Beijing and the Korean Crisis, June 1950-June 1951
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Our understanding of the Korean War and especially the crisis-filled first year of that war has undergone some dramatic changes. Through the 1980s, approaching the fortieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, some twenty books appeared dealing with the war's politics, diplomacy, and strategy. The late Gregory Henderson, writing in an elegiac vein, acknowledged this new era in scholarship. "The men who lived the Korean War now pass. A new generation, eyes deep in mountains of documents declassified up to 1954, claims the old fields. The headiness of those years for us who lived them ebbs. We come, coolly [sic] enmeshed in footnotes, to the scribes' time."2

The scribes have been busiest rewriting American policy and Anglo-American relations during the war. Perhaps as much as anything, the appearance between 1976 and 1984 of the relevant volumes in the U.S. foreign relations series and the clock-like opening of pertinent materials in the British Public Records Office stimulated this fresh research. New accounts have also brought the role of Ko-

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1 A count that included military and campaign histories would go substantially higher. The findings of Bruce Cumings, Rosemary Foot, Burton I. Kaufman, Callum A. MacDonald, and others have served cumulatively to displace David Rees, Korea: The Limited War (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), the standard treatment for at least twenty years. For recent reviews of the new literature, see Rosemary Foot, "Making Known the Unknown War: Policy Analysis of the Korean Conflict in the Last Decade," Diplomatic History 15 (Summer 1991): 411-31; → Philip West, "Interpreting the Korean War," American Historical Review 94 (February 1989): 80-96.

reans into clearer focus. Integrating Korean sources with the English-language literature, those accounts have focused attention on the peninsular origins of the war and the interaction between the great powers and the local actors, between international politics and local politics. On a third front, Soviet involvement, the first volume of Nikita Khrushchev’s memoirs opened up some intriguing insights in 1970, and the 1990 volume has offered some supplementary details. But in general, our view on the Kremlin remained limited in the age of glasnost, and little has yet changed now in the age of Boris Yeltsin.3

The Chinese role has, at least until recently, been only marginally better understood. Whether and when the Chinese might release illuminating material on the war has been a subject of occasional, generally pessimistic comment.4 But the Chinese are making their own contribution to our understanding of the war, helping us to move beyond the point researchers relying heavily on the contemporary public record had carried.5 Thanks to new material China’s intrusion into the narrative need no longer be accompanied by a relentless rain of speculation and misinformation. We can now correct misconceptions by nonspecialists intent on a more global view of the war,6 subject undocumented claims to critical scrutiny,7 and begin to nail down such vital but elu-

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4 For example, Max Hastings writing in 1987 suggested that the Chinese records are either lost or forever sealed. “It may never be possible to piece together the precise decision-making process in Peking that led to the order to enter Korea. Almost all the key participants are dead, and among the living there is no reliable body of records to enable even those who wish to establish the objective truth about recent Chinese political history to do so.” Hastings, The Korean War (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 132. Edwin P. Hoyt, The Day the Chinese Attacked: Korea, 1950 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 144, is similarly pessimistic.

5 Allen S. Whiting, China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War (originally published 1960, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), a meticulous reconstruction of Chinese signalling from June to November 1950, is the best known and most influential of these works based primarily on the public record.


7 See for example the imaginative treatment of Chinese decision making in October and November 1950 in Russell Spurr, Enter the Dragon: China’s Undeclared War against the U.S. in Korea, 1950-51 (New York: Newmarket Press, 1988). Spurr fails to indicate precisely how the interviews in China on which he relies so heavily support his narrative. Hoyt, The Day the Chinese Attacked, a somewhat better grounded account, also dispenses with precise documentation.
sive topics as the domestic impact of the war and its effects on Sino-Soviet relations.

The credit for this advance on the Chinese front of the Korean War, but one aspect of a broad movement to develop and open up party history, goes to the Communist party central committee itself. Much of the headway made through the 1980s was due to the efforts of three historical units in Beijing operating under the direct supervision of a central committee “small group.” The party center's own research offices have put out a wide variety of material relevant to Mao Zedong's central role in the crisis as well as the context in which he operated. Adding significantly to the literature, the Chinese military itself has promoted research and publication on a topic in which it takes considerable pride. Officers who played a prominent role in the conflict together with military researchers have produced an impressive body of work, much of it published by one or another of the military-run presses. These various secondary treatments and

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8 The most ambitious study to date is Larry S. Weiss, “Storm Around the Cradle: The Korean War and the Early Years of the People's Republic of China” (Ph.D. dissertation in Political Science, Columbia University, 1981), which contends that the war radicalized China's domestic policy, thus bringing to a premature end the New Democracy stage of China's development.


documentary collections provide a window—indirect to be sure—into military, party, and foreign ministry archives. Taken together, they offer a view that contrasts sharply with what was available earlier in China.\(^{13}\)

Foreign scholars soon recognized this historical opening. The first hints came at a conference in Beijing in 1986.\(^{14}\) Since then, as more and more material has been published and reached specialists outside China, additional accounts in English have begun to appear, pulling aside the curtain long obscuring Chinese decision making.\(^{15}\)

While the record of China's role in the Korean War is by no means complete, the materials now in hand are voluminous and reliable enough to invite a sweeping reappraisal of Beijing's response to the crisis and an overall reassessment of the crisis itself. These new Chinese materials on the Korean War are especially rich for the first year of the conflict when Beijing moved toward a decision to intervene, struggled to formulate war aims and an appropriate strategy, and finally accepted negotiations and a military stalemate. This article begins by sketching out some of the central findings that have emerged to date. It then seeks to relate those findings to themes drawn from the more fully documented Anglo-American side.

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\(^{13}\) For an impression of how thin and domestically oriented the treatment of the war was before the recent explosion of publications, see Hu Zhongchi, KangMei yuanChao zundong shihua [An informal history of the resist-America, aid-Korea campaign] (Beijing: ZhongHua qingnian, 1956); and Zhongguo renmin kangMei yuanChao zonghui xuanchuanbu, comp., Weida de kangMei yuanChao yundong [The great resist-America, aid-Korea campaign] (Beijing: Renmin, 1954), a collection of documents.


of the story. It finally offers some reflections on the implications of the Korean case for our general understanding of international crises.

**BEIJING AND THE OUTBREAK OF THE WAR**

New materials coming out of China complicate and marginally clarify our picture of Beijing's role in the origins of the Korean War and its response to the first months of the fighting. They do not set directly in doubt the older impression that the actual outbreak of the war found the Chinese leadership preoccupied with reconstructing the economy, carrying out land reform in newly liberated areas, and in general consolidating the revolution at home.¹⁶

There are now, however, some hints that Beijing knew that the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung had some military initiative afoot. Several accounts claim that Mao and Stalin discussed the Korean question during their summit meeting in Moscow (December 1949-February 1950) and that Mao exchanged views with Kim during a later meeting in Beijing.¹⁷ Whatever may have been said on these occasions, it is clear that Beijing and Pyongyang worked together in the year before the war to repatriate Korean troops who had fought in the Chinese civil war. Those troops had marched into the Northeast with the Chinese Communist Eighth Route Army at the end of the Pacific War carrying orders to organize Korean residents of the Northeast and to help the Soviet army in the liberation of Korea.¹⁸ In fall 1949 China and North Korea reached an agreement on the return of two divisions of those troops in the Fourth Field Army. While in Moscow in January 1950 Mao received Kim Il Sung's request for the return of additional Korean nationals in the Fourth Field Army; and during the spring, after some additional discussions with the North Koreans, Nie Rongzhen, then acting chief of staff, effected the return of 14,000 with their weapons and equipment. Estimates of the total number of troops sent back to Korea by the eve of the war run around 50-70,000 and by the fall exceed 100,000.¹⁹

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¹⁶ The "liberation" of Taiwan was somewhere on the agenda, but (to judge from the evidence now available) an invasion attempt was not imminent because the Communists lacked the requisite naval and air forces. Nie, *Nie Rongzhen huixilu* 3: 7. Jon W. Huebner, "The Abortive Liberation of Taiwan," *China Quarterly* 110 (June 1987): 256-75, which surveys U.S. and Nationalist intelligence estimates; and Xu Yan, *Jinmen zhi zhan (1949-1959 nian)* [The battle for Jinmen (1949-1959)] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi, 1992), 116-25, 142-44, which describes the long-term planning for an invasion and reports that by 11 August 1950 the Military Affairs Committee had decided to put off any decision to 1952 in order to focus on Korea.

¹⁷ Hao and Zhai, "China's Decision," 100, claim on the basis of "interviews" that Kim Il Sung visited China in April on his way back from Moscow and revealed his intention to unify Korea by force but not the details of his plans.


¹⁹ Nie, *Nie Rongzhen huixilu*, 3:744 (which does not reveal if the North Korean requests carried any hints of the uses to which the troops would be put); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean
On 25 June 1950, North Korean forces launched an invasion of South Korea, setting off a string of unpleasant surprises for Beijing. The first of these came on 27 June when President Harry S. Truman announced that the United States would not only defend South Korea under the auspices of the United Nations but also “neutralize” the Taiwan Strait by sending the Seventh Fleet to block any communist invasion attempt. Beijing’s earliest public response to the American intervention, published on 28 and 29 June, was notably cautious and vague. While deploring American intervention around the world and especially in Asia, Mao, Premier Zhou Enlai, and a Renmin ribao editorial all nonetheless focused their public fire on the American attempt to deny China control of its province of Taiwan.\(^{20}\)

But the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began almost at once to prepare against untoward developments in Korea. On 30 June Zhou ordered Chinese military observers to North Korea. On 7 and 10 July the Military Affairs Committee met, and in sessions chaired by Zhou and attended by the army commander-in-chief, Zhu De, and Nie Rongzhen recommended creating a force to defend the border and if necessary cross the Yalu River to help North Korea. Mao at once endorsed the proposal. By early August more than a quarter of a million troops were assembled along the Yalu with Gao Gang, in charge of party and military affairs in the Northeast, bearing responsibility for logistical support. Even so, Beijing’s alarm, reflected in public warnings directed against the advance of the United Nations forces, continued to mount. On 5 August Mao personally instructed Gao Gang to have the border forces ready for combat by early September. Told by Gao of the difficulties in completing the preparations, Mao agreed on 18 August to extend the deadline to the end of the month. On 17 September, in the immediate aftermath of the successful American landing at Inchon, the Military Affairs Committee dispatched Chinese officers to Korea to lay the groundwork for possible intervention.\(^{21}\)

China’s growing alarm, reinforced by Soviet and Korean calls for assistance, gave rise to efforts to coordinate policy among the three countries, so at least the


\(^{21}\) Chai and Zhao *Banmendian tanpan*, 34–36; Zhang Xi, “Peng Dehuai shouming shuaishuai kangMei yuanChao de qianqian houhou” [The full story of Peng Dehuai’s appointment to head the resistance to the United States and the assistance to Korea], *Zhonggong zhongyang dangshi ziliao* 31 (1989): 118–20; *Jianguo yilai*, 1: 429, 454, 469; Chai and Zhao, *KangMei yuanChao jishi*, 46–47, 51. Bo Yibo, *Ruogan zhongda juece yu shijian de huigu* [Reflections on some major incidents and decisions] (Beijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao, 1991), 43, recalls a Political Bureau meeting on 4 August at which Mao contended that China had to help Korea by sending troops, that preparations for their dispatch had to begin at once, and that only the timing of the intervention was a matter for discussion. Bo’s account needs confirmation.
new secondary accounts suggest. While some older accounts contend that regular, high-level consultations among the three began in early July,\textsuperscript{22} the new evidence points to a later date—after the Inchon landing and General Douglas MacArthur’s rapid push north created panic in Pyongyang and alarm in Beijing and Moscow. These contacts quickly moved to the highest level, bringing the Chinese fully into inner councils of the war. In late September Stalin raised with Beijing the possibility of Kim Il Sung setting up a government in exile in China, and on 1 October with South Korean forces crossing the thirty-eighth parallel Kim personally followed up with a desperate request for China’s help in the war.\textsuperscript{23}

The Peoples Republic of China (PRC) had to scramble to create working relations with Kim’s regime. A Chinese embassy was hastily set up in early July, nearly a year after diplomatic recognition. The post-Inchon alarm brought the Koreans and Chinese into increasingly frequent military contact. On 8 October Kim sent a liaison to the headquarters of the Chinese forces gathering in the Northeast, and on 4 December, as a result of a Kim-Mao meeting in Beijing, a joint Chinese-Korean command was set up under Peng Dehuai, the commander of the Chinese forces in Korea. At several critical points in the tumultuous first year of the war, Kim Il Sung travelled to Beijing. These visits in early December 1950, late January 1951, and early June 1951 served to coordinate war strategy and to iron out practical difficulties such as friction between the Chinese “volunteers” and Koreans, differences over policy on the release of prisoners, and inadequate North Korean logistical support.\textsuperscript{24}

**The Decision to Intervene**

The new materials offer some new insights on the decisions that led China to intervene militarily in the conflict. These materials, which include a substantial body of documents, reveal Mao’s dominant role. Not surprisingly, however, given the complexity of the man, the rapidly developing crisis confronting him, and the size of the stakes for the CCP, those materials raise fresh, knotty questions about precisely when and exactly why Mao resolved to act.

To clarify the issue of timing it is useful to think of Mao moving along two sometimes intersecting tracks toward a definitive commitment of his forces.

\textsuperscript{22} Drawing on a 1968 study by Huang Chenxia, Jurgen Domes, *Peng Te-huai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), 60, points to Sino-Soviet military meeting in Beijing in August and the creation of a joint Sino-Soviet general staff in Shenyang in September.

\textsuperscript{23} Chai and Zhao, *KangMei yuanChao jishi*, 55; Zhang, “Peng Dehuai shouming,” 123; Xu, *Diyici jiaoliang*, 22; for what purports to be the text of Kim’s 1 October appeal for help, see Ye Yumeng, *Chubing Chaoxian: KangMei yuanChao lishi jishi* [Sending troops to Korea: A historical record of the resistance to America and assistance to Korea] (Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi, 1990), 39–40.

Suspiciously, little of either track is evident before Kim's appeal for help on 1 October, even though we know that Mao began to take a hold of strategic planning two months earlier.

One of those tracks led to Moscow. Having announced to his colleagues his own view that China should intervene, Mao on 2 October cabled his decision to Stalin. Chinese troops would enter Korea on 15 October, Mao announced, and there they would assume a defensive posture, letting the enemy forces know that they faced a new situation. Once better prepared and equipped with Soviet arms, those troops could if need be take the offensive. Aside from equipment, Mao wanted from Stalin help in fending off possible American naval and air attacks on Chinese cities and industry. Thus, while indicating that China was ready to shoulder the main burden of saving North Korea, Mao also sought to ensure practical military cooperation from a Soviet leader known for his caution and now perhaps growing reluctant to be drawn directly into a protracted or escalating conflict.25

In any case, on 8 October Mao followed up by sending Zhou Enlai to meet with Stalin on Chinese intervention. Zhou, accompanied by Lin Biao (seeking Soviet medical treatment) and perhaps by Ambassador Wang Jiaxiang, travelled to Sochi on the Black Sea for a meeting with Stalin that lasted through the night of 9–10 October. Stalin revealed that he would not provide the air cover Chinese forces operating in Korea would desperately need. The Soviet air force, he explained, needed more time for preparation before being engaged even in the defense of Chinese airspace. Zhou returned to Moscow to cable Mao this disappointing news but also to pass on assurances that the Soviets would immediately begin supplying weaponry for twenty Chinese divisions.26

While dealing with Stalin, Mao moved along the second track defined by a string of high-level meetings devoted to discussing the grave crisis facing the new regime. The existing record suggests that Mao's proposal for decisive action elicited doubts that he was not able to dispel either quickly or easily, and indeed that he himself seems at points to have fallen prey to uncertainties. Indeed, as early as 2 October in his cable to Stalin, Mao had identified one set of risks: attacking Chinese troops might fail to destroy American forces in Korea and become entangled in a Sino-American military stand-off that would bring serious collateral damage to China's economic reconstruction and that would deepen the discontent of the Chinese already unsettled by revolution. Mao's colleagues who

25 Mao cable to Stalin, 2 October 1950 in Jianguo yilai, 1: 539–41.
26 Zhang, “Peng Dehuai shouming,” 147–48. Shi Zhe, who accompanied Zhou as translator, has offered a detailed description of the trip that is often not congruent with other sources and thus has to be used with care. See Shi Zhe with Li Haiwen, Zai lishi juren shenbian: She Zhe huiyilu [Alongside the giants of history: Shi Zhe's memoir] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, 1991), 495–502. For alternative accounts, see Hong, KangMei yuanChao, 25–27; and Qi, Chaoxian zhanzheng, 62–63 (for the recollections of Kang Yimin, another member of Zhou's party). For details on the ensuing Soviet aid program that included air support in Korea beginning in January 1951, see Xu, Diviyi jiaoliang, 30–32; and Hong, KangMei yuanChao, 184.
opposed sending troops or at least wanted to delay intervention also pointed to the military risks and the prospects of a direct, damaging attack on China. They also argued that the new Chinese state needed time to consolidate its political control, wipe out remaining Chinese Nationalist resistance, complete land reform, stabilize the economy, and upgrade the armed forces. They pointed to the burdens intervention would place on a war-weary population. They may also have stressed the uncertain nature of Soviet assistance. The rapidly deteriorating battlefield situation, the delays in getting Chinese troops ready for combat, Stalin's refusal of air support, and in general the gnawing anxieties about the risks China was about to take—all combined to complicate Mao's task and prolong the discussion.

The identity of the doubters is still a matter of some conjecture, and even a full record may not reveal a clearly drawn debate with a neat line-up of those for and against intervention. In the face of the prestige that Mao brought to the discussion of military affairs, his colleagues would have expressed themselves carefully, even though in principle collegial decision making still prevailed within the party center. Moreover, the discussions at this time were (the existing record suggests) complex, turning more on the aims and level of the Chinese commitment than on the principle of somehow assisting North Korea. The issue thus did not invite yes or no answers but offered opportunity aplenty for the participants to reassess and shift their views.

The first of a hurried and tension-filled series of high-level meetings took place on 1 October. The leadership broke away early from the public celebration of the PRC's first anniversary to discuss Kim Il Sung's urgent request for military assistance. This meeting, held like most of the others to follow within the CCP headquarters compound at Zhongnanhai in Beijing, did not end until dawn.

The middle of the afternoon the next day (2 October) Mao met with Zhu, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou, Nie, and Gao (having just flown into the capital), and he announced that troops had to intervene. The only questions were when and under

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28 Zhang, "Peng Dehuai shouming," 124. This account offers the most detailed treatment of the October meetings but without indicating the source on which it draws.
whose command would the intervention take place. The assembled leaders agreed on 15 October as the day for Chinese forces to march. The selection of a commander seems to have been more difficult. Mao indicated that he had considered first Su Yu and then, once the size of the operation grew, Lin Biao. However, both were medically indisposed, and Lin had evidenced anxiety over American military superiority. Mao suggested Peng Dehuai and won general approval.29 Mao then dispatched his cable to Stalin, and Zhou called in the Indian ambassador, K. M. Pannikar, to warn that Beijing “has to be concerned” (yaoguan) if the Americans crossed the thirty-eighth parallel.30

On 4 October, again at mid-afternoon, an expanded meeting of the Political Bureau began. Late in the afternoon Peng Dehuai arrived from his command in the Northwest to join the discussions. Early on the 5th Mao sounded out Peng on taking the Korea command, first through his emissary Deng Xiaoping and then in a personal interview. Peng had earlier concluded that China was being sucked by the North Korean adventure into an arena previously the domain of the United States and the USSR. Peng had sat quietly through the discussions on the day of his arrival. Having now agreed to shoulder the command, Peng spoke out in support of Mao’s intervention proposal in the meeting later that day (5 October).31 On 8 October, following a series of planning meetings, Mao met again with the enlarged Political Bureau and gave the orders for Chinese forces to prepare to move across the Yalu River and do battle with U.S troops then crossing the thirty-eighth parallel and threatening Pyongyang. At the same time he cabled his decision to Kim Il Sung and formally named Peng Dehuai the commander of the volunteers. Peng left at once for the Northeast to take up his command. He was accompanied by Gao and Mao Zedong’s son, Anying, who was to serve as translator for the Soviet advisers.32

The arrival of Zhou Enlai’s unsettling report of his interview with Stalin during the afternoon of 10 October set the stage for a second round of consultations in Zhongnanhai. On 11–12 October Mao not only suspended his intervention order but also recalled Peng and Gao to Beijing for another round of discussions. The Political Bureau met on 13 October and stayed in session through the night before

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29 Lin was an odd choice if he was indeed ill. And it is equally perplexing that Mao would have turned now to a commander with whom he had come into sometimes sharp conflict over military strategy during the civil war. For differences between the two in spring 1946 see ZYWJ, 13: 356, 377, 387-88, 404. For sharper tensions later in the civil war, see Takeuchi Minoru, ed., Mao Zedong ji bujuan [Supplements to collected writings of Mao Zedong] 10 vols. (Tokyo: Sososha, 1983-85), 8: 141-57.
30 Zhang, “Peng Dehuai shouming,” 125-27; and the transcript of the Zhou-Pannikar meeting, 3 October 1950 in Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan, 25. Zhou’s warning on this occasion was in fact weaker than in his publicly circulated address of 30 September. There he indicated a determination to resist aggression whether against China or its neighbor. Ibid., 24.
32 Jianguo yilai, 1: 543-45; Zhang, “Peng Dehuai shouming,” 137-42. Mao Anying was killed in late November in an American air raid.
coming to a unanimous agreement to send troops to Korea despite the lack of Soviet air support. Mao devoted the 14th to detailed consultation with Peng on the impending military operations.\(^{33}\)

The 13 October Political Bureau meeting and Mao’s discussions with Peng on the 14th produced a consensus in favor of proceeding cautiously and avoiding a direct challenge to the United States. The volunteers were to concentrate their attack on the South Korean “puppet” forces and avoid hitting any but isolated American forces. The volunteers were, moreover, not to make a rapid advance but rather establish a base of operations in the mountainous region north of Pyongyang and Wonsan. If American forces did not advance beyond those two points for six months, then Chinese forces would gain time to prepare for whatever action Beijing might think best at the end of that period. This action, the Political Bureau resolution somewhat vaguely opined, would “produce a change to our advantage.” The consensus did not address the possibility that MacArthur might continue his rapid advance, giving the Chinese force no grace period and Beijing no chance for a peaceful resolution of the confrontation. This oversight may have reflected a reluctance to see the crisis in worst-case terms and thus play into the hands of the doubters. Mao now cabled Zhou, still in Moscow, the terms on which China was acting and made clear that the intervening force would consist not of the six divisions that Stalin had urged earlier in the crisis but fifteen divisions together with supporting units (260,000 troops).\(^{34}\)

Finally, on 15 October, with Kim calling for haste in the dispatch of support, Mao issued an order for intervention no later than 17 October (soon pushed back to the 18th). By the 17th Peng’s subordinates reported that their forces with few anti-aircraft guns and no air cover faced poor odds in battle and proposed delaying action until winter or even the following spring, when they might be better equipped. That same day Mao called Peng and Gao back to Beijing to canvas again the precise time for moving into Korea and to hear Zhou report on the details of Soviet support. With the Americans advancing rapidly and the North Koreans in a panic, Mao thrust aside hesitations and fears and insisted on immediate action. He now set 19 October for the major crossing of the Yalu. As instructed, the first major body of Chinese troops advanced into Korea late that day, setting in motion the events that would soon bring war with the United States.\(^{35}\)

**Motives for Intervention**

Any effort to pin down the exact motive behind Mao’s decision to intervene must enter a mind as complicated as the crisis it wrestled with. That effort must

\(^{33}\) Zhang, “Peng Dehuai shouming,” 147–52; and Jianguo yilai, 1: 552–53.

\(^{34}\) Zhang, “Peng Dehuai shouming,” 152; Jianguo yilai, 1: 556, 559.

also confront the different, though not mutually exclusive, rationales that Mao offered in his effort to neutralize the hesitations or objections that he felt he faced on three distinct fronts. The puzzle for the historian is to judge how much Mao chose his arguments to win support, how much those arguments were keenly felt by him, and how important one was relative to the other.

That Mao's attitude toward China's role in the Korean conflict was complex is amply illustrated by his cable of 2 October to Stalin. He contended that he felt an internationalist duty to rescue the beleaguered Korean revolution and to help maintain revolutionary morale around the world in the face of a counteroffensive launched by American reactionaries. The dangers of a revival of reactionary sentiment in China and elsewhere in Asia was equally troubling and called for a decisive response. If China meekly acquiesced while the Americans occupied all of Korea and dealt a heavy blow to the Korean revolution, "then the American aggressors would run even more wild to the detriment of all of East Asia."36 While giving considerable weight overall to the dangers of appeasement and the opportunities for creating an international environment favorable to revolutionary change, Mao also invoked a narrower, more conventional concern with China's security. He had to act, he argued, to preempt a possible American offensive into China itself.

When Mao shifted from addressing Stalin to his compatriots, especially the petty and national bourgeoisie and intellectuals, another set of concerns—national unity—came to the fore. He and Zhou Enlai made patriotic appeals calculated to calm their fear of war and neutralize their lingering philo-Americanism, which Mao himself had attacked only a year earlier. He now again warned that patriots should not be deceived by American propaganda. He indicated that the war was necessary to defend the vital interests of China against renewed aggression, and he urged "all patriotic industrialists and merchants" to join with the masses in a united front against foreign aggression. Zhou Enlai, playing his accustomed role as spokesman for united front policies, drew on China's past in making a similarly patriotic appeal. In an address to the Chinese People's Consultative Congress on 24 October, he invoked the traditional figure of speech—Korea as lips to China's teeth—to underline the long accepted strategic importance of the peninsula. He compared the line of attack the Americans were following to that of the Japanese, beginning in Korea before moving on to the Northeast and then China as a whole.37

Finally, the discussions within the Political Bureau found Mao once more an internationalist, but one now with China decidedly at the center. Joined by Peng Dehuai and other advocates of action in the meetings of 4–5 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

36 Jianguo yilai, 1: 543.
wavering countries and classes to the side of the United States, strengthen the
resolve of reactionaries at home and abroad, and encourage the United States to
send troops to other points along China's border.

The final consensus reached at the meeting of 13 October seemed to reflect
this combination of concerns. According to Mao's summary of that consensus,
military intervention was necessary above all to prevent the enemy from domi-
nating the Yalu River and thus posing a constant threat to the Northeast. But it
was also important for guaranteeing the North Koreans a secure base of opera-
tions and for denying imperialism a victory that would fan counterrevolutionary
sentiments in China and internationally.

Mao's own precise personal goals at this point are difficult to pin down and may
not have been entirely clear in his own mind. Indeed, the risks and uncertainties of
intervention put a premium on keeping policy flexible with several options left
open. His cables to Zhou, sent in the immediate aftermath of the decisive 13
October Political Bureau meeting, reflected this reluctance to be pinned down.
Chinese troops might win a decisive battlefield victory that would force the
American-led coalition to abandon the peninsula. Even a limited success might
send a wake-up call to Washington, making clear China's determination and
hence the dangers of a more costly Korean conflict. Once rudely shaken, Wash-
ington might reassess its goals in Korea; the pause in Chinese military operations
following the initial entry into Korea would give the Americans time to indicate
their interest in a peaceful resolution of the conflict. If on the other hand Wash-
ington held to its aggressive course, then Chinese troops, by then better prepared
for combat, could take the offensive in a renewed test of strength. Mao must
have played out in his mind each of these scenarios in the anxious days before
the crossing of the Yalu. But they amounted, as he and his Political Bureau
colleagues must have realized, to nothing more concrete than the pious hope that
an early blow might produce a turn for the better on the peninsula.38

**MAO DIRECTS MILITARY STRATEGY**

These materials are also revealing on Mao's deep involvement in the actual plan-
ing and execution of the first three campaigns, beginning in late October and
running to early January. The point that deserves stress is that Mao's role here,
as in the high-level decision to take a military stand, was central and controlling.
For example, through October Mao appears to have focused on the Korean
crisis to the exclusion of other pressing issues facing the new government. His
preoccupations, even anxieties, are evident in the drumbeat of advice that he
showered on the commander of his forces in Korea. For example, one collection
has Mao sending out fifty-five telegrams to Peng Dehuai between 21 October and

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38 Mao's discussion of the strategic options in his cables to Zhou, 13 and 14 October, in *Jianguo
yilai*, 1: 556, 559.
26 December with no fewer than eighteen going out on the eve of the first offensive and into its first few days (that is, between 21 and 26 October). The concerns reflected in the published telegrams, sometimes numbering two or three a day, range from placement of Chinese units and the line of approach of enemy forces down to the proper location for Peng's own headquarters.  

The Mao that appears here is a confident figure, keenly aware of the political dimensions of warfare. His sensitivity on this point grew out of his experience with the party's armed struggle for survival that extended over nearly thirty years and his experience directing the Red Army over the previous fifteen years. His confidence was buoyed by his most recent success (now documented in detail) at coordinating far-flung operations during the civil war campaigns that resulted in the defeat of a Nationalist force far larger and better armed than his own.  

Mao would brook no Chinese MacArthur, and Peng Dehuai, a dutiful field commander who deferred to Mao's judgment, did not attempt to play that role. Even so, he did at crucial junctures question his superior's strategy. For example, in late November and early December Peng urged a halt at the thirty-eighth parallel and a rest through the winter months to prepare his forces for a spring offensive. Determined to exploit the vulnerability of the disorganized and demoralized enemy, Mao ordered another round of campaigning, ruthlessly driving forward his own exhausted peasant army, inadequately fed and clothed and freezing on the battlefield. Unable to bring Mao to accept a more cautious course, Peng loyally continued the headlong assault.  

The new materials make strikingly clear that Mao, once deeply and successfully engaged in the Korean conflict, resolved the ambiguities in Chinese war aims in favor of bold, far-reaching goals and without any apparent formal consultation with his Political Bureau colleagues. The resolution came in late November and early December. As Peng's drive south gave increasing promise of a sweeping victory, Mao in effect fell victim to military opportunism. On 4 December he ordered reconnaissance in force against the clearly panicked UN army now retreating across the thirty-eighth parallel into South Korea. The next day P'yongyang fell amid hints that the Americans might altogether abandon Korea. On 13 December he ordered the advance to continue beyond the parallel, and he reiterated that position as late as 21 December. Bolstered militarily, Beijing publicly linked peace on the peninsula to the withdrawal of all foreign troops, U.S. disengagement from Taiwan, and a place for China in the UN.  

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39 Figures derived from Mao junshi wenxuan, 649–86. Nie Rongzhen huiyilu, 3: 739, notes that the instructions that Mao sent out were prepared with the assistance of the PLA's General Staff Office.  
40 A selection of documents on Mao's central role in the civil war are conveniently brought together in Mao junshi wenxuan, pt. 2. But see also ZYWJ; Takeuchi Minoru, ed., Mao Zedong ji [Collected writings of Mao Zedong] 10 vols. (Tokyo: Hokobosha, 1971–72; Hongkong reprint, 1975); and Mao bujuan for additional documentation.  
41 Ibid., 680–81, 683; Jianguo yilai, 1: 719; Chai and Zhao, Kang Mei yuan Chao jishi, 69–71.
From this high point of optimism, Mao began a retreat toward a more sober appraisal of the military situation and toward more modest goals. He took the first step back on 26 and 29 December when he began to concede the seriousness of the supply and morale problems afflicting his army. Peng was calling for a rest for Chinese forces, and Nie claims to have then endorsed the proposal. But Mao insisted for political reasons on launching another offensive. The third offensive thus began on 31 December against the better judgement of Mao's chief military associates in the Korean commitment. A month later (25–29 January) at a Sino-Korean military conference Peng again proposed a rest for his forces, this time in preparation for renewed offensive action in March. (The difficulties of supply and morale were exacerbated and hopes for a rest denied when the Americans launched their own offensive on 25 January.) With his troops exhausted, short on supplies, and harried by the enemy, Mao now at last conceded in early February that he had become entangled in a war of attrition and would have to shift to “rotational warfare” whereby Chinese armies would be trained, sent to Korea for a time, and then withdrawn in favor of a fresh force. In a prolonged series of meetings with Peng in February and March, Mao worked out the details of this new strategy. In a revealing discussion sent on 1 March to Stalin, Mao described this rotational warfare as a way of continuing his contest of wills with the United States, a contest in which inflicting casualties was the key to victory.43

Mao had from the beginning of the conflict seen it as a test of wills. This way of thinking was somewhat predictable given Mao's tendency to view confrontations with earlier opponents in similar terms. But on this occasion, he had to admit, he was losing the test. By his own calculations the cost of destroying the enemy's will to fight had climbed steadily higher just as the resolve and condition of his own forces had declined. On 18 November Mao had called for the destruction of "several 10,000" of the enemy forces, and predicted that then "the entire international situation will undergo a dramatic change." On 26 December he offered a revised judgement—that it would take at least 40–50,000 American and British casualties before resolution of the Korean question would be possible. Now on 1 March 1951, Mao, once more indulging his numerological fetish, set the critical casualty figure at "several 100,000" Americans. Only then, he claimed, would Washington see the difficulty it was in and be ready to solve the Korean problem.44

According to Chai and Zhao, KangMei yuanChao jishi, 73, Chinese and North Korean forces at the end of the year outnumbered UN forces 442,000 to 250,000 with some 315,000 additional Chinese troops being readied for battle.


44 Mao junshi wenxuan, 351, 672, 685. Again indulging a proclivity for seeing the war statistically, Mao somewhat vaguely noted on 28 April 1951 the advantages of inflicting 15–20,000 casualties in the fifth campaign. Jianguo yilai, 2: 265.
Deeply engaged in the conduct of the Korean conflict through the fall, Mao abruptly put the war to one side early in 1951. Part of this loss of interest can be explained in terms of the recurrence of ill health hinted at in his correspondence. No less important was Mao's leadership style with its marked proclivity to shift focus abruptly from one policy question to another. Putting Korea aside was especially attractive as difficulties mounted and the prospects for some sweeping success steadily dimmed. Between January and May 1951 Mao immersed himself in the campaign against counterrevolutionaries, letting the previously all important war against the imperialists in Korea intrude but occasionally.45

Then as suddenly as Korea had diminished in Mao's constellation of concerns, it reappeared in late May. By then the fifth major Chinese offensive had ground to a halt, confirming the military stalemate that Mao had perceived earlier and revealing the continuing problem of supply and the fragility of Chinese units in the face of a still strong enemy. The Americans, he observed on 26 May, remained determined and confident. He had failed to destroy their will to fight, and he would have to shift to a defensive strategy. Mao's own willingness to concede this point and the American approach to the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations on 31 May appears to have signaled to his colleagues that a major reappraisal of the Korean strategy was in order. On 3 June Kim Il Sung held talks with Mao and Zhou, followed in mid-June by high-level CCP discussions. This flurry of activity produced consensus on trying for a negotiated end to the conflict with the thirty-eighth parallel to serve once again as the dividing line between the two Koreas. On 23 June the Soviet UN ambassador publicly proposed talks, and it was immediately endorsed by an editorial in Renmin ribao. Talks opened in Kaesong on 10 July.46

As the combatants moved toward negotiations, Mao inserted himself into the policy process on a daily basis. To control the process, he dispatched to Korea Li Kenong, the vice-minister of foreign affairs, seconded by Qiao Guanhua, also then of the foreign ministry. They would serve as intermediaries between the Chinese negotiating team in Korea and Mao in Beijing. They would report the

45 Jianguo yilai, 1: 749, 2: 61, 174, 229, for evidence of illness. Commentary and instructions on dealing with counterrevolutionaries dominate the documentation in ibid. for January through May and in all constitute about one-quarter of the documentation in the Jianguo yilai volume for 1951. It is possible that the apparent personal turn from the press of Korean War business is only an artifact of the compilation process.

46 Mao junshi wenxuan, 352-53; Chai and Zhao, KangMei yuanChao jishi, 86-87; Jianguo yilai, 2: 322, 344, 350, 355, 357; and Nie,Nie Rongzhen huiyilu, 3: 741-42. Nie claims to have himself supported moving the confrontation with the United States from the battlefield to the negotiating table. For a summary of Peng's pessimistic appraisal of the military situation in late May, see "Dangdai Zhongguo" conghu bianji weiyuanhui, KangMei yuanChao zhanzheng [The war to resist America and assist Korea] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1990), 142-43. Additional details (needing confirmation) on Sino-Soviet-Korean coordination in this period are supplied by Shi Zhe, Zai lishi juren shenbian, 506.
day's developments to Mao, who in turn would prepare the instructions for
the next day of talks, orchestrate the press treatment in China, and in general
offer directions. He would do all this without apparent reference to either the
Soviets or the North Koreans. As he waded knee deep into the details of the talks,
Mao attended to matters large and small—the demarcation of the neutral zone
at Kaesong, the displacement of the peasants to create a negotiating site, the
rules for journalists attending the meeting, measures to assure the safety of
the American negotiators, and perhaps most important of all the scope of the
negotiations and the power of the negotiators. It was, all in all, another extraordi-
nary performance, and like his handling of the intervention, it is all the more
amazing for having been concealed so long from view.47

Reflecting back in July 1951, Mao tried to put the developments of the past
year in positive terms. "As the ancients said, only by being able to fight is one
then able to make peace."48 But the fighting had already proved more costly than
anticipated, and Mao would soon discover that the talks were a slow and tortuous
process. Two years of deadlock would pass and China's dead and wounded on
the battlefield would climb to 360,000 before the military sacrifices that China
had made could be translated into a peace agreement.49

**MEETING THE AMERICAN NUCLEAR THREAT**

The new materials add marginally to the impression derived from long available
public sources that the Chinese leadership may have been worried but not deterred
by the American nuclear threat. Recent research on the American side demon-
strates that the Truman administration engaged in atomic diplomacy, first
through Secretary of State Dean Acheson's leak to the *New York Times* in early
August 1950, then through Harry Truman's own sensational press conference
statement of 30 November, and finally through a warning conveyed by contacts
in Hong Kong in May 1951. To give these threats substance, Washington kept
nuclear-armed bombers within striking distance of China until late June 1951,
and the air force made reconnaissance flights over the Northeast and Shandong
to get data for a possible nuclear strike.50

Beijing publicly dismissed the nuclear threat. A lightly industrialized and
heavily rural, agricultural China was not a particularly fruitful target for nuclear
attack. Similarly, in Korea nuclear weapons did not seem useful as an actual tool

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of Foreign Affairs* (Beijing: New World Press, 1985), 85; Chai and Zhao, *Kang Mei yuan Chao jishi*,
88–91.

48 Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, comp., *Mao Zedong shuxin xuanji* [Selected letters
of Mao Zedong] (Beijing: Renmin, 1983), 416.

49 Military casualties from Bo, *Ruogan zhongda juece*, 44–45

50 Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy during the Korean War," *International Security* 13 (Winter
of land warfare. This tendency to downplay the nuclear threat may have been neither off-handed nor disingenuous. One study contends that the dangers of atomic warfare did at least intrude into the discussions over intervention in October 1950, while another account indicates that Mao in a 5 September 1950 talk to the Council of the Central People's Government raised the atomic threat only to downplay its significance. Even so, the nuclear threat required attention. Mao was concerned enough about popular fears of atomic bombing that he had the wartime mobilization campaign address them. On the off-chance that the United States did attack from the air, the leadership ordered bomb shelters prepared in urban areas, some industrial plants removed from vulnerable urban sites, and civil defense education directed at the civilian population.

DOMESTIC RAMIFICATIONS OF INTERVENTION

Finally, these new materials are suggestive on the pervasive impact of the Korean war on the homefront. Intervention in Korea clearly complicated the tasks of economic reconstruction and drained away scarce resources needed domestically. The constraints the war imposed on reconstruction is evident in the national budget. In 1951, the first full year of the war, defense ate up 46 percent (up from about 38 percent the previous year), and only 30 percent was left for economic development. But already by 1952 the overall military burden had dropped to 32 percent of the total budget, and economic construction had risen to an impressive 52 percent.

The war also provided an opportunity to mobilize the urban population and integrate intellectuals into the new political order. This process, begun on the eve of liberation, had intensified in July 1950, paralleling China's military preparations at each step of the way. As noted above, national unity particularly preoccupied Mao as he made the decision in early October to intervene. The Korean


Zhonguo renmin zhiyuanjun kangMei yuanChao zhansi, 7.
Jianguo yilai, 1:616.
Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan and Zhongyang dang'anguan, comps., ZhongHua renmin gong-heguo jingji dang'an ziliao xuanbian [Selection of materials from the PRC economic archives] (Beijing: Zhongguo chengshi jingji shehui, 1989–), 1949–1952, Pt. 1: Zonghejuan [Summary volume], 872, 891, 903. This volume and its one companion to appear to date provide a starting point for examining the economic and even to some extent political and social dimensions of the Korean War.

For the public side of this mobilization campaign, see the material in Zhongguo renmin kangMei yuanChao zonghui xuanchuanbu, Weida de kangMei yuanChao yundong. For an inside view, see Jianguo yilai, vols. 1 and 2; and XinHuaShe xinwen yanjiubu, comp., XinHuaShe wenjian ziliao xuanbian [A selection of documentary materials on the New China News Agency] 4 vols. (no place, no publisher [1981–87?]), vol. 2: 1949–1953.
crisis also gave a push to the land reform movement in the newly liberated areas, particularly in the Southeast. After China entered the war, Mao issued orders to accelerate efforts along that vulnerable section of the coast in order to consolidate control and improve defense capabilities.58

Perhaps most intriguing of all the domestic ramifications is the way the war intersected with the counterrevolutionary effort. Even before the war began, Beijing had regarded as urgent the suppression of remnant Nationalist forces on the mainland (estimated at 1.5 million in late 1949), spies and covert operations sponsored by Taibei and Washington, and banditry (perhaps as high as one million). These forces of disorder and anticommunist resistance, concentrated in southeast and southwest China, attacked local government officials and party cadres, blockaded or seized towns and villages, disrupted communications, carried out looting and robbery, committed sabotage and assassinations, and attacked scattered military units. As early as 1949, the People's Liberation Army had taken responsibility for dealing with the most serious of the resistance, and it carried its efforts to a conclusion in 1952 while also fighting in Korea.59

Beijing's determination to eliminate counterrevolutionary forces was reinforced by the fear that Nationalist forces, perhaps backed by the United States, might launch a counterattack on the mainland and link up with residual resistance groups, creating a rallying point against the CCP. This fear predated the Korean War and was intensified by the possibility (entertained by both Mao and Peng) of amphibious landings on the coast or an American march into the Northeast as the first step in an attempt at overthrowing the CCP.60

According to party sources, the American intervention in Korea and especially the Inchon landing were signals of hope for China's counterrevolutionaries. Active resistance groups, now joined by landlords, secret societies, and unemployed soldiers, thought that better times were just ahead and intensified their resistance. They carried out widely scattered acts of violence extending into the Northeast, the logistical base for Chinese forces in Korea, and stirred up rumors, while intimidating local party cadres. "You're like a frog in a well with no idea of the big picture and still in a mess. The third world war is coming and the Nationalist army will be right back."61

The party center responded to this upsurge on 10 October with a directive calling for an end to a counterrevolutionary policy that had been too rightist in

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accommodating enemies of the new regime, killing too few, suspending the sentence of too many, and letting cases drag on too long. The party center ordered local authorities to step up internal security measures in order to blunt this threat. The first uncertain months of the military contest with the United States seems to have marked the high point of danger, which did not begin to recede until early 1951. On 24 January Mao offered the judgment that there was no risk of an American invasion (though he did think a Nationalist invasion threat remained).  

**Gaps in the Historical Record**

Important gaps still exist in our knowledge of China's entry into the Korean War. The most glaring of these are Beijing's relations with Pyongyang and Moscow. Because the party history establishment, taking its cue from the top party leadership, regards candid treatment of relations with the Soviet Union and North Korea as "inconvenient," Chinese historians generally approach the topic warily and work from limited sources. Virtually all the fresh information on this topic comes from memoirs and histories, not from primary documentation. A collection of such documentation on interparty relations is reportedly sitting on a shelf ready for wider circulation at the right moment. Perhaps with good, direct, detailed documentation of this sort, we will be able to gauge China's foreknowledge of the North Korean invasion, to learn more about the Stalin-Mao exchanges before the attack and leading up to Chinese intervention, and more generally to trace the patterns of interallied relations on the socialist side in the detail and with the assurance that is now possible for Anglo-American relations.

Other aspects of China's entry also cry out for more documentation. We need to know more about the inner party debate over intervention in early October and about the possible role doubters may have later played in prompting a negotiated settlement. The role of the foreign affairs bureaucracy and the military requires a great deal more attention. The leadership's private views on possible American nuclear attack need confirmation and amplification. Finally, the links between the war and domestic developments are still not clear enough to make an overall assessment.

**An Altered Picture of the Sino-American Collision**

While our perspective is still one-sided with much work remaining to be done before the scribes can offer a full and genuinely international picture of the Korean War, we do have enough fresh evidence to reconsider our broader understanding of that crisis and especially to relate what we now know about the

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Chinese side of the war to some of the key points that emerge from the recent studies of American policy.\(^{63}\)

Mao's leadership style stands in striking contrast to that of Harry Truman, not least in their markedly different relationships with their respective field commanders. Recent treatments of U.S. policy reveal a Truman presidency in crisis—internally divided, under the growing scrutiny of its worried European allies, besieged by domestic critics, and confused by the failure of the Soviets to behave belligerently and the Chinese to take American professions of good will at face value. At the root of these troubles was a president whose involvement in making policy might be described as spasmodic rather than either weak or strong. He hesitated at critical moments to play a decisive role even though the interminable and inconclusive debates among his aides cried out for presidential direction.

During the summer and into the fall of 1950 he was an almost invisible man, resistant to sitting down with his key advisers and engaging in formal discussion of the chief issue that divided them—whether to cross the thirty-eighth parallel and, if so, how to do it. As MacArthur's public outbursts became increasingly serious, Truman once again proved reluctant to act against a military figure whom he held in some awe until he had the backing of another general, George C. Marshall, whom he held in no less awe. Only then did Truman overcome his lack of self-confidence and abruptly sack MacArthur. This decision brought to a close the contest over presidential prerogative and personal prestige; but the debate over limited war that had begun in earnest in December 1950 continued unabated to the end of the Truman presidency. Once again, Truman sat quietly at the center of the storm while the argument over the use of nuclear weapons, the bombing of China, a naval blockade of the China coast, and the unleashing of the Nationalist army on Taiwan swirled about him.

Mao's assertive style, his hands-on approach, and the general deference accorded him contrasts with Truman's striking lack of assurance, his episodic involvement in policy making, and the leadership vacuum that MacArthur and others sought to fill more or less constructively. For Mao the close link between politics and warfare was a given, a point that Truman was slow to grasp or at least to act on. Even when Mao withdrew from daily direction of military affairs from January to May, he still provided a guiding hand as Chinese forces adopted the strategy of rotation discussed above.

Miscalculation afflicted both sides. It has long been a commonplace in the historical literature that American leaders were dealing with a dimly imagined Chinese foe on the basis of very limited information and insight. Ignorance and wishful thinking proved especially costly between June and December 1950 when underestimation in Washington and Tokyo of Chinese determination and ca-

Pacifism led to a disastrous military setback and ultimately a costly deadlock on the battlefields of Korea.

Working from fresh evidence, historians in the mid-1980s have extended this critique of the Truman administration. They have highlighted the degree to which U.S. war aims, especially in the crucial first months of the war, were confused and unstable. Washington was deeply divided once the commitment to Korea was made in late June 1950. That initial division was exacerbated by presidential indecision and in turn produced a poorly defined policy that gyrated in response to developments on the battlefield—from caution and pessimism in late June and July, to optimistic opportunism in mid-September with the successful Inchon landing, to anxiety in November, near panic in December, and ultimately a greater equilibrium in the new year.64

The Chinese, we can now see, did little better. The mix of calculations Mao applied to the Korean intervention in October brings to mind nothing so strongly as the outlook in Washington at the very same time. Like the Truman administration, Mao was guided by one part “national security” and another part “new world order.” Taken together, the elements that made up China’s policy toward Korea were every bit as complicated and unstable as Washington’s.

Once engaged in the fighting, Mao himself fell victim to the military opportunism that also characterized U.S. policy, in no small measure because he too suffered from a highly schematic view of the enemy, a view that led him as well to underestimate his foe.65 Mao believed that a rational calculus guided the American ruling class in its approach to the Korean crisis. Once the high cost of aggression became clear, the imperialists would beat a retreat. Moreover, he believed that the masses in the United States had nothing to gain by fighting in Korea. He could accentuate popular disaffection by killing American troops and releasing American prisoners. Finally, he believed that the links between the United States and its allies were weak. By chewing up South Korean puppet forces and British commonwealth troops, he could destroy their will to fight. Thus beleaguered at home and isolated internationally, Washington would have to abandon Korea or seek a comprehensive solution of East Asian questions with China.

Finally, what is most striking about this crisis viewed from a supranational perspective is that neither side could have read the intentions of the other; hence crisis resolution or management was virtually impossible in the initial stages—


65 The parallels between U.S. and Chinese behavior can be extended. Not only did both make an unsuccessful attempt at “rollback” in Korea, but also a kind of domino theory influenced the initial decision on both sides to engage militarily in Korea, and both experienced an accentuated fear of subversives at home as a result of the war.
down to the spring of 1951. Even had Mao and Truman been clairvoyant, each would have come away from an examination of the mind of the other unimpressed by clarity of vision. Rather, both would have been shocked by the muddle their opposite number was in. This ambiguity that marked the approach of the two sides, in itself a serious impediment to managing the Korean conflict, was further heightened by time lag and perceptual distortions. What limited information one side received about the other side was often outdated when it arrived and mangled in the transmission.

The crisis was finally resolved only after a dramatic roller coaster ride. The two parties followed strikingly similar courses, but with the Chinese lagging behind the Americans in the cycle of alarm, then optimism, and finally pessimism and a grudging acceptance of a costly, long-term war. For Americans the alarm and sense of crisis began in June. The Inchon landing in September fed optimism and made possible the aggressive march north that in turn alarmed the Chinese and fed the sense of crisis in Beijing. The successful Chinese offensive in October and November advanced Beijing to the next stage of excessive optimism and aggressive campaigning, while the Americans, sobered by military reverses, moved toward a pessimistic assessment of the Korean situation. The realization of limits began to set in on the Chinese side in late December. The blood-letting Chinese forces endured in December, January, and February convinced Mao that instead of gaining a quick and decisive victory he had become entangled in a war of attrition.

Perhaps the best overall characterization of this crisis is as a process of armed interrogation. With the two parties out of synch, the crisis was difficult to stabilize until each had realized through a painful exchange of blows and counterblows how wrong its initial estimate of the enemy’s intentions and will had been. Given the ambiguity of perception on both sides, the complexity of the interaction, and the instability of policy all around, it is hard to imagine the crisis developing otherwise.

**Implications of Korea for Understanding Crises**

The characterization offered here of Sino-American interaction during the first year of the Korean War invites special attention to one major historical problem with important theoretical as well as political ramifications: the difficulty of imposing narrative order on a crisis and then extracting patterns and lessons from it. As the treatment above suggests, the task is challenging enough when dealing with just one set of policy makers, and it becomes considerably more daunting when dealing with two sets interacting with each other under intense pressure and with great rapidity.

Yet students of foreign policy crises have put a premium on imposing narrative order. This proclivity may be the result of the interpretive paradigm that they have operated within, one committed to engaging theory, evaluating the rationality of
policy, and offering lessons to policy makers. The poverty of documentation on most of the crises studied and the tendency to focus on one side of a crisis (usually the better understood American role) rather than the international interplay has facilitated and reinforced this impulse to reduce crises to easily encapsulated and evaluated form.

Writings on the Korean case reflect these tendencies, finding Beijing's response to the crisis reassuringly clear, unitary, and above all carefully calculated. Allen Whiting's classic *China Crosses the Yalu*, published in 1960, proved a path-breaking account that powerfully defined the direction of subsequent analysis. Neither Moscow-dominated nor irrational, the Chinese leadership depicted by Whiting acted essentially out of fear of "a determined, powerful enemy on China's doorstep." Edward Friedman writing a decade later also stressed the calculated, rational nature of Chinese policy, arguing that Beijing sought to fend off a MacArthur who seemed to have broken free from Washington's control. China's thoughtful, apparently measured response to the American security threat impressed students of deterrence theory, so that China's handling of the Korean War soon became a widely cited example in the international relations literature of calculated decision making and prudent crisis management. Beijing's supposedly clear "perception of the magnitude of what was at stake" and its careful decision making contrasted dramatically with the blinkered view that led American policy makers into a costly miscalculation.

Accounts over the last decade or so have accommodated increasingly rich data on the Korean intervention without however departing from the old impulse to impose clarity on CCP decision making. The Gurtov-Huang account of 1980 carried forward the theme that China was essentially responding to a security threat, even though the authors stress the importance of domestic concerns, note divisions within the leadership, and point out strong internationalist elements in Beijing's justification for intervention. Jonathan Pollack's sympathetic 1986 treatment stresses that Chinese policy makers not only followed a security calculus but also drew from the war experience in a way that further sharpened that calculus. Writing a few years later, Hao Yufan and Zhai Zhihai saw "primarily security concerns" guiding Beijing as it reacted in what they described as a defensive and calculated fashion. The most recent accounts by Chen Jian and Thomas

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70 Hao and Zhai, "China's Decision," 15.
J. Christensen both continue to argue for a clearly drawn Chinese policy, and Christensen explicitly carries forward the interest in relating the Korean crisis to deterrence theory. To be sure, both Chen and Christensen take issue with earlier accounts by arguing that the first deployment of Chinese troops into Korea was not intended as a deterrent but rather reflected Mao's firm decisions of 1–2 October to administer a decisive blow against the United States and force a favorable adjustment of East Asian issues. They nonetheless see Chinese policy crystallizing early and with a fixed offensive objective in view. Scholars in the PRC enjoying unparalleled access to source materials have done nothing to challenge this widespread and persistent interpretive tendency. Indeed, party orthodoxy and patriotism have inspired repeated claims that the intervention was a "brilliant decision" (yingming juece) unblemished by confusion, division, or opportunism.

But is it possible that this string of studies goes too far in imposing order, whether for analytic neatness or national pride, and as a result fundamentally distorts our understanding of this crisis? Should we be more attuned to the element of chaos in decision making as one set of leaders formulates policy and to the element of contingency in the unfolding of crises as one set interacts with another? The reading of the Korean crisis outlined in the previous section of this article would suggest that the answer to both questions is yes. Misperception, miscalculation, and confusion were prominent, perhaps dominant features of the policy process on both sides. Beijing and Washington came to the crisis with attitudes that were ambivalent, even contradictory, and as each explored options ranging from inaction to all-out assault their views did not so much clarify as shift messily about.

These observations are not meant to deny rationality on the part of Chinese policy makers or for that matter on the part of Americans but to highlight the difficulty of applying the notion, especially in an international setting. It could be argued that policies within one capital, however diverse their sources, however jumbled their elements, however tentative their acceptance, however divergent their possible meanings, are nonetheless thought through by policy makers and thus can be subjected to the test of rationality within the prevailing political, cultural, and institutional framework. But when a crisis is viewed internationally and an analyst must deal with two or more historical actors each operating within


72 This characterization would apply to virtually any of the secondary studies of the Korean War published over the last decade and noted above. The phrase yingming juece appears in the title of one of the earliest of the documented accounts to appear in the PRC. Yao Xu, "KangMei yuanChao de yingming juece" [The brilliant decision to resist America and aid Korea], Dangshishi yanjiu, 1980, no. 5, 5–14.
strikingly different frameworks, then rationality as a standard of evaluation is much harder to apply. In this altered context we are more likely to be struck by the degree to which each party in a crisis is radically and necessarily hobbled by badly flawed or seriously incomplete information about the other. Even if the crisis environment were transparent, information does not necessarily assemble into a coherent and correct picture. And even if the available information is assembled into such a picture, a rapidly changing situation will soon leave it outdated.

Crisis studies need to temper their preoccupation with rationality by developing a greater sensitivity to policy makers' lack of clairvoyance, their cultural blinders, and their extreme vulnerability to contingency. These studies need to recognize in turn the degree to which this debilitating trio introduces a dynamic element to crisis as each side rushes to keep its estimate of the situation, the adequacy of its will and resources, and the nature of its overall goals current with the gyrations of equally agitated policy makers on the other side. Under stress the multiple, perhaps divergent goals of policy makers become exposed and the ambiguities of calculations are revealed. Viewed in international terms, crisis management such as is seen in Korea ceases to be a simple exercise in cool ends-means analysis (or a failure to match up to that standard) and becomes instead a kind of psychological St. Vitus dance that two rivals induce in each other and that ends only after exhaustion sets in.

If this characterization of crises as events enveloped in confusion and misinformation is correct, then historians and other students of this phenomenon are left to confront the paradox that they must speak clearly about something that is inherently disorderly and governed to a large degree by chance. By the same token, policy makers face the equally paradoxical situation. Robert McNamara's well known maxim that crises, so hard to manage, are simply best avoided sounds wise and prudent. But the Korean case suggests it is hard to act on in a world of fundamentally imperfect understanding.*

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