Did Stalin Lure the United States into the Korean War?

By Donggil Kim and William Stueck
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New Evidence on the Origins of the Korean War

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The following telegram from Joseph Stalin to Czechoslovak President Klement Gottwald on 27 August 1950 in which the Soviet leader explained his decision-making in the preceding months raises new questions about the origins of the Korean War. Did Stalin purposefully seek to entangle the United States in a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula? Did Stalin expect an intervention by the Chinese communists from virtually the beginning of the conflict? First published in the original Russian in Novaya I Noveishaya Istoriiia in 2005,¹ two experts, Beijing University Professor Donggil Kim and University of Georgia Professor William Stueck, provide an initial assessment of this potentially significant new finding.

Kim argues that the document suggests that Stalin gave Kim Il Sung permission to attack South Korea on 25 June 1950 not because he felt the US would not get involved, but precisely because he wanted the US to become entangled in a limited conflict in Asia. Other scholars, by contrast, have emphasized that Stalin secretly approved Kim Il Sung’s plan to attack during the North Korean leader’s secret trip to Moscow in April 1950 – only after receiving his assurances that South Korea could be overwhelmed so quickly, in a matter of a few weeks, that Washington would be unable to rescue it.² From the very beginning he envisioned a conflict involving not just the North Koreans, but also the newly established People’s Republic of China. Doing so, Kim argues, would allow the Soviet Union to concentrate its energies on consolidating its European empire and forestalling the outbreak of a third world war. Kim bases his findings, which will be published in an NKIDP Working Paper later this year, on this and additional documents that have recently become available from the collection of the late Russian diplomat and historian Andrei Ledovskii as well as from Russian and Chinese archives.

William Stueck, author of The Korean War: An International History (Princeton, 1997), and Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History (Princeton, 2004), argues by contrast that the document shows Stalin reassuring Gottwald—a nervous ally—about the international situation, and, implicitly, his own infallible leadership. In the document, Stalin claims that events in Korea had unfolded according to his wishes. Stueck argues that UN intervention in Korea and the corresponding US military buildup in Europe were surely not the results for which Stalin had hoped. Though Stalin may have seen some promising possibilities in the course of international events, this is a far cry from saying that events had gone largely as he had anticipated or desired.

Commentary by Donggil Kim (Beijing University)

Written just two months after the outbreak of the Korean War, the 27 August letter from Stalin to Czechoslovak President Klement Gottwald reveals much about Stalin’s goals in the Korean War and also sheds some light on the origins of the Korean War. The letter describes the reasoning behind Stalin’s decision to withdraw from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in January 1950, as well as the rationale for the Soviet absence from the UNSC in July 1950, when it discussed the Korean issue. At the same time, the document implies that Stalin intended to take advantage of a Chinese intervention in the Korean War to swing the global balance of power in the Soviet Union’s favor.

Following the North Korean invasion on 25 June 1950, the United States petitioned for UNSC intervention in the conflict. Approval was given for this first deployment of a UN force, widely considered a diplomatic victory for the Western powers. Eastern European leaders questioned the Soviet abstention and failure to exercise its veto. In a remarkable act of criticizing the Vozhd’s actions, Gottwald sent Stalin a letter asking why the Soviet Union had missed the critical UNSC meeting. The document contains Stalin’s response to Gottwald’s questions.

Stalin’s reply indicates that:

1) Stalin not only predicted but actually desired US intervention in the Korean War. In his letter, Stalin clearly stated that one of his goals in boycotting the UNSC was “to give the American government a free hand and give it an opportunity to commit more foolishness using a majority in the Security Council so that public opinion can see the true face of the American government.” Stalin hoped for the United States to become entangled in military conflict in Korea, and expected that UN sanctions would better facilitate United States entry into the Korean War. Therefore, Stalin’s decision to abstain effectively guaranteed that the UNSC would authorize intervention.

2) Stalin viewed the Korean War positively, explaining to Gottwald with satisfaction: “it is clear that the United States of America is presently distracted from Europe in the Far East. Does it not give us an advantage in the global balance of power? It undoubtedly does.” This not only confirms the fact that Europe was the main priority in the Soviet Union’s international strategy, but also that the Korean War was seen as an opportunity for the Soviet Union and the socialist camp to strengthen socialism in Europe while diverting American interests and resources from that continent.

3) Even though at the time of Stalin’s writing this letter the US Air Force had already established air supremacy over the North Koreans, overall North Korean forces still had superiority over allied forces. By early August North Korean forces had nearly run UN forces off of the Peninsula. Yet even during this early stage of the Korean War, Stalin apparently had strong hopes for China’s intervention in Korea. Stalin commented to Gottwald what he believed the outcome of the Korean War would be if China was “[pulled]…into the struggle for the freedom of Korea.” It seems that Stalin’s aim in the Korean War depended upon Chinese intervention, believing that
Chinese intervention would not only tie down the United States in conflicts in Asia, but also weaken the United States’ overall stature and influence. Therefore, from Stalin’s perspective, it seems, China’s intervention was inevitable. This finding should strengthen arguments that Chinese intervention was a precondition for Stalin’s approval of the Korean War. This document also leads us to conclude that one of Stalin’s major goals in the Korean War was to lead the US and China into military conflict, thereby enhancing the deterioration of Sino-US relations, precluding any potential Sino-US rapprochement in the near future, and reinforcing China’s dependence on the USSR.

4) Stalin believed in the inevitability of a third world war. The Soviet Union, unable to compete economically with US measures in Europe such as the Marshall Plan, the Berlin blockade and the establishment of NATO, desperately needed time to strengthen the socialist camp to prepare for a third world war. This question was foremost in Stalin’s grand strategy. As shown in the document, the Korean War offered Stalin a solution. Stalin stressed that a United States exhausted from the Chinese intervention in the Korean War “would be incapable of a third world war in the near future. Therefore, a third world war would be postponed for an indeterminate period.” Unquestionably, postponement of the third world war was a clear strategic advantage which the Soviet Union and the socialist camp obtained from the Korean War.

It could be said that this document is little more than an *ex post facto* attempt to justify a reckless action. Yet, as noted, at the time the document was composed, the North Koreans still enjoyed tactical superiority and had South Korean and United Nations troops contained within the “Busan [Pusan] Perimeter,” giving Stalin little or no need to justify his actions.

In conclusion, this document not only explains the 1950 Soviet absence from the UNSC, but also reveals much about Stalin’s view of the Korean War in the context of his grand strategy.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the Academy of Korean Studies and also to the late Andrei Ledovskii who co-discovered this document. The preceding analysis is based on a 2005 discussion we had on this document in Moscow.

** Commentary by William Stueck (University of Georgia)**

While Stalin composed this fascinating document at a time when North Korea held a tactical advantage over UN forces and was about to launch a new offensive aimed at driving them off the peninsula, it is difficult to believe that the Soviet ruler was as optimistic about international conditions as he claimed. In his discussions with Kim Il Sung the previous April, after all, he had indicated that the United States was not likely to intervene militarily to resist a North Korean attack. He recognized, to be sure, that there was a risk of such a response and he saw the Chinese as a counterweight in such an event. Yet his emphasis to Kim on the need for a quick victory over South Korea indicates that he preferred no US military intervention.

Not only did the United States respond militarily and prevent a quick North Korean victory; it took advantage of the Soviet boycott of the UN Security Council to push resolutions of support
通过那个组织。为什么苏联没有返回到安全理事会以防止这种情况仍然不确定。斯大林可能担心这种行动会增加直接与美国军事冲突的危险；或者，根据美国国务卿迪安·艾奇逊于1950年1月12日演讲中的声明，如果被攻击，美国以外的国家在太平洋可能可以期待来自联合国的帮助，斯大林可能想证明，即使没有苏联的存在，国际组织也会无能无力。很清楚的是，6月底决定不返回安全理事会是斯大林自己的决定，反对他的高级助手的建议。这个事实使他后来的辩护显得更加必要，特别是在他决定8月份命令恢复苏联在安全理事会的代表之后。

在批准朝鲜战争的春季。斯大林可能预料到来自美国在西太平洋的一些反应，比如保护台湾的行动，以增强在印度支那的法国人和/或加强美国在东亚的立场。他也可能看到了这些行动可能有利，因为它会将注意力和资源从欧洲战场引开，并进一步将中国从西方孤立起来。到了8月底，美国不仅做了这些事情并介入了朝鲜，它也开始了一般性的军事准备，并开始了说服与会国也这样做的一项运动。尽管华盛顿直到9月才将德国重武装问题提上日程，斯大林肯定在8月27日就认识到这个问题。他还认识到，美国政府中的高级圈子里正在讨论预防性战争的可能性。

斯大林并不是在恐慌中写信给戈特瓦尔德的。当然，他看到了国际事件中的一些有希望的可能。尽管如此，他的意图远不是一个准确的过去计算的反映，也不是斯大林当前心态的反映，而是努力向一个处于恐慌中的亲近盟友保证苏联领导的不可言喻的智慧。

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通过那个组织。为什么苏联没有返回到安全理事会以防止这种情况仍然不确定。斯大林可能担心这种行动会增加直接与美国军事冲突的危险；或者，根据美国国务卿迪安·艾奇逊于1950年1月12日演讲中的声明，如果被攻击，美国以外的国家在太平洋可能可以期待来自联合国的帮助，斯大林可能想证明，即使没有苏联的存在，国际组织也会无能无力。很清楚的是，6月底决定不返回安全理事会是斯大林自己的决定，反对他的高级助手的建议。这个事实使他后来的辩护显得更加必要，特别是在他决定8月份命令恢复苏联在安全理事会的代表之后。

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斯大林并不是在恐慌中写信给戈特瓦尔德的。当然，他看到了国际事件中的一些有希望的可能。尽管如此，从说事件已经做了他所预见和希望的来说，这是一个远大的要求。他的信件给戈特瓦尔德需要被视为一个准确的过去计算的反映，或者斯大林的当前心态，而不仅仅是一个努力向一个处于恐慌中的亲近盟友保证苏联领导的不可言喻的智慧。

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Letter from Filipov (Stalin) to Soviet Ambassador in Prague, conveying message to CSSR leader Klement Gottwald, 27 August 1950


Top Secret

Prague, Soviet Ambassador

Pass Gottwald the following message orally. Put it in writing if he so requests.

“We view the issue of the Soviet Union’s withdrawal from the Security Council on 27 June and the events which unfolded afterwards somewhat differently from Comrade Gottwald.
We left the Security Council for four reasons: first, to demonstrate solidarity of the Soviet Union with the new China.

Second, to underscore the foolishness and idiocy of the United States policy of recognizing the Guomindang puppet in the Security Council as the representative of China and not wanting to admit the genuine representative of China to the Security Council; third, to render decisions of the Security Council illegitimate by virtue of the absence of representatives of two great powers; fourth, to give the American government a free hand and give it an opportunity to commit more foolishness using a majority in the Security Council so that public opinion can see the true face of the American government.

I believe that we have achieved all of these goals.

Following our withdrawal from the Security Council, America became entangled in a military intervention in Korea and is now squandering its military prestige and moral authority. Few honest people can now doubt that America is now acting as an aggressor and tyrant in Korea and that it is not as militarily powerful as it claims to be. In addition, it is clear that the United States of America is presently distracted from Europe in the Far East. Does it not give us an advantage in the global balance of power? It undoubtedly does.

Let us suppose that American government continues to be tied down in the Far East and also pulls China into the struggle for the freedom of Korea and its own independence. What might come of this?

First, America, just like any other country, cannot cope with China, a country with such large armed forces at the ready. It follows that America would overextend itself in this struggle. Second, having overextended itself in this matter, America would be incapable of a third world war in the near future. Therefore, a third world war would be postponed for an indeterminate period, which would provide the time necessary to strengthen socialism in Europe, not to mention that the struggle between America and China would revolutionize the entire Far East. Does all this not give us an advantage from the perspective of the global balance of power? It unquestionably does.

As you can see, the question of whether or not the Soviet Union participates in the Security Council is not as simple as it might appear at first glance.

By virtue of all this, we cannot say that “the democratic camp has no need to leave the Security Council.” Whether we leave or stay depends on the circumstances. We might leave the Security Council again and come back once again, depending on the international situation.

One might ask why we have now returned to the Security Council. We have returned to continue exposing the aggressive policy of the American government and to prevent it from using the flag of the Security Council as a smokescreen for its aggression. Now that America has become aggressively involved in Korea, it will be very easy to achieve this goal while in the Security Council. I think that this is clear and needs no further explanation.
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FILIPPOV [Stalin]

27 August 1950

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The Commentators:

Donggil Kim is associate professor in the Department of History, Peking University, and co-author of Minguo shiqi Zhong Su guanxi shi, 1917-1949 (Sino-Soviet Relations during the Republican Era, 1917-1949) (Beijing: Zhonggong dangshi chubanshe, 2008). He has published numerous articles in Chinese and English on Sino-Soviet and Sino-North Korean relations.

William Stueck Jr. is distinguished research professor of History at the University of Georgia, and an authority on U.S. diplomatic history, particularly American-Asian relations. Dr. Stueck is the author and editor of many books, including Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History.