

# The Role of Ideology and Interest in Stalin's Engagement with China

Written by Fan Zhang

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## The Role of Ideology and Interest in Stalin's Engagement with China

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FAN ZHANG, NOV 30 2012

### Introduction

The Cold War has generally been understood as the “mind-game” between two superpowers that symbolizes two different ideologies—the Soviet Union (USSR) as the paradigm of socialism or communism, and the United States (US) as the symbolism for liberalism and capitalism. Nonetheless, as the Cold War in general and the onset of the Chinese Civil War in particular unveil, the ideological fault line between the two camps was not as clear-cut as one may imagine. The 1950 Sino-Soviet alliance may have signaled the message of an amicable relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and USSR. However, one examination of the Soviet policy toward China prior to that agreement iterates a complete different aspect of their relationship.

The underlying argument of this paper is that although the Cold War is ubiquitously known as the conflict between communism and capitalism, Joseph V. Stalin's ambivalent foreign policies projected new motives of the superpowers by which ideology was only a mask for vested national interests. The paper will focus on the time period of 1945-1950, and will mainly center around Stalin and his foreign policies during the onset of the Chinese Civil War; it is this period during which Stalin most evidently digressed from the ideology he eminently epitomized. The reason why China is being scrutinized in this paper is that quintessentially, China was the miniature battleground for the Soviet Union and the US throughout the Cold War. China's leverage in the Cold War was primarily determined by its enormous size. With the largest population and occupying the third largest territory in the world, China was a factor that neither superpower could ignore.[1] The observation made by political scientists Andrew J. Nathan and Robert S. Ross certainly makes good sense: “During the Cold War, China was the only major country that stood at the intersection of the two superpower camps, a target of influence and enmity for both.”[2]

### Counter Argument

Certain Cold War historians such as Chen Jian believes that the Chinese Civil War and China's emergence as a revolutionary country dramatically enhanced the perception of the Cold War as a battle between “good” and “evil” on both sides. This in turn makes the conflict more explicitly and extensively framed by ideological perceptions. When the Chinese Communist revolution achieved nationwide victory in 1949, the global Cold War was at a crucial juncture. Against this backdrop, and in an attempt to avoid direct contact with the American ammunitions, Stalin's vision turned to East Asia. Had the Soviet Union not shift its attention, alongside the 1948-49 Berlin Blockade and the Soviet Union's first successful test of an atomic bomb in August 1949, the Cold War could have gone “hot” on European soil. Therefore, with the existing spar between the CCP (whose leader is Mao Zedong) and the Nationalist Guomindang (GMD, whose leader is Chang Kai-Shek) within China, combined with the reality that the Cold War's emphasis was shifting from Europe to East Asia, the Cold War inevitably entailed a more ideological form of warfare as a whole.[3]

I cannot disagree with Chen Jian, and many other kindred historians, that the Cold War, USSR, and US were ideology-oriented. Nevertheless, this paper's scrutiny of Stalin's attitude towards Mao, his friendly treaty with the GMD, and his secret protocols at the Yalta conference shows that although the two contending camps used strong

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ideological rhetoric to attack one another and defend themselves, they did so more to generate domestic backing than to shape decisions yet to be made. In other words, the state leaders were more concerned about their nation's "vested interests," rather than their ostensible ideological commitments.

## **Stalin's Realpolitik**

Joseph V. Stalin, perhaps due to paranoia disorder, always had doubts about the backwards communist leadership in Beijing.[4] On the other hand, he saw prospective successes for the more advanced group, the GMD, if they were to be supported effectively by the big powers. Stalin emphatically believed in realpolitik, that the bigger, more advanced group would prevail, regardless of their political or ideological manifestation.[5] While ostensibly persistent in trying to establish a "socialist" society in Russia, Stalin made "promoting the proletarian world revolution and overthrowing capitalism" the USSR's sacred state mission.[6] However, the Soviet-American agreement at Yalta in February 1945 represented the completion of a crucial step in the Soviet Union's "socialization" process. Although Moscow continued to profess its belief in the Marxist-Leninist theory of international class struggle, the Soviet Union was no longer the same kind of revolutionary country it used to be. Rather, as a main contributor and power to the postwar world order, Stalin's Soviet Union was transforming into a member of the big-power club, assuming the identity of a quasi-revolutionary country and a status quo power at the same time. Consequently, Vojtech Mastny, political scientist and specialist in the Cold War, points out that "despite Stalin's ideological dedication, revolution was for him a means to power rather than a goal in itself." [7]

Even as late as 1949, Stalin advised the CCP leaders to avoid provoking US intervention and stop disseminating forces at the Yangtze River, to reach an agreement with the GMD, and perhaps even to accept a partition of the country through a coalition government.[8] To be true, even earlier in 1926-1927, Stalin had made an issue of the need for the CCP to join with the GMD in "opposing foreign imperialism" and in constructing a new Chinese state.[9] When confronted with Chinese requests to establish its own Communist armed forces, the Soviet leader declared that "we need the [Guomindang] Right. It has capable people who still direct the army and lead it against imperialists." [10] While Stalin won the political battle in Russia, his advice to the Chinese Communist proved disastrous for the recipient: in April 1927 the GMD army under Chang Kai-Shek crushed the CCP party and arrested or murdered its main leaders. Communism was finished as a main political force in China for almost a decade.[11] Although the result may have been inadvertent, Stalin certainly neither factored in the interests of the CCP nor considered the potentially detrimental outcome when he encouraged the CCP-GMD coalition government.

Stalin wanted to keep his options open in China; he subordinated the interests of local communist leaders to the interest of his own nation. He also had a vested interest in keeping China in its quaint state, so as to maintain the Soviet's accessible prerogative in Manchuria and various privileged areas within China. Stalin's attitude reflects his understanding of how Soviet interests in China would best be served. He lacked confidence in the CCP to win a civil war against the GMD. Thus he relinquished relations with a party in alignment with his ideological orientation to affiliate with another that had completely different agendas with that of the Soviet Union. Moreover, he was reluctant to commit any support to his Chinese comrades by risking a direct conflict with the American who were then planning large-scale landing operations in Northern China.[12]

## **Soviet Union-Western Nations, Yalta Conference 1945**

On February 11, 1945, Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, then in conclave at the Crimean port of Yalta, signed an agreement for disposing of Far Eastern questions.[13] Stalin agreed to enter the war in Asia within two or three months of Germany's defeat, which would ensure the expansion of Soviet supremacy in Asia.[14] The accord stated that the status quo in Outer Mongolia (the Mongolian People's Republic) would be preserved, and that the "former rights of Russia violated by the treacherous attack of Japan in 1904" would be restored.[15] In addition to validating various Soviet claims against Japan itself, Yalta gave Moscow extraterritorial rights in China and prescribed the conclusion of a treaty of alliance between Moscow and the nationalist government in Chongqing.[16]

After the result of the conference was conceived, Roosevelt informed Chang of the main contents of the Yalta

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agreement, but Stalin did not brief the CCP leaders on the deal he had made with Roosevelt.[17] For the Russian dictator, the strategic interests of the Soviet Union were more important than those of his Chinese Communist comrades. Stalin's strategic efforts show his pragmatic approach to foreign policy—regardless of whether or not the policy conforms to communist ideas, as long as it serves the Soviet Union's national interest, it is a viable approach. The security equation for Stalin was simple: subordinate the interest of weak states (including China) to those of the powerful, divide the strategic regions of the world into spheres of influence, and widen the buffer zones along the periphery of the Soviet State.[18] As can be seen, Stalin had no consideration to “unify Communist states” in order to push forward an “international proletarian revolution;” cooperation was merely for national security interests, and Communism provided the perfect justification.

## Soviet Union-GMD

Aside from advising the CCP to coordinate to the GMD, Stalin's USSR also had primary alliances with the GMD. Anticipating that the Soviet Union would soon enter the Second World War in the Far East against Japan, Chang made great efforts to reach agreements with Stalin. Early in July 1945, Chang sent T.V. Soong, Republic China's Foreign Minister and his brother-in-law, to Moscow to meet Stalin.[19] Stalin agreed to support Chang as China's only leader and not to aid the CCP, but he also asked for several vital concessions from the GMD government.[20] Although Stalin's acquirements were pricey, Chang authorized Soong to sign the Sino-soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance (this is not to be confused with the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance which was a treaty signed between the CCP and the Soviet Union in 1950).

*When world peace is being re-established on the principles of justice, the signing of the Soviet-Chinese treaty of friendship and alliance is an event of tremendous historical importance...I am fully confident that henceforth the Government of both countries, one the basis of this treaty, will be able to show a spirit of mutual confidence and assistance, so as to direct all their efforts 'towards achieving the happiness and prosperity of the two great peoples of china and the USSR, as well as of the peoples of the whole world.[21]*

These were the words exchanged between Chang and Stalin on the ratification of the August 1945 Sino-Soviet treaty, and the Soviet leader echoed the same sentiments in his reply.[22] Through this treaty, Chang acknowledged the independence of Outer Mongolia, the Soviet military occupation of Port Arthur, and Soviet privileges regarding the Chinese Changchun railroad.[23] In return, the Soviet Union agreed to respect Chang's position as the leader of China's legal government and acknowledged that Chang's troops had the right to inherit lost territories, especially that of the Northeast.[24] On 14 August, the same day that the Sino-Soviet treaty was signed, Chang telegraphed Mao to invite him to come to the GMD's capital, Chongqing, to “discuss questions related to re-establishing peace in China.”[25] The Chang-Stalin alliance undermined the optimism of the CCP leaders' strategic thinking, which was further diminished by Stalin's pressuring of his Chinese Communist comrades to negotiate with Chang. On 20 and 22 August, respectively, Stalin sent two urgent telegrams to the CCP leaders, advising them that with the surrender of Japan, the CCP should enter discussions with the GMD about the restoration of peace and the reconstruction of the country.[26]

Stalin's constant compelling and browbeating of the CCP to cooperate in a negotiation that does not benefit the CCP in the foreseeable future evidently demonstrate that Stalin is willing to betray his communist comrades for economic ends. Access to Outer Mongolia, Port Arthur, and the Changchun railroad provide massive benefits and convenience to Soviet's economic development and transportation of resources and raw material. Stalin had gained much through signing a treaty with the GMD government and was eager to retain those advancements by all means. Even when there were sparks between USSR and the GMD over the proposed economic cooperation scheme for the Changchun railroad, the Soviets, caught in a bombardment of diplomatic criticism, resorted to sacrificing the CCP. Consequently, the CCP forewent all cities along the Changchun railway to the GMD, and were asked to retreat.[27]

## Why USSR-CCP?

With Stalin's realpolitik and pragmatic foreign policy, and his disconcern for his Chinese communist comrades, how did the Sino-Soviet Treaty of 1950 crystallize? There are several aspects to the answer; however, ultimately it was

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not "communism" that united the USSR and the CCP. Stalin immediately took into effective the Yalta agreement and began to deploy the Soviet Red Army into the Northeastern region of China. Concurrently, Chang also realized the strategic importance of the Northeast and began to deploy GMD units there. In accordance to the Sino-soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance, the Red Army generally showed cooperative sentiments to the incoming GMD troops. With the help of the US facilities, large numbers of GMD troops were transported into China by air or sea. In addition, late in September, US Marines began large-scale landing operations in Tianjin and several other northern ports.[28]

This cooperative nature between the GMD and US military actions immediately alerted Moscow. Furthermore, as the CCP-GMD conflict over the control of the Northeast was escalating, the foreign ministers of the US, USSR, Britain, France, and China met in London to discuss important Far Eastern issues, particularly the question of military actions in Japan. When the Americans heralded that they would exercise exclusive control of the occupation of Japan, the Soviets immediately decided to harden their policy toward the US in East Asia and the GMD in China. The Soviets were now more inclined to renegeing their promises under the Sino-Soviet treaty. Beginning in early October their perspective towards the Northeast issue changed further in favour of the Chinese Communist Party. The Soviet Red Army began to create barriers against the GMD troops' movement into the Northeast, "claiming that until an overall solution of the Northeast issue had been worked out, they would not allow GMD troops to enter the areas they occupied." In the meantime, the Soviets increased their support for the CCP. On 4 October, the Soviets advised the CCP Northeast Bureau that the Chinese Communists should move as many as 300,000 troops into the Northeast in one month's time, and that the Soviets would provide them with large numbers of weapons. On 19 October, the CCP leadership decided to "go all out of control the entire Northeast." [29]

The US also contributed in pushing the USSR to its eventual ally: in order to reduce Soviet influence in East Asia, early in February 1946, Washington expressed strong opposition to the Soviet-GMD negotiations on economic cooperation in the Northeast. The US intentionally publicized the contents of the secret agreements on China between Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta.[30] Meanwhile, by 1948, as Mao's cadre gained momentum, it became clear that the GMD could not defeat Mao's forces and that the Americans were unwilling to bail Chang's government out of its economic and military predicament; Stalin began showing support for the Chinese Communists.[31]

## Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief that the USSR-CCP and US-GMD alliances came about due to ideology affinity, the aforementioned case studies describe alternative motives behind these alliances. Stalin, albeit having truly believed in Marxist-Leninism to begin with, faltered his faith in ideology due to increasing interest in the Soviet Union's international status and economic development. This is evidently corroborated by his betrayal of the Chinese Communist Party with the GMD (Friendly Treaty) and with the US (Yalta Conference), both of which were renowned opponents of the communist camp during the Cold War.

Joseph V. Stalin, of course, was not the only "national interest-oriented" leader of the bunch. A look in close range, we also realize that Mao made alliances with the "enemy" simply because it was China's national goal to re-establish its position in the center of the international community. Mao's revolution never took as its ultimate goal the Communist seizure of power in China; rather, as the chairman repeatedly made clear, his revolution aimed at transforming China's state, population, and society, and simultaneously reasserting China's central position in the world.[32] On the other hand, the international aspect of the revolution served as a source of domestic mobilization, helping to legitimate the revolution at home and to maintain its momentum. Mao's belief in Marxist-Leninist ideology was always interwoven with his devotion to using ideology as a means to transform China's state, its society, and its international status. This belief stood at the core of their conceptual realm, providing legitimacy to the Chinese *communist* revolution.[33]

When serious disagreement began to emerge between Beijing and Moscow in the mid- and late 1950s, China and the Soviet Union had more shared "national interests" than ever: given the hostility of the US and other Western countries toward the People's Republic of China (PRC), Beijing's strategic alliance with Moscow was vital; the Western economic embargo against China made Sino-Soviet trade relations ever more valuable for Beijing; and China's economic reconstruction benefited greatly from Soviet aid.[34] In turn, China's support significantly

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enhanced the Soviet Union's position in a global confrontation with the US. And thus, In February 1950, a Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed between the PRC (now official communist) and the USSR, and an agreement that the USSR would provide long term credits to China, and that china would leave certain Manchurian railways and port arrangements in Soviet hands for a few years.[35] The negotiations were far from easy; however, the national interests of China and the Soviet Union were highly compatible at that time, or at least should have greatly outweighed any explicit or implicit conflict that might have existed between them.

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[2] *Ibid.*, 2.

[3] *Ibid.*, 3-5.

[4] Sergei Nikolaevich Goncharov et al., *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford University Press, 1993), 77.

[5] Michael M. Sheng, *Response: Mao and Stalin: Adversaries or Comrades?*

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[6] Chen Jian, 4.

[7] *Ibid.*, 4.

[8] Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972* (California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 28.

[9] Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53.

[10] *Ibid.*, 53.

[11] *Ibid.*, 53.

[12] Chen Jian, 28.

[13] Sergei Nikolaevich Goncharov et al., 2.

[14] Chen Jian, 24-25.

[15] "The Yalta Agreement," *Yale Law School*, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/yalta.asp> (accessed March 20, 2012).

[16] Sergei Nikolaevich Goncharov et al., 2.

[17] Chen Jian, 24.25

[18] Sergei Nikolaevich Goncharov et al., 2.

[19] Chen Jian, 25-26.

[20] *Ibid.*, Chapter 1.

[21] George W. Atkinson, "The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Jul., 1947), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/3017226.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2012), 357.

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[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Chen Jian, 27.

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[27] Victor S. C. Cheng, "Imagining China's Madrid in Manchuria: The Communist Military Strategy at the Onset of the Chinese Civil War, 1945-1946," *Modern China*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 2005), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/20062601.pdf> (accessed March 20, 2012), 85.

[28] Chen Jian, 31.

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[29] Ibid., 31

[30] Ibid., 33.

[31] Odd Arne Westad, 65.

[32] Chen Jian, 7.

[33] Ibid., 8.

[34] Ibid., 9.

[35] Gungwu Wang, *China and the World Since 1949* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1977), 34.

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*Written by: Fan Zhang*

*Written at: University of British Columbia*

*Written for: David Gossen*

*Date written: 03/2012*