, but rather he came to the conclusion that he needed to fight one. That he allowed MacArthur to proceed northward beyond the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel I interpret not as evidence that Truman had wanted a war all along but as evidence of not wanting to miss the rare opportunity of putting an end to the Korean quandary once and for all.

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