

China, the Soviet Union, and the Korean War: From an Abortive Air War Plan to a Wartime Relationship

Zhang Xiaoming

Volume 22, Number 1, Spring 2002

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs22_1art06

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Xiaoming, Z. (2002). China, the Soviet Union, and the Korean War: From an Abortive Air War Plan to a Wartime Relationship. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 22(1), 73–88.

China, the Soviet Union, and the Korean War: From an Abortive Air War Plan to a Wartime Relationship

by *Zhang Xiaoming*

Zhang Xiaoming is an Associate Professor of History at Texas A&M International University.

The Korean War was the only time during the Cold War that two belligerent coalitions, led respectively by the United States and the Soviet Union, were involved in direct, armed conflict against each other. Although the historical literature on the Korean War has been enriched substantially in recent years, the Communist coalition warfare in Korea has not received the attention it deserves.¹ Indeed the war-waging capabilities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were limited, and its war efforts in Korea depended on Soviet equipment, Soviet advice, and particularly Soviet air support. Recent revelations of Chinese and former Soviet archival records demonstrate a deep involvement of the Soviet Union on the Communist side in the Korean War, especially the Soviet Air Force units and other military personnel that were actively participating in the fight against the US and its allies.² Yet, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's fear of a direct confrontation with the United States limited Soviet involvement and assistance in Korea.

A few days after the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) crossed the Yalu River, the Beijing leadership began to draw up a forward-looking air war plan for Korea, which the UN commander had almost feared they would do at the time. For almost three years of war, despite the assembly of a large force of air power to the north of the Yalu, the Communists only could provide limited air defense for their ground operations in Korea. This article examines the coalition warfare on the Communist side with a focus on analyzing how and why the Chinese and Russians failed to implement the offensive air war plan. Perhaps more important, the study of the abortive air war plan demonstrates that, although China bore major responsibility for fighting, it had to count on Soviet assistance and adhere to Soviet decisions. Like almost any wartime alliance, ideology, geopolitics, and national interests are factors that determined how far the Communist coalition would go in Korea. In a historical perspective, Soviet limited support in the war raised Beijing's suspicions of the reliability of such a relationship with the Soviet Union for China's security interests.

Following China's ground assault in the Korean conflict in late October 1950, the Chinese air force, which consisted of only two fighter divisions, one bomber regiment, and one attack aircraft regiment, with a total of two hundred combat planes, started preparations for air intervention. On 30 October, a meeting was convened focusing on when and how the air force should enter the war. Participants concurred that Chinese ground forces were at a decided disadvantage in Korea because the United States was in effective control of the air. Chinese pilots needed additional training, but arguments were made that the history of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had shown that Chinese airmen could learn warfare through hands-on training under actual combat conditions. Although the Chinese Air Force could not compare with the US Air Force in numbers of

planes or in technology, Chinese Air Force leaders based their confidence on the Chinese Communist Party's leadership, their countrymen's support, and their own ground war experience. They were confident that the Chinese Air Force could prevail against US air strength, and that the ultimate victory would depend upon ground operations, while the air force should play only a supporting role in meeting the needs of ground troops. Chinese leaders subsequently devised their strategy which provided that the newly established air force should not engage in a war of attrition, which would work to US advantage. Their method was to train fliers for the 100 to 150 aircraft that the Chinese could mobilize. Those planes should be concentrated for timely attacks on the Americans.³

An ambitious, but cautious air war plan for Korea emerged with two implementing stages. The Chinese Air Force would first commit four air regiments (120 MiG-15s) to provide protection for transportation lines between the Chinese border and Anju in North Korea in January and February 1951. Chinese planners hoped that Soviet Air Force units, assigned to defend China's airspace since August 1950, would coordinate the operation, letting the inexperienced Chinese pilots fly with them in combat. Then, by mid-April, there would be six fighter regiments (five MiG-15s and one La-11), two Il-10 attack aircraft regiments, and four Tu-2 bomber regiments, totaling 360 planes, available to take part in the war. However, both the MiG-15s and Il-10s were short-ranged, and the Chinese Air Force needed to construct airfields inside Korea in order to allow their use in direct ground support. According to this plan, the strength of the Chinese Air Force would be significantly enhanced by the end of 1951 with some 28 flight regiments (25 MiGs and four La-9 and La-11 regiments), four attack aircraft regiments, seven bomber regiments, and four transport regiments, amounting to 1,300 war planes.⁴

Recent Chinese sources reveal that at this time Chinese Air Force leaders actually considered two options about how the air force should be used in Korea. One suggested that fighters, bombers, and attack aircraft should move into Korea to provide direct support for the CPV's ground operations. The other recommended that air force units be based only inside China to engage the US aircraft over Korea. The former would give ground troops more direct support than the latter, but also would entail a greater risk for losing the entire air force. Such a lesson could be drawn easily from the experience of the North Korean Air Force, which had been destroyed by the Americans during the first month of the war. The CPV leaders and particularly Peng Dehuai, however, demanded direct air force support for his ground forces. In early December, the Chinese Air Force drew up a plan for air warfare that emphasized direct coordination with the ground offensives and concentration of strength for a timely attack. Mao was inclined to a prudent approach, but could not evade the pressure from the CPV leaders who pleaded for air force support. He approved the direct ground support strategy on 4 December 1950.⁵

One of the greatest challenges for the Chinese Air Force's preparation for the Korean intervention was to construct airfields. As the CPV recovered most of North Korea's lost territory by mid-December 1950, Chinese military leaders began seeking airfields that could be built or repaired for commencing the full-scale air offensive against UN forces.

China's air war plan called for a deployment of 12 air regiments, or about 350 planes, in Korea by April 1951. However, implementation of such a plan required building airfields in North Korea that would suit jet aircraft. Construction of airfields was set up on a priority schedule.⁶

However, UN air superiority, along with freezing weather, presented a formidable barrier to the Chinese air war plan. After several months of effort, in early 1951, the Chinese had failed to find any airfield operational inside Korea. Beijing's frustrations were expressed in Mao's telegram to Stalin on 1 March. "We plan to send ten air regiments to the war in April and May," the Chinese leader complained, "but so far we are unable to find a single airfield inside Korean territory operational." In addition to the natural problem that the soil was not yet thawing, he stressed the fundamental difficulty was that "the Chinese will be unable to construct any airfield in the days to come because they do not have a reliable air force to provide cover." Urged by Peng Dehuai, his field commander, Mao appealed the Russian leader to take measures to improve the situation.⁷ Stalin quickly responded to China's entreaty. The Russian leader agreed to send Soviet Air Force units to North Korea, and to supply the Chinese with two sets of metal strip for use in Korea, as well as anti-aircraft guns and shells for the protection of airfields. He also requested the Chinese prepare four additional airfields with concrete runways for the Soviet MiG units to use.⁸

Having received such a positive reply from Stalin, Zhou held a talk with Colonel General Emen E. Zakharov, the Soviet chief military advisor in Beijing, and then directed Liu Yalou, commander of the Chinese air force, and his Russian adviser Major General D. Golunov to travel to Shenyang for consultation with their Korean colleagues about how airfields would be constructed and how their air forces would operate from them.⁹ From the Chinese Air Force's point of view, it would be better to take a step by step approach. Zhou explained to Peng that the Chinese could first build two airfields with pierced steel plank runways for one Soviet air division to use; then construct two airfields in the Pyongyang area for one Chinese MiG division to be stationed there. After that, Zhou continued, two other airfields would be built for another Soviet MiG division and at the same time three advanced airfields at Anak, Pyonggang, and Sinmak could be built under the protection of Soviet air units. Beijing believed that the burden of manpower, material supplies, and transportation would be relatively lessened in this way, but it also acknowledged that the air force's entry into the war would be delayed.¹⁰

The Russians, not fond of this plan, argued one Soviet MiG division would not be able to hold its ground, and thus, insisted China build the four Soviet airfields simultaneously, and let North Korea construct the four airfields the Chinese needed.¹¹ Soviet disapproval put the Chinese in a predicament. The Chinese Air Force had few engineering units able to undertake the task. With little engineering equipment available, progress on the project would depend on how much manpower could be mobilized. The Chinese leadership originally planned to involve two to three newly recruited divisions of the North Korean People's Army (KPA) in the construction of the airfields, and have the Chinese Air Force engineering units assist in hopes that the first airfield could be completed by the end of March. Although Kim Il Sung had agreed to cooperate, no North Korean soldiers were ever sent to do the job by that time.¹² Soviet objections, furthermore, compounded the

problem by insisting on the building of the four airfields at the same time which forced Beijing to employ combat troops to do so, a situation Peng was reluctant to accept.

The CPV had just suffered a serious setback on the battleground in February 1951. Those CPV armies that had entered the war since the prior October were weakened severely and badly in need of rest and reinforcement. Peng did not want any one of the three crack armies (38th, 39th, and 42nd) that just pulled back from the front and were resting in the Wonsan-Hamhung area to assume the airfield construction mission. He also disagreed with the idea of using one of the newly arrived armies. The agreement between Beijing and Pyongyang at this time required the Chinese to construct two airfields with concrete runways at Sunan and Sunchon, and two airfields with pierced steel plank runways at Yongyu and Namyonni for the Soviets. During the same period, the North Koreans would build two airfields in Pyongyang for the Chinese to use.¹³ Based on the contemporary experience at home, Zhou advised Peng that construction of an airfield for jet aircraft in China required 24,000 person-days. Considering the difficult conditions in North Korea, he believed the construction of the four Soviet airfields would require 96,000 person-days. But North Korea could not supply that amount of manpower. Concluding that this task only could be taken by combat troops, Zhou urged Peng to accept the proposed arrangement, noting that if the Soviet Air Force did not move into Korea, the Chinese air units never would be able to operate from the advanced airfields there.¹⁴

In late March, the Central Military Commission (CMC) assigned the 47th Army (three divisions and two engineering regiments), and three air force engineering regiments, along with more than 1,000 civilian engineers to construction work. Later, additional troops (four newly recruited regiments from the 38th Army, plus two divisions and an army headquarters from the 50th Army) were mobilized for construction because of slow progress.¹⁵ Given the Soviet request for an equal number of the Chinese Air Force units to move into Korea along with theirs, Zhou implored Moscow on 1 April to furnish China with an additional set of steel strip for a third airfield in the Pyongyang area.¹⁶ For construction of these airfields, China employed some two million person-days, and shipped 30,000 tons of cement, 36,000 pieces of steel plate, and other supplies and equipment. The Chinese troops worked day and night, and completed the construction at Sunan, Yongyu, Namyonni, and Pyongyang by the end of May.¹⁷

The airfield rehabilitation program in North Korea had been an alarming concern to UN military authorities. During the months of April and May, the Far East Air Force (FEAF) Bomber Command conducted airfield attacks routinely to make sure all of these airfields were "unserviceable."¹⁸ China employed most of the CPV's antiaircraft artillery units (eleven regiments), along with the Soviet troops (eight regiments), to protect these airfields, while leaving many important targets along the supply lines inadequately shielded.¹⁹ They failed, however, to prevent UN aircraft from hitting their targets. Chinese records show that the UN planes attacked these air facilities 72 times. One third of their ordnance (6,826 bombs) hit runways, taxiways, or surrounding facilities. As the last airfield at Sunchon was finished in late July, the Chinese realized that the recently built airfields could not be used by the Soviet Air Force, because they were too far away

to receive support from airfields inside China.²⁰ Chinese leaders, therefore, had to propose another postponement of the entry of the air force into the war until September.²¹

Chinese leaders could not forget several months earlier in October 1950 when they tried to make a decision on China's intervention into the Korean conflict that Stalin withheld his air support promise and left China to mount military operations in Korea without full air cover. But despite the concerns of Chinese leaders about US air superiority, Chinese ground operations had progressed smoothly. By the end of 1950, the CPV had compelled UN forces to retreat and had recovered much of the lost territory in North Korea. As the frontline was pushed into South Korea, Chinese hope for a swift decisive victory in Korea was shattered. By mid-February 1951, it became obvious to the CPV's commanders that the Chinese soldiers could not outmaneuver the motorized enemy forces while under constant US air bombardment, with the poor supply facilities, and in the bitter cold. In the middle of the fourth phase of the offensive, on 20 February, Peng rushed back to Beijing to review China's war strategy with Mao and other Chinese leaders.²²

During his meeting with Mao, Peng complained that the fighting capability of his troops had been weakened severely due to mounting casualties and too little supplies during the past few months of offensives. For Peng, the principal cause was that the CPV had no air cover or adequate anti-aircraft artillery to protect communication and supply lines, thus only "sixty to seventy percent of supplies" could reach the CPV's soldiers at the front. He had suggested to Colonel General Zakharov, Soviet chief military advisor in Beijing, that the two Soviet air divisions extend their air cover of the CPV's supply lines all the way down to the 38th parallel, but received a negative response. Peng now urged Mao personally to persuade Moscow to provide air support for his ground operations. On 1 March 1951, Mao forwarded Peng's appeal to Stalin.²³

Two days later, the Soviet leader responded positively, deciding to move two Soviet air divisions from Manchuria into Korean territory to provide protection for the rear of China and North Korea, but the air defense in the Andong area, he determined, should be shouldered by the two Chinese air divisions.²⁴ On 15 March, Stalin further informed Mao that it would be better, also, to send two Chinese air divisions to the front for use in the upcoming offensive, at which time the Soviet Union would dispatch an additional large fighter division (three regiments and 90 MiG-15s) to Andong. Stalin did not indicate his reason for this change, other than to argue that the Chinese needed "a large number of aviation both at the front and in the rear."²⁵ He evidently still was concerned about the military and political danger of deploying Soviet planes in Korea. As mentioned before, the Soviets had no confidence that the current strength of their air force in China was equal to that of the United Nations. To avoid the danger presented by such imbalance, Stalin believed the Chinese had to rely on their own air force at the front.

Stalin's new decision to strengthen the Soviet air presence at the Yalu River was welcomed by Chinese leaders, but they felt far from relieved. On 7 March, the UN forces waged a northward attack in central Korea. Hundreds of sorties were mounted by the US Air Force to support the advancing ground forces and attack CPV supply lines. With a

shortage of reinforcement and supplies, the CPV was suffering the first serious battlefield reversals since China's full entry into the war. Worried about the persistent UN onslaught from the air, on 11 March, Peng complained again to Beijing that without the proper air protection of transportation, his troops were continuing to suffer from food shortages, a problem that definitely would affect the CPV's ability to conduct its next decisive campaign in the Korean War.²⁶

While the CPV leaders and soldiers anxiously yearned for their own air force to join the battle, Russian air units had little success in defending the crossings over the Yalu River.²⁷ After the UN aircraft repeatedly knocked out the rail bridges between China and Korea in late March, Chinese leaders became desperate and turned to the North Koreans for help, asking if they could use their propeller fighters to supplement Soviet jets in providing cover for the supply lines.²⁸ More critical to the Beijing leadership was the fact that there appeared to be no way to secure a full air commitment from the Soviet Air Force. The Soviets had agreed to satisfy the Chinese request for more air cover in Korea, but it was the Chinese responsibility to meet the Soviet demand for airfields so that the Soviet Air Force might be able to operate to the extent that the CPV expected. Without effective air cover from the Soviet side, the Chinese found no way to complete the constructions on time.²⁹ On the other hand, both Chinese and North Korean leaders did not want to risk their own air forces. General Zakharov once criticized Chinese leaders as being too cautious to send their air force to Korea. Zhou Enlai disagreed, arguing that China would "have no problem to endure losses of fifty thousand or one million army soldier, but would not make sacrifice of our newly built air force" in Korea. According to the premier, China's Air Force remained small and it would be difficult to develop one if the air force was sapped severely in the war.³⁰

While the Chinese felt frustrated at the limited Soviet involvement in the air, the Soviet leadership also became uneasy about the situation in Korea. Reportedly, at the start of the Korean War, Stalin and other Soviet leaders were convinced that the combination of Chinese troops and Soviet weapons was unbeatable.³¹ But, by the middle of 1951, the news from the battlefield indicated that the Soviet-supported Communist troops were unable to destroy any significant number of UN forces. According to Peng's report to Mao, which was forwarded to Stalin on 4 June 1951, the UN troops possessed not only a great quantity of aircraft, tanks, and strong artillery, but were also in relatively high fighting spirits. Incapable of operating in the daytime, the Chinese forces had not found any effective way to negate the enemy's effective strength.³² Peng did not express any grievance at this report, but it is unlikely that Stalin did not sense China's pressure for more Soviet assistance.

As Stalin read the secret reports of the Chinese complaints, he became increasingly dissatisfied with the progress of the Chinese Air Force, which was apparently more critical to the Communist war effort in Korea than he at first had anticipated. When responding to Beijing's complaints about the low quality of MiG-9s in late May, he declared that the Soviet Union would send 375 MiG-15s to the Chinese to replace the antiquated jets within two months. According to Stalin, it was a mistake for the Russians to equip the Chinese Air Force with MiG-9s, but they previously had thought the MiG-9

fighters were superior to the best British-American jets. However, the air war over North Korea proved they were wrong, and in order to enhance China's national defense, he had to take measures to improve it. Stalin particularly excused the Soviet Union for failure to satisfy China's demand in the past, and now decided to make a gratuitous offer to compensate the Chinese.³³ For the Chinese, Stalin was generous, but this generosity also revealed what he actually was thinking.

On 13 June, Stalin wrote to Mao stating in no uncertain terms that he considered it "absolutely necessary now to start moving at least eight fighter aviation divisions from the sixteen Chinese divisions." In addition to two or three MiG-15 divisions, the Soviet leader asserted, the Chinese leadership "could take to the front from central and southern China five or six MiG-9 divisions, which would operate effectively against bombers." He also appeared highly critical and impatient about the hesitation of the Chinese leadership, noting that Chinese pilots should have been able to participate in combat after receiving seven to eight months of training; otherwise, they would be only "paper pilots."³⁴ Simultaneously, Stalin sent another telegram to his own military representative, Colonel General Stepan Krasovsky, in Beijing, criticizing him and his associates for training "the Koreans very slowly and in a slipshod manner," while intending to "make professors rather than battle pilots out of the Chinese pilots." He could not understand why Russian pilots could be trained during the war in five to six months, but it had been impossible to complete the training of Chinese pilots in seven to eight months. He urged his generals to throw away their "harmful overcautiousness," and devote themselves to creating "more quickly a group of eight Chinese fighter divisions and send them to the front." Concluding his directive, Stalin emphasized that the Chinese must rely only on their own aviation at the front, so the Soviet Air Force personnel should make available two airfields for the deployment of Chinese fighter divisions.³⁵

Stalin's pressure made the Chinese leader feel rather ill at ease. Mao did not believe that air power should play a determining role in the war, but he also did not want to see the young Chinese pilots become "paper pilots," as Stalin insinuated. After receiving Stalin's cable message, Mao ordered the PLA General Staff to formulate a plan with regard to the participation of eight Chinese fighter divisions in battles.³⁶ On 23 June, Liu Yalou reported to Mao that the air force would enter the war in September, but disagreed about sending their MiG-9 divisions to the front, because the air force leaders did not believe that obsolete MiG-9s would be a match for US F-84s.³⁷ He thus requested another one and a half to two months to retrain the pilots of three MiG-9 divisions on MiG-15s, and then send them to the front. Apparently, Stalin disagreed as he read Mao's request. It would take him only 10 days to retrain Russian MiG-9 pilots on MiG-15s in Russia, but the Chinese needed a course of two months to do so!³⁸ This appeared, however, to be the best Moscow could do. On 26 June, Stalin instructed Soviet air units in China to start retraining Chinese pilots of three air divisions immediately on MiG-15s, so that they could participate in the forthcoming operations in Korea.³⁹

Interestingly, Stalin's personal attention to the air force issue probably reflected his anxiety about avoidance of a direct confrontation with the United States. From the beginning, Stalin did everything he could to deceive the world on Soviet involvement.

Soviet pilots wore Chinese uniforms and their planes were disguised in North Korean colors. Several rules were prescribed to prevent Soviet pilots from flying over the sea or close to the front lines, as well as speaking in Russian over the radio.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Soviet leader knew he could not fool the Americans. He had to keep Soviet involvement limited, while encouraging the Chinese to continue fighting with Soviet assistance. Although hundreds of MiGs piloted by Russians battled UN planes each day in the skies over North Korea beginning in the summer of 1951, they made little effort to coordinate their sorties with ground operations. Lack of air power remained a significant factor adversely affecting China's war efforts in Korea.

In summer 1951, the ground war developed into a stalemate at the front lines just north of the 38th parallel, while the ceasefire talks began at Kaesong. For the sake of strengthening the Communist bargaining position at the negotiating table, in early August, the CPV command contrived another major offensive to drive the UN forces southward. This time, Peng planned to congregate 13 Chinese armies and four North Korean corps for the ground attack and 22 air force regiments for air support.⁴¹ He, however, soon learned from Beijing that three additional airfields had to be constructed in the area north of Anju for the air force to use in Korea.⁴² Without choice, Peng Dehuai had to cancel the planned new offensive in Korea.⁴³ This was understandable in view of the CPV leader's discontent with Moscow's lack of strong support for China's war effort in Korea.

Peng's disappointment about lack of air power forced him to think of a way to involve the Soviets more directly in the war by recommending the creation of a Sino-Soviet-Korean joint command. Mao, however, misunderstood Peng's real intention. On 19 September, he requested Stalin to dispatch a total of 83 Soviet advisors to Peng's headquarters to assist Chinese generals in planning and organizing warfare in Korea.⁴⁴ Stalin did not deem it wise to send so many Soviet advisors to the CPV headquarters and its subordinate headquarters. He feared the dispatch of Soviet advisors to CPV's group armies' and armies' headquarters would place heavy responsibility on the shoulders of Russian generals in military operations. He thus agreed to send only five advisors to Peng's headquarters.⁴⁵ Again, Peng felt frustrated for not being able to get the Soviets deeply involved in the Korean War. Several former staff officers at the CPV's headquarters recalled later that Peng was disgusted with the presence of this small Soviet advisory group, which served largely as a liaison between the CPV and the Soviet leadership and played an insignificant role in managing the war.⁴⁶

While Peng's ground forces had been frustrated by a standstill in ground operations by fall 1951, circumstances were otherwise for the Communist air forces at the Yalu, which loomed larger than ever. Beginning in September, Soviet pilots from two fighter divisions intensified their operations routinely in large-scale dogfights with UN aircraft over "MiG Alley." The aggressiveness of the Soviet pilots forced UN Bomber Command to curtail B-29 raids in North Korea unless they were accompanied by fighter escorts, and eventually only at night. The Soviet MiGs also began systematic attacks against UN fighter-bombers, thereby impeding the UN railroad interdiction campaign then under way. At this same time, Chinese pilots also joined their Russian comrades in air

operations, and so did North Koreans.⁴⁷ At any time, from November 1951 to the armistice, the Communist air forces maintained three to four Chinese air divisions, along with two Soviet air divisions and one North Korean air division, totaling 350 to 400 MiG-15s, at the airfields on China's side of the Yalu.⁴⁸ This preponderant force frequently launched as many as 100 MiGs at a time, flying them over the skies of North Korea to provide protection for the supply lines and bridges. Although there was a need to form a joint command from the military point of view, the Soviets refused, continuing to operate independently throughout the war. The lack of a single command system and coordination between Soviet air units and Sino-Korean forces caused confusion. On occasion, Chinese or North Korean anti-aircraft artillery units blasted away at Soviet MiGs, while Russian pilots mistakenly shot down Chinese MiGs falsely identified as enemy Sabres.⁴⁹

The major setback for the Communist air forces, however, was abandonment of their plan for ground support. Because the US Air Force made sustained bombardments against Chinese efforts to activate any airfield in North Korea, the Communist air forces were prevented from deploying planes inside Korea. Despite Stalin's continuing pressure on the Chinese to move their MiG units to the bases inside Korea, insisting that it would drastically alter the balance of power, in December 1951 Beijing had to put aside plans for ground support and opted to use only airfields inside China to engage UN planes over Korea.⁵⁰ As a result of being unable to use airfields in North Korea, the Communist airmen, flying the short-ranged MiG-15s, were restricted to an area no more than 150 miles distant from home base. From a Communist perspective, the air war was purely a defensive one, as only fighter planes were employed and operated only over friendly territory.

However, the greatest restriction on Communist war efforts in the Korean War came from both Moscow's and Beijing's political considerations. One important element in China's air war strategy in 1951 was the use of bomber aircraft to attack American targets in Korea directly. At the time the CPV's air force was established in spring 1951, Beijing authorities committed two bomber divisions to Korea. Their major targets were US warships off the North Korean coast and airfields at Seoul. Chinese leaders seemed aware that Washington had restricted bombing targets north of the Yalu River in order to limit the war. In a reciprocal fashion, Beijing confined Chinese air operations to defense and refused to allow attacks on the US safe haven south of the 38th parallel. Then, all bomber units were released gradually from combat duties in Korea after March 1952.⁵¹ In the meantime, the political limitations on the war were also Moscow's major concern. Learning that Peng was planning to launch a specific attack against one US division in early March, the Soviet leadership raised strong suspicions about the timing of such an operation when negotiations at Panmunjom had made significant progress during the prior four months toward a peace agreement.⁵²

In late June, the US air campaign against the key dam and hydroelectric power stations presented a powerful dilemma for Chinese and North Korean leaders. From China's perspective, US bombardments would put the Communists "in a disadvantageous position in political and military relations" and force the Chinese and North Koreans to

accept US terms for a truce.⁵³ Faced with the ravages of the bombardments, Kim Il Sung wanted both the Chinese and Soviets to increase their assistance in Korea and the CPV to take on aggressive military operations instead of a passive defense. His most critical demand was to ask the Chinese to reconsider the use of bombers to attack enemy airfields, warehouses, barracks, and other military facilities in the south at night.⁵⁴ Stalin acceded to strengthening North Korea's air defense ability by supplying more anti-aircraft artilleries, but fearing escalation of the war in Korea, he warned Mao that because the air force belonged to the state, it therefore could not be used by the Chinese "volunteers."⁵⁵

Calculating that a strong Chinese air force would enable China to fight an independent air war in Korea, and any future war against the Western imperialists in East Asia, Stalin, furthermore, encouraged China to build an air force of 200 air regiments, instead of the 150 projected by the Chinese. To match the Western technological advantage, he promised the Soviet Union soon would supply new fighters with speeds of 1,000-1,100 kilometers-per-hour to China. In view of the fact that the air war in Korea served Soviet interests, the Soviet leader continued to support Beijing's war efforts in Korea with military supplies and limited air involvement, while managing to avoid direct confrontation with the United States.⁵⁶

Because of Moscow's opposition, China had to continue to concentrate on air defense against US bombardments. However, as the UN air campaign was sustained against North Korean industrial facilities throughout the summer and early fall of 1952, the North Koreans began to waver, and became increasingly unsteady. Among certain members of North Korean leadership, there was even a state of panic. With a feeling of hopelessness, in early October, Kim Il Sung sent General Nam Il, chief of staff of the KPA, to the CPV's air force joint command at Andong to inquire whether the Chinese air force could bomb Seoul. Without Beijing's authorization, Nie Fengzhi, the CPV's joint air commander, only could agree to allow North Korean pilots to continue to fly biplanes at night to "heckle" UN forces. For the remaining months of the war, use of the little Po-2 biplanes was the only Communist air tactic annoying UN forces.⁵⁷

Western studies generally state that it was the building of a worldwide military structure by the United States that permitted more diplomatic leverage in the truce talks at Panmunjon. In particular, allegedly it was US nuclear capabilities that successfully denied the Communists victory in Korea.⁵⁸ The new Soviet documents suggest that the severity of the burden on Russian production capacity, which still was rebuilding from the devastation of World War II, played a vital role in Moscow's decision-making. Escalation of the conflict in Korea would create for both Beijing and Pyongyang further excuses to press Stalin for more assistance that already had exceeded Soviet economic limitations. The Soviet leadership had agreed to outfit 16 Chinese army divisions with Soviet arms and equipment in 1951, but by April 1952, China had received equipment for only four divisions, of which three would be transferred to the KPA.⁵⁹ In August 1952, Peng Dehuai requested that the Soviet Union supply the Chinese Air Force with new Tu-16 medium jet bombers. The Soviets found it difficult to fulfill the order, and first asked the Chinese to buy 120 outdated Tu-4s.⁶⁰ A strained economy forced Moscow to keep the war in Korea, as well as its assistance to China, within strictly limited parameters, and let

the burden of the war weigh ever more heavily on its East Asian allies. When the guns fell silent on the Korean peninsula, the Chinese had not only sustained great physical losses in the conflict, but also found themselves with a huge war debt to the Soviet Union totaling about \$650 million. This would magnify China's economic difficulties for years to come.⁶¹

In retrospect, the wartime relationship between China and the Soviet Union was complicated and delicate. After Moscow adopted an antagonistic strategy toward the West in the late 1940s, the Soviet leadership desperately needed China to serve as a bulwark for its security in East Asia. While realizing the limit on its own ability to wage a direct confrontation with the United States, Stalin promoted China's intervention in Korea, which not only prevented an expanded war beyond the Korean peninsula, but also kept the United States pinned down on an Asian battlefield. Although the Soviet leader failed to satisfy China's demands for assistance, the limited involvement of Soviet air units in the war and the augmentation of China's military and economic capabilities appeared enough to persuade the Chinese to continue fighting for nearly three years in Korea. As a result, the war not only deepened Chinese dependence on Moscow, but also allowed the Soviets to achieve transformation of their country into a superpower in a limited period of time.

Although the war helped the Chinese atone for China's past humiliations at the hands of Western powers, and enhanced the firm Communist grip on Chinese society during the early years of the PRC, China's partnership with Moscow proved a galling one. Chinese leaders expected the alliance with Moscow based on a shared set of values and goals to produce unconditional Soviet support. Stalin's withholding of promised air support at the crucial time of 1950 and 1951, however, left China to mount military operations in Korea without full air cover. The storied Russian air campaigns in Korea could not compare with China's contribution to the war. The CPV bore heavy human and material losses, while Soviet involvement and assistance was too little and too late. The fight in Korea against the Americans, though a common enemy to both Mao and Stalin, became solely China's war. Nevertheless, Beijing had to consult with Moscow about its war plans and strategy. It was Stalin and his successors in the Kremlin who decided how the Chinese and North Koreans should conduct the war. As a junior partner, Mao never felt comfortable in this Communist alliance. Perhaps equally important was the Soviet request that Beijing pay for the Soviet military aid China received to fight the war, which "made the Soviets seem more like arms merchants than genuine Communist internationalists."⁶² Therefore, the Korean War experience suggested to the Chinese that the Soviet Union was an unreliable ally. In due course, China would break off this relationship, placing more emphasis on self-reliance as a fundamental principle for Chinese national security.

Endnotes

1. For recent diplomatic and political analysis of the events leading up to China's intervention, see Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); and Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). For the most recent and most thorough account about the Chinese military participation in the Korean War, see Shu Guang Zhang, *Mao's Military Romanticism: China and the Korean War, 1950-1953* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995). See also, William Stueck, *The Korean War: An International History*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995). Since these books were published before 1995, they do not include the most recently available archival materials from China and Russia.
2. Primary documentation of Chinese involvement in Korea is available from the first four volumes of *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* [Mao Zedong's manuscripts since the founding of the People's Republic of China] (Beijing: Central Historical Materials Press, 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1990); the last two volumes of *Mao Zedong junshi wenji* [A collection of Mao Zedong's military papers] (Beijing: Military Science Press and the Central Historical Materials Press, 1993); the last of four volumes of *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* [Selected Military Papers of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing: People's Press, 1997); and the first of three volumes of *Zhou Enlai nianpu* [Chronicle Records of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing: Central Historical Material Press, 1997). Recent former Soviet archival records concerning the Korean War are from the Archive of the President of the Russian Federation. Some of them have been translated by Kathryn Weathersby and Alexandre Mansourov and published in Cold War International History Project *Bulletin (CWIHPB)*, Issues 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996). There also is a collection of documents on the Korean War from the Archives of the President of the Russian Federation (APRF) that has been translated into Chinese, titled *Guanyu Chaoxian zhanzheng di Erguo dangan wenjian* [Russian Archival Documents on the Korean War], and published by the Military Science Academy for internal use. Hereafter, this collection will be cited as APRF.
3. Wang Dinglie, et al., *Dangdai zhongguo kongjun* [China Today: The Chinese Air Force] (Beijing: Chinese Social Science Press, 1989), pp. 127-29.
4. Zhou Enlai to Mao Zedong, 12 December 1950 memorandum, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* 4, pp. 128-29.
5. Yang Wanqin and Qi Chunyuan, *Liu Yalou jiangjun zhuan* [Biography of General Liu Yalou] (Beijing: Chinese Communist Party History Press, 1995), p. 292; Zhao Jianguo and Ma Yuan, *Chaoxian dakongzhan* [The Great Air War in Korea] (Beijing: China Personnel Press, 1996), p. 84; Zhong Zhaoyun, *Baizhan Jiangxing Liu Yalou* [Biography of General Liu Yalou] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Arts Press, 1996), pp. 184-85.
6. Zhou to Mao, 12 December 1950 memorandum, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* 4, pp. 128-29.

7. Mao to Joseph Stalin, 1 March 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 141. See also, *Zhou Enlai junshi wuxun* 4, p. 164.
8. Stalin to Mao, 3 March 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 142.
9. *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, p. 137.
10. Zhou to Peng Dehuai and Gao Gang, 11 March 1951 telegram, cited in *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, pp. 138-39. Zhou to Peng and Gao, 22 March 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* 4, p. 176.
11. Zhou to Peng and Gao, 28 March 1951 telegram, cited in *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, p. 143.
12. Zhou to Kim Il Sung via Cai Junwu, 27 February 1951 telegram, *ibid.*, p. 134; Zhou to Peng Dehuai, 11 March 1951 telegram, cited in Wang Yan, ed., *Peng Dehuai nianpu* [The Chronicle of Peng Dehuai] (Beijing: People's Press, 1998), p. 484.
13. These individual names do not match Western spellings of Korean locations. Robert Futrell in *The United States Air Force in Korea* on page 407 gives two airfield locations as Pyong-ni and Kangdong, which are likely Sunchon and Namyong-ni as the Chinese called them. For Chinese sources, see *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 139. For English references, see Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), p. 407.
14. Zhou to Peng, 22 March 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* 4, pp. 175-78. Zhou to Peng, 25 and 28 March 1951 telegrams, *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, pp. 141-43. Peng to Central Military Commission (CMC), 26 March 1951, and Peng to Zhou and Nie Rongzhen, 28 March 1951 telegrams, Wang Yan, ed., *Peng Dehuai nianpu*, pp. 486-87.
15. The 50th Army was the former Guomindang (GMD) 60th Army which defected to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in 1948.
16. Zhou to Stalin, 1 April 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 146; Zhou to Kim Il Sung via Li Zhiliang, Chinese ambassador to Pyongyang, 31 March 1951 telegram, cited in *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, p. 144.
17. Li Xueyan, "Recollections of Logistics Work for the CPV's Air Force," *Lantian zhi lu* 1, p. 483; *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 140.
18. See Far East Air Force (FEAF) Weekly Intelligence Roundups, nos. 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, and 37, United States Air Force Historical Research Agency, Montgomery, AL.
19. According to Zhou's telegram to Peng on 22 March 1951, the Soviet Union agreed to send eight anti-aircraft artillery regiments to defend the four airfields that were being

built for the Soviet Air Force. *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxuan* 1, p. 177. See also, Zhou to Stalin, 23 March 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 143.

20. *Dangdai Zhongguo kongjun*, p. 141.

21. Zhou to Mao, Liu Shaoqi, and Chen Yun, 6 August 1951 letter, *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, p. 167.

22. Peng to the CMC and each army command, 17 February 1951, *Peng Dehuai junshi wenxuan* [Selected Military Papers of Peng Dehuai] (Beijing: Central Historical Materials Press, 1988), pp. 373-74. *Peng Dehuai zhuan* [Biography of Peng Dehuai] (Beijing: Today's China Press, 1993), p. 451.

23. Mao to Stalin, 1 March 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxun* 4, p. 164.

24. Stalin to Mao, 3 March 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 141. See also, *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, p. 140.

25. Stalin to Mao, 15 March 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 141. See also, *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, p. 59. The size of the Soviet air division was mentioned in Zhou's telegram to Peng on 22 March 1951, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxun* 4, p. 175. For UN actions against these bridges, see Futrell, *The U.S. Air Force in Korea*, pp. 321-22.

26. Peng to Zhou, 11 March 1951 telegram, cited in *Peng Dehuai zhuan*, p. 456.

27. Zhou to Kim Il Sung via Li Ziliang, 5 April 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxun* 4, p. 187.

28. By that time, the North Korean Air Force had two combat ready regiments, one with 20 La-9 and Yak-9 fighters at Sinuiju, and one with 20 La-9s at Yanji, Jilin Province. Zhou to Kim via Li, 5 April 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxun* 4, p. 187.

29. Zhou and Nei to Peng and Gao, 16 April 1951, *ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

30. Wei Bihai, "Air Operations during the War to Oppose America and Aid Korea in Historical Retrospect: An Interview with Wang Bingzhang." *Junshi lishi*, 6 (2000), p. 32. In addition, North Korean leaders did not want to risk their propeller pilots unless the Soviet MiGs would shield them from the lethal US Sabres. See Zhou and Nei to Peng and Gao, 16 April 1951, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxun* 4, pp. 189-90. Zhou to Kim via Li, 23 April 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai nianpu* 1, p. 150.

31. Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *Alien Wars: The Soviet Union's Aggressions Against the World, 1919-1989* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1996), p. 76.

32. Peng to Mao, 4 June 1951 telegram, APRF, p. 153.

33. Stalin to Mao via Colonel Stepan Krasovsky, 22 and 26 May 1951 telegrams, APRF, pp. 149-50.
34. Stalin to Mao via Roshchin, 13 June 1951, *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, pp. 60-61. See also, APRF, pp. 159-60.
35. Stalin to Krasvosky, 13 June 1951 telegram, *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, p. 60. See also, APRF, p. 160.
36. Mao to Stalin, 13 June 1951 telegram, *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, p. 61. See also, APRF, pp. 158-59.
37. Mao to Liu Yalou, Wu Faxian, and Wang Bingzhang, 24 June 1951, *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao* 2, p. 369. Unfortunately, I have no access to the PLA Air Force report. However, the former Soviet records reflect its content. For Chinese accounts, see Xu Yan, *Diyici jiaoliang* [The first test of strength] (Beijing: Chinese Broadcasting and Television Press, 1990), p. 31.
38. This view can be found in Stalin's earlier telegram to Mao on 22 May 1951, APRF, pp. 149-50.
39. Stalin to Krasovsky, 26 June 1951, and Krasovsky to Stalin, 28 June 1951 telegrams, *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, pp. 62-63. See also, APRF, pp. 164, 166-67.
40. Georgi Lobov, "Black Spots of History: In the Skies of North Korea," JPRS Report, JPRS-UAC-91-003 (28 June 1991), p. 30.
41. Xu Yam, *Diyici jiaoliang*, p. 107.
42. Zhou to Peng, 19 August 1951 telegram, *Zhou Enlai junshi wenxun* 4, pp. 217-19.
43. Xu Yam, *Diyici jiaoliang*, p. 108.
44. Mao to Stalin, 27 August and 8 September 1951 telegrams, APRF, pp. 230, 232-33.
45. Stalin to Mao, 10, 12, and 26 September 1951 telegrams, APRF, pp. 233-35.
46. Heng Xueming, *Shengsi sanbaxian: Zhongguo zhiyuanjun zhai Chaoxian zhanchan shimo* [Life and Death on the 38th Parallel: The Whole Story of the Chinese Volunteer Army in the Korean War] (Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art Press, 1992), pp. 303-05.
47. For information about the North Korean Air Force, see No Kum-Sok, *A MiG-15 to Freedom* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), pp. 96-104.
48. The Communist air divisions (two regiments each) were normally equipped with 56 MiGs, except for one Soviet air division which had 90 MiGs.

49. Jon Halliday, "Air Operations in Korea: The Soviet Side of the Story," in William J. William, ed., *A Revolutionary War: Korea and the Transformation of the Postwar World* (Chicago, IL: Imprint Publications, 1993), p. 154; Sarin and Dvoretzky, *Alien Wars*, p. 74.
50. Stalin to Mao, 13 November 1951 telegram, APRF, 249. For China's decision, see Wang Dinglie et. al, *Dangdai zhongguo kongjun*, p. 203.
51. According to one Chinese source, on 8 February 1952, three Tu-2 bombers were assigned to strike Kimpo airfield. Their mission was called off a few minutes before takeoff by Zhou Enlai from Beijing. Li Chuangeng, *Feijiangjun Liu Benshan* [Biography of General Liu Benshan] (Beijing: Central Historical Material Press, 1995), pp. 344-45. See also, Xu Yan, *Diyici jiaoliang*, p. 206.
52. Andrei A. Gromyko to Roshchin, 8 March 1952, and Mao to Stalin, 9 March 1951 telegrams, APRF, pp. 268-69. Regarding progress at Panmunjom, see James I. Matray, "The Korean Armistice Negotiations: Divergent Negotiating Strategies?," in Hwang Byong-moo and Lee Pil-jung, eds., *Pursuing Peace Beyond the Korean War* (Seoul: Rinsa, 2000), pp. 111-36.
53. Mao to Kim, 18 July 1952, telegram, *CWIHPB*, Issues 6-7, p. 78.
54. Kim to Mao, 15 July 1952 telegram, *ibid.*, p. 79.
55. Stalin specifically noted that "the air force belongs to the state and that the Chinese Volunteers should not use state planes." Conversation minutes between Stalin and Zhou, 20 August 1951, *ibid.*, p. 13.
56. Conversation minutes between Stalin and Zhou, 3 September 1952, *ibid.*, p. 16.
57. Nei Fengzhi, *Zhanchang: jiangjun de yaolan* [Battlefields: The Cradle of Generals] (Beijing: People's Liberation Army Press, 1989), p. 194.
58. For discussion of the debate over the utility of nuclear threats in the Korean War, see Roger Dingman, "Atomic Diplomacy During the Korean War," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89), pp. 50-91; Rosemary Foot, "Nuclear Coercion and the Ending of the Korean Conflict," *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter 1988/89), pp. 92-112.
59. Mao to Stalin, 28 March 1952 telegram, APRF, pp. 270-72.
60. Shen Zhihua, *Mao Zedong, Stalin yu Hanzhan* [Mao Zedong, Stalin, and the Korean War] (Hong Kong: Tiandi Books, 1998), p. 302.
61. Xu Yan, *Diyici jiaoliang*, pp. 31-32.

62. Chen Jian and Yang Kuisong, "Chinese Politics and the Collapse of the Sino-Soviet Alliance," in Odd Arne Westad, ed., *Brother in Arms: The Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998), p. 257.