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## Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined

by *James I. Matray*

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Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson's speech at the National Press Club on 12 January 1950 was among the most important and controversial US policy statements in the early history of the Cold War in East Asia. In it, he defined the American "defensive perimeter" in the Pacific as a line running through Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines. This denied a guarantee of US military protection to the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan. Less than six months later, North Korea launched a military offensive across the 38th parallel that nearly succeeded in imposing Communist rule over the entire peninsula. Critics immediately pointed to Acheson's National Press Club speech as giving Pyongyang the "green light" to pursue forcible reunification, based on the premise that the United States had ruled out military intervention to defend South Korea. More than fifty years after the start of the Korean War, countless South Koreans still hold Acheson responsible for igniting this fratricidal conflict. The United States, they bitterly maintain, committed an act of betrayal toward Korea ranking with President Theodore Roosevelt's approval of the Taft-Katsura Agreement in 1905 and President Harry S. Truman's agreement to divide the peninsula forty years later at the end of World War II.

Release of Soviet documents during recent years has removed any doubt that North Korea planned and initiated the Korean War with the reluctant endorsement of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. North Korea's leader Kim Il Sung had begun to press the Soviet Union to support an invasion shortly after creation of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in September 1948. But Stalin withheld approval until April 1950 mainly because he feared that the United States would intervene militarily, thereby risking escalation into a major war involving the Soviet Union. The reaction of shock and panic in the ROK to Acheson's exclusion of South Korea from the American defensive perimeter has been well-documented. Still unresolved, however, is the far more important question of the impact of the National Press Club speech on Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung. This article presents evidence from recently released Soviet documents that Acheson's address had little if any impact on Communist deliberations. Stalin worried about US military intervention until the moment the Korean War began. Moreover, he feared that North Korea could not survive an attack that he was certain South Korea would stage in the future. His approval of Kim Il Sung's plan was a mistake, but it derived more from a sense of weakness rather than strength.

There were two primary motivating factors behind Acheson's delivery of the National Press Club speech. First, the Truman administration was trying to implement a new China policy after the victory of the Communists in the Chinese Civil War. By late 1949, Truman and Acheson had decided that the People's Republic of China (PRC) would launch an invasion of Taiwan in the near future to destroy the last remnants of Jiang Jieshi's government.<sup>1</sup> The president announced his determination to remain uninvolved in

the Chinese Civil War on 5 January 1950, explaining that while the United States would continue economic aid to Taiwan, US military aid and advice would cease. Such an approach, Truman insisted, proved that the United States had no predatory designs on Chinese territory and sought no specific privileges or military bases. Acheson denied that the statement constituted any reversal of US policy. The United States, he explained, had recognized Taiwan as Chinese territory in World War II and would not violate its past agreements. Far more important, Acheson insisted that military aid would not help Jiang and the Guomindang. The United States could not give "a will to resist and a purpose for resistance to those who must provide it for themselves."<sup>2</sup> Not only was the Truman administration attempting to build the foundation for future relations with the PRC, it also was defending itself against criticism from the Republicans for its alleged "loss of China" to the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

A second goal of Acheson's speech was to build support for US policy in South Korea. Since the fall of 1947, the United States had been pursuing a policy there that sought to eliminate its commitment to military protection, but without ensuring Communist conquest of the ROK either as a result of internal political subversion or external military invasion. This explains the US decision to postpone withdrawal of its occupation forces until late June 1949, defying strenuous objections from US military leaders. Just three months earlier, Truman had approved National Security Council (NSC) Paper 8/2, which outlined steps for the creation of a South Korea that would achieve the economic, military, and political strength necessary to provide for its own survival with American financial aid and diplomatic support. A key provision of this plan was a three-year program of economic assistance that required Congressional approval. The administration tried to persuade Congress that despite its failure in China, the United States could succeed in Korea, even hinting at the possibility of future peaceful reunification under a government following the American model of economic, political, and social development. But Congress refused to pass the Korean aid bill, forcing the administration to settle for a continuation of temporary economic assistance to South Korea until 15 February 1950. Economic deterioration in the ROK in the fall of 1949 further reduced prospects for approval of a long-term aid package.<sup>4</sup>

Acheson's Press Club speech thus sought to build support for passage of the Korean aid bill, which required demonstrating that US policy in Korea would have a better outcome than what had taken place in China. Scholars unfortunately focused attention thereafter on assessing Acheson's reference to the US "defensive perimeter" and ignored the remainder of the speech. After the outbreak of the Korean War, charges that Acheson had provided a "green light" for North Korea's invasion prevented a clear understanding of the address as a subtle, but realistic statement of the administration's policy in Asia after the Communist victory in China. It enunciated a conception of containment in Asia that NSC Paper 48 had outlined in the fall of 1949. Acheson, in his speech, asserted that the main issue in Asia was the struggle against economic privation and foreign domination. Asians considered national independence and self-government as the indispensable ingredients in the resolution of these two problems. The United States, he insisted, always had worked for Asian independence, while the Soviet Union attempted to rob Asians of control over their own affairs. The United States opposed Communism not for any self-

serving reason, but because it was the spearhead of Russian imperialism and a new Soviet strategy of domination. Acheson stressed that American efforts had to concentrate on avoiding any actions that obscured the true malevolent nature of Soviet tactics.<sup>5</sup>

Acheson's attitude toward the military capabilities of the United States in Asia reflected a realistic grasp of the limits of American power. Beyond Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines, "it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack." In the event of open aggression outside this defensive perimeter, he announced, "the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon ... the United Nations which so far has not proved a weak reed to lean on by any people who are determined to protect their independence against outside aggression." The secretary of state claimed, however, that the military threat was not as immediate as the challenge of political "subversion and penetration." Communism exploited conditions of economic dislocation and social upheaval to advance the Soviet strategy for world domination. Acheson emphasized that without economic stability, Asian nations could not withstand the Soviet challenge. Through American economic aid, technical skill, and administrative advice, however, Asian nations could develop democratic institutions capable of fulfilling both popular needs and desires. But US aid alone was not enough, since Asian leaders themselves had to demonstrate the will to improve conditions. In China, for example, Jiang had not fostered an improvement of political and economic circumstances and the Chinese people had "brushed him aside."

For Acheson, his strategy in Asia was the only logical US alternative. He pointed to Korea as a place where the United States could utilize economic assistance and foster the development of democracy. In Korea, "a very good chance" existed for successfully resisting Communist expansion. To refuse such aid to Korea would be "utter defeatism and utter madness." Acheson's containment strategy would succeed in Korea because, in contrast to China, the ROK wanted American aid and would use it effectively. The secretary of state concluded that "we have a greater opportunity to be effective" in Korea than anywhere else on the Asian mainland."<sup>6</sup> Outlining the US "defensive perimeter" was then a secondary issue in Acheson's speech that reflected in part concern that President Syngman Rhee of South Korea might resort to military aggression against the north to achieve reunification. The secretary of state was attempting to caution the South Koreans that the United States would not guarantee absolutely the ROK's military security.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Acheson's speech constituted only public enunciation of Truman's postwar strategy of stressing economic assistance in Asia, rather than military power. Finally, General Douglas MacArthur in March 1949 had placed South Korea outside the same "defensive perimeter" that Acheson defined in his speech, because of his desire to redeploy US forces then in Korea back to Japan.<sup>8</sup>

Acheson's National Press Club speech thus outlined a realistic approach for addressing postwar American problems in Asia. It was also cautious and judicious in analyzing the relationship between communism and nationalism. As Tang Tsou writes, Acheson's policy "seemed to avoid any immediate risk of war, drew an easily defensible line to protect America's vital interests, and contained a long-term program for Asia which could be implemented by peaceful means."<sup>9</sup> It made little sense to advocate direct intervention

in the internal affairs of Asia when such a policy only would alienate people hostile to imperialism. But the United States could build friendship based on offers of assistance. Acheson reasoned that Asian nationalism would defeat Soviet imperialism with American aid and then reward the United States with its political support. North Korea's invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950 ended any chance of finding out whether this policy would have succeeded because it justified the militarization of US policy in East Asia. Three days later, Republican Senator from Ohio Robert A. Taft held both Truman and Acheson responsible for the events leading to war in Korea, accusing them of pursuing a "bungling and inconsistent foreign policy" that had provided "basic encouragement to the North Korean aggression."<sup>10</sup> For at least the next three decades, his interpretation of the National Press Club speech would become conspicuous in accounts explaining the Korean War.

Presidential candidate General Dwight D. Eisenhower encouraged public acceptance of Acheson's responsibility for the Korean War during the fall of 1952 when in a speech in Cincinnati he attributed North Korea's attack to the Press Club speech. In response, an angry Acheson stated publicly that he had "used no language whatever 'excluding' Korea or any other area in the Asiatic mainland or suggesting any lack of interest by the United States in the event of an attack on any area of the Asian mainland in general or Korea in particular." In his memoirs, Acheson explained that his purpose in writing the speech was "to carry some sense of the problem in the Far East, the limitation of our power, and direction of our purpose." He categorically rejected the charge that he "gave the green light" to North Korea:

This was specious, for Australia and New Zealand were not included either, and the first of all our mutual defense agreements was made with Korea. If the Russians were watching the United States for signs of our intentions in the Far East, they would have been more impressed by the two years' agitation for withdrawal of combat forces from Korea, the defeat in Congress of a minor aid bill for it, and the increasing discussion of a peace treaty with Japan.

Acheson was surprised that critics focused on his reference to the American "defensive perimeter" because he believed that he had engaged neither in "innovating policy or political heresy."<sup>11</sup> President Harry S. Truman surely agreed with this assessment, choosing not to even mention the speech or the "green light" theory in his memoirs.<sup>12</sup>

Several American military leaders who were important figures in the Korean War wrote accounts of the conflict. Generals Omar N. Bradley and J. Lawton Collins mentioned Acheson's speech, but discussed it only in the context of an overall US policy that showed indifference toward the fate of the ROK.<sup>13</sup> General Douglas MacArthur, in his memoirs, noted that Acheson's policies in Asia received widespread condemnation in the United States. "I felt the Secretary of State was badly advised about the Far East," he wrote, implying that the Korean War proved it was wrong to allow diplomats to make military decisions. For General Matthew B. Ridgway, Acheson's "clear indication that we had no intention of defending Korea did nothing to give the enemy even momentary pause."<sup>14</sup> A few early accounts of the Korean War would blame Acheson almost

exclusively for North Korea's invasion. Robert T. Oliver, for example, wrote that the reason "why the war came" was because "American authoritative statements indicated that we would not defend Korea."<sup>15</sup> For those reluctant to speculate about the impact of the speech on North Korea or the Soviet Union, many agreed that at least it was unwise, if not foolish, for Washington to publicize its policy and intentions toward Korea.<sup>16</sup>

A consensus soon emerged that Acheson's address was only one element in an overall US policy signaling North Korea and the Soviet Union that the United States would not intervene to halt an invasion of South Korea. David Rees, for example, wrote that "Acheson's Press Club speech only reflected a military weakness which the Communists knew already, that the US did not have the men to garrison South Korea, and that a mere UN commitment in Korea might mean that an indigenous Communist attack in an Asian country would be tolerated by the West out of weakness and miscalculation."<sup>17</sup> Most writers agreed that Acheson had not given "away state secrets" and had said "nothing new."<sup>18</sup> According to John W. Spanier, Acheson was

only verbalizing the basic American strategy of total war, ... that had not calculated on ... a less than all-out challenge by a Soviet satellite in Asia against an American friend, whose strategic importance was not "worth" the price of total war. In short, it was not American words but American policy that probably encouraged the Communists to believe that the United States would not defend South Korea.<sup>19</sup>

Certainly, historians had concluded that many US leaders shared blame for the failure to show a stronger commitment to South Korea's survival.<sup>20</sup> This policy, according to Korean historian Kim Chum-kon, invited North Korea to launch its invasion and therefore constituted appeasement.<sup>21</sup>

For thirty years, the consensus remained firmly in place that the United States gave North Korea the "green light" to invade South Korea. In 1982, East Asian expert Claude A. Buss wrote that Acheson's speech was "virtually tantamount to an invitation" for Communist aggression. Buss perceptively added, however, that the address reflected the Truman administration's search for an effective policy in postwar Asia:

Far from abandoning the ROK, Secretary Acheson called for a much broader defense than the United States could provide on its own. In directing attention to the nonmilitary factors in security and to the need for nonmilitary measures to solve problems stemming from the expansion of communism, he voiced ideas which, if heeded, might have avoided many of the most bitter consequences of Korea - and Vietnam.

Buss reiterated that although Acheson's speech included the "first clear-cut statement on a United States defense perimeter in Asia," it only confirmed a long-standing military strategy. Nevertheless, it was "certainly an unwise and unskilled diplomatic maneuver to broadcast it openly to the world."<sup>22</sup> Bevin Alexander agreed, arguing that the North Koreans concluded that the United States would not act to save South Korea. "The mistake they made," he writes, "was to believe" the public pronouncements of US leaders.<sup>23</sup>



Release of classified US documents on policy toward Korea after World War II revived debate about whether the Acheson speech provided a "green light" for North Korea's invasion. William Stueck pointed to the Press Club speech as a prime example of how US "actions did not fall into a consistent pattern that conveyed a deep American commitment" to South Korea. More public demonstrations of strong US support "might have served as warning signals to the Kremlin."<sup>24</sup> Robert J. Donovan agreed, claiming that although Kim Il Sung already had developed his plans for invading South Korea before Acheson's speech, "it made Kim and Stalin and Mao more confident that the venture could succeed."<sup>25</sup> But for other writers, "why North Korea invaded South Korea in the first place" was not simple to explain because, according to Burton Kaufman, "the conflict between North and South Korea was a true civil war." "Acheson's speech," he surmised, "must have led Kim to expect that the United States would not intervene in the struggle, while he would anticipate continued Soviet military support."<sup>26</sup> For Callum McDonald,

Acheson's speech was in fact an exercise in ambiguity, designed to restrain both sides. In this respect, it was a faithful reflection of American policy. Washington did not express uninterest but refused to spell out in advance its attitude towards an armed assault against its Korean creation. In the meantime, Washington hoped that the worst would never happen.<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, some writers no longer even mentioned the Acheson speech.<sup>28</sup>

Peter Lowe, nicely summarizing the new consensus that emerged in the 1980s, wrote that the National Press Club speech "was a crisp, forthright address covering much ground but too explicit on a few aspects that would have been better cloaked with at least some opaqueness." Acheson's words were "too blunt" and had a direct impact on igniting the Korean War:

It was unquestionably foolish to convey the impression that Korea was expendable. North Korea and the Soviet Union could only have drawn encouragement in the belief that America would most likely not act with vigour if North Korea moved against the south to reunify the peninsula.<sup>29</sup>

"Without access to North Korean or Soviet archives," James Stokesbury added, "no one can say the speech was a green light, but it may safely be assumed that it was not a red or even a yellow one."<sup>30</sup> John Merrill partially filled this documentary void, relying on North Korean public statements and interviews to support his conclusion that the Acheson speech

was also noticed in Pyongyang. A former North Korean journalist, who claims that he personally delivered the news to Kim Il Sung after reading wire service reports, later recalled that the North Korean leader was greatly excited to learn of the speech.<sup>31</sup>

In the absence of documentary evidence, however, the actual impact of the address on North Korean policy remained a matter of speculation.

Bruce Cumings advanced by far the most fascinating interpretation of the impact of Acheson's Press Club speech. "South Korea," he wrote, "was not pointedly excluded from the American defense perimeter." "Certain nations (Japan) would be defended, and in other threatened nations (like the ROK), initial reliance would be on those attacked to defend themselves, and if they could not, the implication was, the situation would be reevaluated." Perhaps more important, Cumings noted that "the North Koreans thought Acheson included the ROK in his perimeter" after reading a false report in the *New York Times*. "The real effect of the speech," he argued, "was probably to keep [the North Koreans] off balance, wary, unsure about what might come next - exactly Acheson's intent with regard to *both* Koreas." His ultimate goal was to use deception to maneuver the Communists into taking action that would justify creating through political and economic means American dominance of a "great crescent" from Japan to Southeast Asia to India. Cumings relied on a remarkable metaphor to illustrate his argument:

Acheson is the linebacker and he knows they may come around the end, or throw a pass, or come off tackle. A properly constructed defense encourages the offense to choose one instead of another option; it creates a field of force that constrains enemy decision. ... More noteworthy is Richard Nixon's rendering of Acheson's logic; he chose a metaphor from his favorite game, poker: 'the North Koreans thought our intentions were face up on the board. ... It [June 25] was a miscalculation by them, based upon a misrepresentation by us.'

Acheson, presumably the Dick Butkus of US foreign policy, thus used his National Press Club speech to manipulate North Korea into attacking. "The idea that Acheson naively gave the green light to Stalin or Kim, or that this was where American deterrence failed is," for Cumings, "a fantasy."<sup>32</sup>

Sergei Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai were among the first to make use of Soviet documents and interviews in *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War*. Endorsing the traditional view, they claimed that Stalin "*consented*" to Kim Il Sung's idea for an invasion because American demobilization and the Truman administration's words had indicated the United States would not intervene to save the ROK. Relying on an interview with V.P. Tkachenko, former head of the Korean section of the Communist Party's Central Committee, they wrote that Acheson's National Press Club speech "was quickly sent to Moscow, was carefully studied by Stalin and had a significant impact on his thinking." It was Kim Il Sung who set the date for the offensive, but the invasion was "preplanned, blessed, and directly assisted by Stalin and his generals, and reluctantly backed by Mao at Stalin's insistence."<sup>33</sup> Stueck was not as emphatic, writing that "Stalin suspected that in a pinch there would be little support for collective intervention to save South Korea." Confirming his reputation for caution, the Soviet leader "stood willing to accept a certain risk ... owing to his knowledge through espionage of America's lack of readiness for war with the Soviet Union - militarily, politically, and economically - and to his desire to ensure support for his leadership at home and on his eastern and western borders."<sup>34</sup>



Cold War assumptions and a belief in American exceptionalism have made it difficult for even recent historians to believe that Acheson's words did not have a decisive impact on igniting the Korean War. In 1990, Harry Summers blamed Acheson exclusively for encouraging Moscow and Beijing to "give their blessing" to the North Korean attack. The National Press Club speech, he writes, made "it plain that the United States had abandoned [South Korea] altogether."<sup>35</sup> Kenneth B. Lee wrote in 1997 that Acheson had decided to abandon Korea and his speech was "an open invitation to an attack by the Communists." After the speech, "Stalin knew the United States would not go to the aid of South Korea if it was attacked."<sup>36</sup> Referring to the Acheson address as "notorious," Michael Hickey concluded that the "speech carried enormous weight" because it confirmed that the United States no longer planned to protect South Korea. Along with the withdrawal of US troops and the successful testing of an atomic bomb during 1949, it "lured" Stalin into approving Kim's plans for the invasion.<sup>37</sup> And most recently, Stanley Sandler has asserted that Acheson's "notorious speech" "set off alarm bells in Seoul" and "encouraged aggressive thoughts in Pyongyang," "In 1992," he wrote, "a returned [Korean People's Army] general reminisced that Acheson's speech did produce 'a certain influence on Kim Il Sung'."<sup>38</sup>

Since 1994, the release of additional Soviet documents has added more information to the record of events leading to North Korea's launching of its invasion of South Korea on 25 June 1950. A more accurate assessment of the impact of Acheson's Press Club speech on Stalin's decision to authorize Kim Il Sung to initiate the war is now possible. Relying on as yet unreleased documents, Soviet scholar Evgueni Bajanov emphasizes that a desire to avoid war with the United States dominated Stalin's thinking about Korea:

Until the end of 1949 Stalin did not plan any aggression against South Korea. Instead *he was worried about an attack from the South*, and did everything to avoid provoking Washington and Seoul. In 1947-1948 Soviet leaders still believed in the possibility of a unification of Korea, ....<sup>39</sup> [emphasis added]

However, Kim Il Sung, within months after the creation of the DPRK, had begun to press Stalin for approval of an attack on South Korea. Preparatory to an invasion, Kim Il Sung proposed in January 1949 signing a Soviet-North Korean Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. Stalin rejected the idea, arguing that it would receive world condemnation for perpetuating Korea's division. But he no doubt also was refusing an obligation to defend the DPRK if Kim initiated a war and the United States intervened. When Soviet Ambassador in Pyongyang, Terentii F. Shtykov, informed Kim Il Sung and Foreign Minister Pak Hon-yong that "to conclude a friendship treaty is not timely," the two "embarrassed" North Korean leaders suggested a "secret treaty" for Soviet military assistance as an alternative.<sup>40</sup>

Shtykov played a key role in causing Stalin to be cautious and skeptical in how he reacted to Kim Il Sung's lobbying for an invasion. Starting early in 1949, he began reporting a growing number of military clashes at the 38th parallel, complaining bitterly that North Korea "did not have enough trained personnel, adequate weapons and sufficient numbers of bullets to rebuff intensifying incursions from the South." When Kim Il Sung headed a

delegation that visited Moscow to secure expanded economic assistance, Stalin made it clear that he would not sanction the DPRK provoking a war in Korea. In their meeting on 5 March, Stalin agreed to provide North Korea with Soviet technical trainers and between \$40 and 50 million in credit to buy imports, as well as promising cultural exchanges. But he then issued a blunt warning to Kim Il Sung: "The 38th parallel must be peaceful. It is very important."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, Kim pressed for an invasion, telling Stalin that military means would be necessary to liberate all of Korea because "reactionary forces of the South will never agree on a peaceful reunification and will perpetuate the division of the country until they feel themselves strong enough to attack the North." It was the right time to attack because the Korean People's Army (KPA) was stronger than South Korea's army, guerrilla forces would support the invasion, and the southern people hated the Rhee regime.<sup>42</sup>

Stalin firmly rejected Kim Il Sung's request, explaining that the United States likely would intervene because it would view an attack on the south as violating its agreement with the Soviet Union establishing the division at the 38th parallel, thereby igniting a major war. Moreover, US troops still were deployed in the south and the KPA was weaker than its adversary in South Korea. Stalin said that Kim could not invade until he gained "overwhelming superiority." "Does it mean that there is no chance to reunify Korea in the near future?," Kim Il Sung persisted. "Our people are very anxious to be together again and to cast off the yoke of the reactionary regime and their American masters." Stalin, according to Kim, then predicted that a North Korean invasion was "not necessary" because South Korea would strike first, thus allowing Pyongyang to portray its offensive as a counterattack. "Then your move will be understood and supported by everyone," the Soviet leader explained. But despite these warnings, Stalin's expectations of war in Korea rose after Kim's departure. On 17 April, he cabled Shtykov that an attack on North Korea from the south was imminent. In reply, the Soviet ambassador confirmed that the United States was supporting a military buildup in South Korea, advising that the DPRK could not prevent the outbreak of war. Stalin then castigated Shtykov for failing to act firmly enough to maintain peace.<sup>43</sup>

Soviet intelligence reports during April of American preparations to withdraw further raised Stalin's level of anxiety. After US forces departed, the

UN commission will also leave Korea. In April-May the Southerners will concentrate their troops near the 38th parallel. In June the Southerners will start a sudden attack on the North in order to finish the total destruction of the Northern army by August.

Shtykov reported that the United States and South Korea were negotiating procedures for withdrawal with participation of the UN commission. South Korea's military leaders thought it could "inflict a perceptible blow" if North Korea attacked because the ROK army had increased in size from 53,900 to 70,000 since the year began. Along with reinforcements from youth groups, the South Korean military was ready to receive additional American weapons and equipment. Furthermore, South Korea was moving troops to the parallel in accordance with completed plans for an invasion and already had acted to crush guerrilla forces in the south. Shtykov predicted an attack in June. In

response, democratic forces in South Korea, he urged Stalin, "must carry out diversion, terror and organize an uprising." The Soviet ambassador had spoken to Kim and Pak about the necessity to raise the vigilance and expand the strength of North Korea's army and police.<sup>44</sup>

These dire warnings of North Korea's vulnerability only reinforced Kim's determination to gain not only Soviet approval for forcible reunification, but the military assistance necessary to achieve this objective. On 28 April, Kim Il Sung asked Shtykov to deliver a personal message to Stalin stressing the necessity of strengthening the KPA. He proposed implementation of a plan to expand immediately the DPRK's mechanized and airpower capabilities.<sup>45</sup> Unwilling to rely entirely on an unenthusiastic Stalin, Kim approached the Chinese as well, hoping that Mao Zedong would endorse his plans for reunification. Early in May 1949, Kim Il, chief of political administrator for the KPA, met with Chinese leaders in Beijing. Mao approved of Pyongyang's desire to liberate the south and even promised assistance of Chinese troops if necessary. But he advised against haste, urging the DPRK to wait until the Chinese completed their revolutionary war. Acknowledging that conflict in Korea was possible at any moment, Mao voiced concern about the Japanese entering the fighting, but then denied any reason for worry. "If necessary," he explained, "we can throw in for you Chinese soldiers, all of us are black, Americans will not see the difference." Then Mao concluded with another warning against an advance against South Korea in the "near future" because world conditions were unfavorable and the Chinese were preoccupied with their civil war. Anticipating victory, however, Beijing confirmed plans for the return of two divisions of Korean troops fighting in China.<sup>46</sup>

Pyongyang's pressure on Beijing to endorse and support a military assault on South Korea undoubtedly increased Stalin's anxiety about the imminence of war in Korea. Causing further alarm was Shtykov's exaggerated estimates of the danger of the South Koreans staging an invasion during the summer of 1949. Determined to avoid war with the United States or sacrifice his buffer zone in Korea, Stalin instructed Shtykov and Kim Il Sung strictly to avoid provoking an assault from the south. He also ordered the dismantling of the Soviet naval base in Chongjin and the air force liaison offices in both Kanggye and Pyongyang to "demonstrate to the world our intentions, psychologically disarm the adversaries and to prevent our participation in the possible war against Southern aggression."<sup>47</sup> But Stalin faced a difficult dilemma. It was essential to provide North Korea with enough military assistance to deter an attack from the south without giving so much that Kim Il Sung could initiate an invasion. In June 1949, just before US troops left South Korea, Moscow and Pyongyang signed a special protocol on military-technical aid, providing for the Soviet Union to supply its ally with large amounts of combat aircraft, tanks, cannon, landing ships, machine guns, and engineering equipment. Not surprisingly, this did not satisfy Kim Il Sung, who soon was requesting more materials, as well as assistance to enlarge North Korea's navy.<sup>48</sup>

On 12 August, Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong met with Shtykov to ask that he again convey to Stalin the reasons supporting approval of an invasion. First, peaceful reunification was a total impossibility. Second, the Korean people would not understand if Pyongyang missed the chance to reunite the nation. Third, North Korean forces were

superior to those in the south. Fourth, the withdrawal of US troops meant the 38th parallel had lost its meaning. Last, waiting to counterattack, as Stalin proposed, was no longer possible because South Korea had postponed its planned offensive against the north. After summarizing these arguments in a cable to Stalin, Shtykov warned that South Korea probably had the power to stage a counterattack, causing the fighting to assume a prolonged character. He therefore advised against authorizing a general offensive because the United States might intervene and even use Japanese troops. Furthermore, because the United States and other nations had recognized South Korea, Washington could use the invasion to justify a hostile campaign against the Soviet Union. Also, the majority of Koreans might support a North Korean attempt at reunification, but the KPA did not have the overwhelming superiority to ensure victory. Finally, South Korea possessed a strong army and police force. Apparently, Stalin accepted Shtykov's advice and ruled out a general offensive.<sup>49</sup>

Soviet documents demonstrate that during 1949 Stalin was consistently opposed to an invasion of South Korea because North Korea had not achieved either military superiority north of the parallel or political strength south of that line. He was more concerned about South Korea's threat to the survival of North Korea, regularly asking for estimates of the military balance on the peninsula.<sup>50</sup> Undaunted, Kim Il Sung early in September asked Moscow to approve a limited invasion, claiming that South Korea was preparing attacks to occupy more of the Ongjin peninsula on the west coast of Korea, as well as to shell a cement plant in Haeju north of the parallel. Kim advanced a plan for a campaign to seize all of Ongjin and land adjacent to the south running eastward roughly to Kaesong. This would preempt the southern attack and improve North Korea's defensive position, as well as positioning the KPA to occupy Seoul in two weeks or two months at most. Contradicting rumors of an imminent attack, the Soviet embassy reported, however, that "there have not been any serious incidents" along the border since August 15. Shtykov told Mun Il, Kim Il Sung's personal secretary, that the proposal raised "large and serious" issues, urging that Kim wait for a response from Moscow. But on 1 September, he recommended approval of the limited operation to seize Ongjin, although he did not comment on the logic of Kim's proposal.<sup>51</sup>

Stalin must have worried that if he ignored Kim's warnings, South Korea might be in the position to ignite the war that he was desperate to avoid. He also was concerned that a limited offensive would escalate into a major war. Stalin therefore ordered a new appraisal of the situation in Korea. Indicative of his predisposition against aggressive action in Korea, he chose not to rely on Shtykov's advice and instead instructed the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang to study the military, political, and international implications of an attack on the south. Stalin wanted to know "how real and advisable is the proposal of our friends." He asked for specifics on the military capabilities of the South Korean army, the strength of the partisan movement in the south and the "degree of real assistance which guerrillas could render to North Koreans," and the reaction of the South Korean masses to North Korea "being the first to start military action." Stalin requested information as well regarding the scope of the US military presence in South Korea, the "possible reaction of Americans to the invasion from the North," and "Kim Il Sung's evaluation of the capabilities of his own armed forces."<sup>52</sup>

Soviet Embassy officials met with Kim Il Sung and Pak Hon-yong on 12 September. Kim sounded desperate when, after claiming that the enemy's army was weak, he confessed that the success of the invasion would depend on demoralized South Korean soldiers refusing to fight. The strength of the guerrilla movement was about 1,500 and 2,000 and recently had "somewhat broadened," but Kim admitted that the KPA "could not count on substantial help from the partisans." Pak disagreed, claiming that the guerrillas would make a significant contribution especially in disrupting communications and staging diversionary actions. Kim Il Sung estimated that at that time roughly 900 US advisors and instructors were in South Korea and about 1,500 US soldiers and officers guarded various installations in the south. After North Korea attacked, the United States might reinforce South Korea's army with *Guomindang* or Japanese troops, US naval and air support, or the military engagement of its advisors. Kim Il Sung then conceded that "if a civil war is drawn out, then [the DPRK] will be in a politically disadvantageous position." He admitted that the limited operation might evolve into full-scale war, but doubted that this would happen because South Korea would not dare attack other areas along the parallel. Kim at first said South Korea's people would react with anger, but later predicted they would welcome the invasion.<sup>53</sup>

Rather than Shtykov, Grigorii I. Tunkin, Soviet embassy charge d'affaires, sent the cable to Moscow summarizing the results of the meetings with the North Koreans and offering recommendations. Tunkin warned that putting Kim Il Sung's plan into practice probably would lead to unleashing civil war because "there are quite a few adherents of civil war in the ruling circles of both North and South Korea." This would be disadvantageous to the DPRK "in the existing situation" because the KPA was not strong enough to achieve a quick victory even if the possible assistance from the guerrillas were taken into consideration. A protracted civil war would provide the United States with the opportunity to expand assistance to the Rhee regime. Worse, after the defeat Jiang in China, the Americans would risk a far more determined involvement in Korea, doing everything to save the ROK. The South Korean people also would develop a negative attitude toward the initiators of the civil war, blaming the North Koreans for resultant suffering, sacrifices, and hardships. "Moreover," Tunkin warned, "a drawn out war in Korea could be used by the Americans for purposes of agitation against the Soviet Union and for further inflaming war hysteria." Even a successful operation to seize the Ongjin peninsula would not be worthwhile because it would prompt charges that Pyongyang was trying to provoke a fratricidal war, as well as providing a pretext for greater American intervention in Korean affairs. As a result, Tunkin absolutely opposed not only approving a full-scale war, but also Kim's limited operation on Ongjin because it would have the same impact and result.<sup>54</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Soviet Politburo on 24 September ordered Shtykov to inform the DPRK that it had rejected its request for approval of its plan to stage even a limited invasion because a quick victory was unlikely. Not only was the KPA too weak, but Pyongyang had not done enough to raise the level of preparation of the South Korean masses to join in active struggle. Soviet leaders believed that "only in conditions of a peoples' uprising ... which is undermining the foundations of the reactionary regime, could a military attack ... play a decisive role in the ... unification of all Korea into a



single democratic state." More important, a North Korean attack "would give the Americans a pretext for all kinds of interference into Korean affairs":

An attack on South Korea would be regarded as an invasion by the DPRK and assessed as the willful outbreak of an internal war brought on by the DPRK. If that took place, the U.S. would be presented with the rationale that would enable it to make the issue of invasion by the DPRK the legal basis in the United Nations for receiving UN permission to dispatch U.S. troops to South Korea and there would be prolonged stationing of foreign troops in South Korea, which in the end would result in delaying Korea's unification.<sup>55</sup>

The Politburo thought about repeating the orders of March against crossing the parallel except in response to attacks from the south. Instead, it advised the North Koreans to be ready, "in case the South starts an offensive against the North, to defeat the Southern army and unite the country under the leadership of your government." But "Premier Kim Il Sung must not fail to take into account the possibility for the peaceful unification of Korea." After Stalin approved, the Politburo cabled its decision to Shtykov. On 4 October, Kim "negatively received" the news that Moscow had rejected his plan.<sup>56</sup>

Until the end of 1949, Stalin was committed to avoiding war in Korea, an approach that paralleled US policy toward the divided nation. Cumings writes that the significance of this symmetry was how it demonstrated "the hardwon, *learned* logic of this civil war by late 1949, namely, that both sides understood that their big power guarantors would not help them if they launched an unprovoked general attack - or even an assault on Ongjin or Ch'orwon."<sup>57</sup> During October, Stalin sharply reprimanded Shtykov for not reporting border clashes that the North Koreans had instigated, chastising the Soviet ambassador for allowing attacks on South Korean positions along the 38th parallel. "Such provocations are very dangerous for our interests and can induce the adversary to launch a big war," Stalin bluntly declared.<sup>58</sup> But the establishment of the PRC early that month had a dramatic impact on Soviet policy in Asia. Stalin's contentious discussions with Mao in Moscow from late 1949 to early 1950 indicated the difficulties of this reorientation, as the Soviet leader searched for a new strategy to retain his unquestioned leadership of revolutionary Communist movements. After the Communist victory in China, Stalin did not initiate policy in Asia, but allowed events to dictate the decisions leading to the outbreak of the Korean War.

Mao's victory in China motivated Kim Il Sung to increase his pressure on Stalin. Creation of the PRC also allowed North Korea's leader, in the words of Kathryn Weathersby, to employ "the strategy he later used so extensively of playing China and the Soviet Union against one another."<sup>59</sup> On 17 January 1950, at a luncheon that Pak Hon-yong hosted at the North Korean Foreign Ministry, Kim Il Sung complained to Shtykov that the South Koreans had not provided the necessary pretext to justify a counterattack. The Communist victory in China meant that Korea "was next in line." He requested approval to visit Moscow to receive "orders and permission" from Stalin for an attack on the Ongjin peninsula, predicting that offensive action thereafter would result in the KPA capturing Seoul within a few days. "I can't sleep at night because I am thinking of the



unification of the whole country," Kim Il Sung moaned. "If the cause ... is postponed, then I may lose the confidence of the Korean people." Kim, who was intoxicated, then resorted to blackmail, stating that if Stalin refused to see him, he would visit Beijing and ask China to fulfill its pledge to support an invasion.<sup>60</sup> This latest plea came five days after the Press Club speech, yet Kim Il Sung, thinking Acheson had placed South Korea inside the US defensive perimeter, made no mention of it.

Stalin approved Kim Il Sung's request to visit Moscow. Responding to Shtykov's summary of Kim's remarks, the Soviet leader, almost three weeks after Acheson left South Korea outside the US "defensive perimeter," was vague and tentative, still stressing the need for caution:

I understand the unhappiness of comrade Kim Il Sung, but he must understand that such a large matter regarding South Korea ... requires thorough preparation. It has to be organized in such a way that there will not be a large risk. If he wants to talk to me on this issue, then I'll always be ready to receive him and talk to him. ... I am prepared to help him in this matter.

Stalin also asked for Korea to provide yearly a minimum of 25,000 tons of lead. "It is possible that Kim Il Sung needs our technical assistance and some number of Soviet specialists," Stalin added. "We are ready to render this assistance." Mao was in Moscow at that time, but Stalin did not tell him about the plans for war because, despite Acheson's speech, he was not ready to approve an invasion. Shtykov met Kim Il Sung on 30 January to brief him on Stalin's decisions. North Korea's leader received this information "with great satisfaction." "Your agreement to receive him and your readiness to assist him in this matter made an especially strong impression," Shtykov reported. Kim said to convey his gratitude several times, asking repeatedly for confirmation that Stalin had approved a meeting. Kim Il Sung also stated that he would take all the necessary steps to ship the lead and would remove all problems regarding the matter within two weeks.<sup>61</sup>

To date, only one released Soviet document records a discussion among Communist leaders of Acheson's Press Club speech. On 17 January 1950, Soviet leaders Vyacheslav M. Molotov and Andrei Y. Vyshinsky met with Mao during the latter's visit to Moscow to negotiate the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. Significantly, their discussion of Acheson's speech focused on US China policy, without any reference to Korea. In his diary entry, Molotov writes that he raised the issue of the address, telling Mao that Acheson's statements concerning

international matters, in particular, matters concerning China, USSR and their mutual relations ... are a clear slander against the Soviet Union and were designed to deceive directly public opinion. The United States went bankrupt with its policy in China, and now Acheson is trying to justify himself, without shying away from deceitful means in the process.

Molotov then quoted from a translation of the speech, focusing on Acheson's allegations that the Soviet Union had incorporated Outer Mongolia and was in the process of

partitioning Manchuria. He gave a full text of the speech to Mao, advising him "to familiarize himself with" it. In response, Mao stated that "until now, as is known, these fabrications were the job of all kinds of scoundrels, represented by American journalists and correspondents." That the US secretary of state was now doing "the dirty work" showed how "the Americans are making progress!"<sup>62</sup>

Discussion of the speech continued with Molotov explaining that Soviet leaders thought Moscow and Beijing "should respond accordingly." He then remarked that according to a TASS report from Washington on 14 January,

the former consul general in Mukden, [Angus] Ward, while responding to questions from the press, stated the very opposite of what Acheson said in his speech on 12 January. In addition, I quoted the appropriate portion of Ward's declaration, which stated that he did not see any signs which would point to the Soviet Union's control over the administration of Manchuria or its attempts to incorporate Manchuria into the USSR, even though the Soviet Union is exercising its treaty rights concerning the joint administration of KchZhD [Chinese Chungchun Railroad].

Mao agreed with Molotov's proposal for both the Soviet and Chinese foreign ministries "to make a statement on the matter" that "will expose Acheson's slanderous fabrications . . ." He then asked if the speech could "be a kind of smokescreen, using which, the American imperialists will attempt to occupy the island of Formosa?" Molotov replied that "the Americans are trying . . . to create misunderstandings in the relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China." It was "impossible to disagree that" it was a "smokescreen, in order to carry out their plans of occupation." Discussion then turned to China's refusal to establish any diplomatic contacts with the United States and Soviet efforts to seat the PRC in the United Nations.<sup>63</sup>

On 2 February, Stalin dispatched new instructions to Shtykov reflecting his continuing concerns about the dangers involved in launching an invasion of South Korea. Stalin ordered his ambassador to

explain to Comrade Kim Il Sung that at this point the question he wants to discuss with me must be completely confidential. It should not be shared with anyone even in the North Korean leadership, as well as with the Chinese comrades. This is dictated by the preoccupation with keeping the topic unknown to the adversary.

If Stalin had paid any attention to Acheson's speech, apparently it did not eliminate his anticipation of US intervention to block Communist conquest of Korea. Shtykov reported to Stalin on 7 February the issues discussed in his meeting three days earlier with Kim Il Sung. North Korea's leader asked if the Soviet government would grant the DPRK a loan and proposed sending to Moscow representatives with draft bonds valued at 2 billion won. He also wanted Stalin's permission to arm, equip, and train three more divisions to bring the total KPA strength to ten. Shtykov replied that the "question is large and serious" because approval would require large amounts of material resources. Kim Il Sung then explained that during 1950 he wanted to use the credit the Soviet government

had promised to North Korea under the 17 April 1949 agreement for 1951, so that Pyongyang could fund this military expansion. Stalin wrote in response to these three requests in the margin "it is possible" and at the top of the cable to "give an answer today."<sup>64</sup>

Motivating Stalin's decision to expand North Korea's military capabilities was more a desire to ensure the DPRK's survival than to promote aggressive expansion. Regardless of the reasons, Shtykov reported on 10 February that predictably Kim Il Sung received word of the decision "enthusiastically and several times asked me to communicate to Comrade Stalin his gratitude for his assistance." Shtykov informed Kim Il Sung on 12 March that the Soviet government would approve his request to use the 1951 credit during 1950. Three days earlier, Shtykov had transmitted to Moscow a note from Kim Il Sung requesting that the Soviet government send military-technical equipment to North Korea in the amount of 120 to 150 million rubles. This was pursuant to Stalin's approval of his previous request for help in providing an enlarged KPA with arms, ammunition, and technical equipment. In return, the DPRK would send the Soviet Union 9 tons of gold, 40 tons silver, and 15,000 tons in monazite concentrate, worth a total of 133,050,500 rubles. Kim Il Sung asked that the Soviets dispatch the requested military supplies as soon as possible. On 16 March, Shtykov sent Moscow another note from Kim with an attached seven-page list that itemized the KPA's needs in the categories of artillery armaments, ammunition, engineering supplies, military-medical equipment, and military aviation supplies. Kim Il Sung stated his hope that the needs of the "young republic" could be met in the "shortest period."<sup>65</sup>

Kim Il Sung thus applied pressure on the Soviets to expand the DPRK's military even before his meeting with Stalin to gain approval for an invasion. On 18 March 1950, Stalin transmitted his decisions regarding Kim's specific requests, first expressing thanks after learning that the North Korea leader was sending the lead. With respect to weapons, ammunition, and technical equipment, Moscow had "decided also to satisfy fully this request of yours." Shtykov met Kim on 20 March and gave him the text of Stalin's letter, with Pak present for the discussions. After expressing his gratitude, Kim Il Sung said that he and Pak wanted a meeting with Stalin early in April, adding that this would be an unofficial meeting in the same manner as had occurred in 1945. Among the issues they planned to raise were first, the "path and methods of unification of the south and the north of the country," second, "prospects for the economic development of the country," and third, "possibly several party questions." After receiving instructions, Shtykov visited Kim Il Sung on 24 March to inform him that Stalin had approved discussions in Moscow during the first week of April. Kim and Pak left on 30 March.<sup>66</sup>

North Korea's leaders were in Moscow for almost the entire month of April, meeting with Stalin three times. Stalin gave tentative approval for an invasion, outlining his views on preparations for the war. No minutes of the conversations have surfaced, but recollections of those present and foreign ministry reports provide information on what transpired. Stalin confirmed to Kim Il Sung that the "international environment has sufficiently changed to permit a more active stance on the unification of Korea." He pointed to the Communist victory in China as having "improved the environment for actions in Korea"

because Beijing was no longer distracted and "can devote attention and energy to the assistance of Korea." This included the possible use of Chinese troops. Mao's triumph, Stalin elaborated,

is also important psychologically. It has proved the strength of Asian revolutionaries, and shown the weakness of Asian reactionaries and their mentors in the West, in America. Americans left China and did not dare to challenge the new Chinese authorities militarily.

A second factor was the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance. "According to information coming from the United States," Stalin explained, this agreement had made the United States much "more hesitant to challenge the Communists in Asia." "The prevailing [U.S.] mood is not to interfere" because the Soviets now had the atomic bomb and "our positions are solidified in Pyongyang."<sup>67</sup> But he did not mention Acheson's speech.

Despite his decision to authorize planning for an invasion, Stalin still was fearful of US military intervention. In preparation for this contingency, he declared that North Korea could stage an offensive only if the PRC approved. Stalin emphasized the necessity for thorough preparation. He promised to satisfy the need for more mechanized means and weapons for a strike force of fully-equipped attack divisions. He outlined a plan calling for movement of assault troops into position and then announcing a proposal for peaceful reunification. North Korean forces would strike first at Ongjin, "as it will help to disguise who initiated the combat activities," and broaden the front in response to South Korean counterattacks. "The war should be quick and speedy," Stalin stressed. "Southerners and Americans should not have time to come to their senses ... to put up a strong resistance and to mobilize international support." But "Stalin repeated that the USSR was not ready to get involved in Korean affairs directly, especially if Americans did venture to send troops to Korea." Moscow had too many other problems to cope with elsewhere. Kim Il Sung then reiterated that a military victory would be easy, especially because of support from the guerrilla movement and an expected uprising. "Americans won't have time to prepare," he insisted, "and by the time they come to their senses, all the Korean people will be enthusiastically supporting the new government." Stalin instructed the DPRK's Command General Staff to devise concrete plans with the help of Soviet advisors.<sup>68</sup>

Bajanov identifies the Communist victory in China and the Soviet testing of an atomic device as key factors motivating Stalin to approve an invasion of South Korea. But he adds the establishment of NATO and the deterioration of Soviet relations with the United States, as well as "a perceived weakening of Washington's position and of its will to get involved militarily in Asia." He also contends that "Stalin was now more confident of the Communist bloc's strength, less respectful of American capabilities and less interested in the reaction of Western public opinion to communist moves." Soviet records do not provide specific documentary evidence to substantiate his speculations. But Bajanov accurately notes that Stalin did not discuss the issue of initiating a Korean war with Mao. According to Bajanov, he wanted to work out attack plans on his own and then present Beijing with a *fait accompli*. Then "Mao would have no choice but to agree with the invasion and assist it," he writes, adding that while in Moscow, Stalin rejected Mao's

desire to seize Taiwan so it would be difficult to secure approval for Korea earlier in the year.<sup>69</sup> Stalin in fact had opposed aggressive action against both Taiwan and South Korea at the outset of 1950. It was not until April that the Soviet leader decided to authorize preparations for implementing Kim Il Sung's invasion plan. Even then, however, Stalin's fear of US intervention resulted in him imposing a condition that North Korea could not attack without Mao's consent.

Following the April meeting, Moscow and Pyongyang moved energetically to prepare for war. Meanwhile, the United States was expanding not only its commitments in South Korea, but elsewhere in Asia. By May, Congress had approved the first two years of its economic aid package to the ROK and the Truman administration had increased military aid in response to progress toward economic recovery and political stability in South Korea.<sup>70</sup> Certainly, Stalin was aware of this growing US support for the ROK. Undoubtedly, he also knew that Truman and his advisors were studying the recommendations in NSC Paper 68, calling for major increases in defense spending. For both Stalin and Kim, time was running out. By late May, the Soviet military equipment Stalin promised had arrived and North Korea was ready to invade. Kim Il Sung, after inspecting the newly-formed divisions, reported to Shtykov that the KPA would be prepared to launch an offensive at the end of June. He also had approved the specific invasion plan that the North Korean Command General Staff had devised with the advice of Soviet Lieutenant General P. Vasiliev. At first, the Soviets favored an invasion in July, but Kim Il Sung insisted upon late June because he feared Seoul would learn of the attack plans and the July rains would slow the advance. After Vasiliev agreed, Shtykov requested approval for the target date.<sup>71</sup>

While Kim Il Sung was in Moscow, there was progress toward achieving two other important parts of North Korea's invasion plan. Kim Dar Sen, who was a leader in the South Korean guerrilla movement, arrived in Pyongyang on 3 April to report on the status of partisan activities in the south and work out a program for action before and after invasion. In addition, Kim Il Sung had received a report from Li Zhou-yuan, North Korea's ambassador to the PRC, regarding his talks with Mao in Beijing at end of March 1950. Li had raised the possibility of a meeting between Kim and Mao. Mao agreed and suggested the end of April or early in May. China's leader connected the proposed meeting "with the question of the unification of Korea, indicating in this regard that if there is a concrete plan for the unification of Korea, then the meeting should be organized secretly, but if there is not yet such a plan for unification of Korea, then [it] can be conducted officially." Li did not offer a response regarding the date and form of the meeting, explaining that Kim Il Sung was then undergoing medical treatment. Kim in fact was at that moment on his way to Moscow to confer with Stalin. Mao then commented that in the event of another world war, Korea would not escape the fighting. Therefore, Kim had to prepare military for this eventuality. He also voiced the desire to expand trade relations between the PRC and the DPRK.<sup>72</sup>

Kim Il Sung met with Shtykov on 12 May to brief him about what China's leaders had told Ambassador Li. He reported that Zhou Enlai had proposed an official meeting between Mao and Kim. But Mao,

as if asking when you intend to begin the unification of the country, without waiting for an answer stated that if you intend to begin military operations against the south in the near future, then they should not be meeting officially. In such a case the trip should be unofficial.

According to Kim, China's leader

added further that the unification of Korea by peaceful means is not possible, solely military means are required to unify Korea. As regards the Americans, there is no need to be afraid of them. The Americans will not enter a third world war for such a small territory.

Kim Il Sung then told Shtykov that he had received word from Li that day of Mao's approval of a meeting. He and Pak Hon-yong would leave the following morning for Beijing. Kim then stated that he already had issued all orders to prepare for offensive operations and the Command General Staff was implementing them with the target date set for late June. "But he is still not convinced that they will manage it in this period," Shtykov reported.<sup>73</sup> Apparently, Kim Il Sung thought he would not have any trouble persuading Mao Zedong to approve his invasion plan at their upcoming meeting.

Kim Il Sung also outlined to Shtykov the issues he planned to discuss with Mao. First, he would "inform about their intentions about unifying the country by military means and to report about the results of the discussions on this question in Moscow." Second, he "intends to propose that they sign a trade agreement in the nearest future, but that they sign an agreement about friendship after the unification of the country." Third, he would cover "several questions which were placed under discussion with Comrade Stalin ... about the establishment of closer communications between the Central Committee of the labor party of Korea and the communist party of China." Fourth, they would "exchange opinions on several questions which interest both Korea and China such as the electrical station at Suiho, Koreans who live in China and so forth." Kim Il Sung then asked for Shtykov's advice on "what questions he should raise before Mao Zedong from the point of view of assistance in the intended operation." But the Soviet ambassador declined, explaining that Kim had a better idea of his insufficiencies and how China could help him. Kim Il Sung then explained that he had planned to ask for the ammunition for the American and Japanese weapons that returning Koreans had brought with them and also "for some number of horses." After talking to his army chief of staff, however, he had decided that this was not needed. Kim Il Sung then "stated that he doesn't have more requests for Mao about assistance, since all his requests were satisfied in Moscow and the necessary and sufficient assistance was given him there."<sup>74</sup>

Soviet Ambassador in Beijing N.V. Roshchin reported to Stalin the results of the meeting between Kim and Mao on 15 May. Mao approved of Stalin's three-stage plan, but pointed out that Moscow's agreement with the United States on the 38th parallel precluded Soviet involvement. He then stressed that it was necessary to prepare the KPA well for the forthcoming operation. He recommended to Kim that the KPA, following the Chinese Communist army's example, "must act swiftly, go around big cities not wasting time on



their takeover, concentrating their efforts on destroying the armed force of the adversary." Mao asked about possible intervention of Japanese troops. Kim Il Sung thought this was "not very probable," but speculated that "the Americans might decide to send to Korea 20-30,000 Japanese soldiers." If this happened, however, the "Koreans would be fighting in such a case even tougher." Mao was more cautious, pointing out that Japanese participation might prolong the war. More important, it was "not so much the Japanese, as the Americans themselves who could interfere ...." Kim then repeated Stalin's assertion that the Americans "left China without fighting; the same approach can be expected in Korea."<sup>75</sup> After receiving this summary, Stalin cabled Roshchin that after "the big cause of the liberation and unification of Korea has been completed, the treaty [of friendship and alliance] should be signed," arguing that this step would "solidify the successes of the Korean comrades and prevent foreign interference in Korean affairs."<sup>76</sup>

"Unfortunately," Bajanov writes, the final period (May-June 1950) before the attack is not well documented ....<sup>77</sup> But existing evidence shows that North Korea began to concentrate forces near the 38th parallel on 12 June and concluded offensive deployment eleven days later in accordance with the prescribed plan. "The planning of the operation at the divisional level and the reconnaissance of the area," Shtykov reported later, "was carried out with the participation of Soviet advisors."<sup>78</sup> There was a

special meeting for commanders of divisions and of the first echelon. At this meeting specific and concrete assignments were given to each formation. Special stress was put on keeping total secrecy of the preliminary arrangements. The adversary's intelligence must not learn anything through ground operations or from the air.

As the target date drew near, Stalin still was concerned about possible US military intervention. He approved the use of Soviet ships to transport KPA forces staging amphibious landings, but prohibited participation of Soviet personnel "because it may give the adversary a pretext for interference by the USA." Then, on 21 June, Shtykov informed Stalin that a sudden South Korean military buildup on the Ongjin peninsula indicated awareness of the impending attack. Pyongyang wanted approval to expand the assault along the whole border in a full-scale offensive. Stalin gave his consent, altering dramatically the character of the war that began on 25 June 1950.<sup>79</sup>

Acheson's National Press Club speech had no perceptible impact on the events leading to the outbreak of the Korean War. Until the moment North Korea attacked South Korea, Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong worried about US military intervention. Kim Il Sung displayed remarkable political talent, as he manipulated his patrons into supporting his plan for invasion. He was able to persuade Stalin and Mao that his forces would achieve victory before the United States could intervene not because the Americans would not act to save South Korea. Stalin still hesitated, making his approval contingent on the Chinese endorsing the invasion. Again, Kim manipulated his patrons. When he arrived in Beijing in May 1950, North Korea's leader told Mao that Stalin had said "North Korea can move toward actions," but "this question should be discussed with China ...." Replying to a request for clarification, Stalin informed Mao of his instructions to Kim "that the question should be decided finally by the Chinese and Korean comrades together, and in case of

disagreement by the Chinese comrades the decision on the question should be postponed until a new discussion."<sup>80</sup> Mao gave his reluctant consent, but Stalin had authorized only a limited offensive to seize Ongjin. Predictably, Kim exploited Stalin's exaggerated estimates of South Korea's strength and fears of a protracted war bringing US intervention to secure approval for the full-scale offensive to achieve reunification he had wanted all along.

Some scholars have relied on the released Soviet documents to revive traditional interpretations of the Korean War. For example, Soh Jin-chull writes in a recent paper that "clearly ... the Korean War was 'initiated' and 'realized' by Stalin with the cooperation of Communist China." As part of a "collective conspiracy," he concludes, "it was the North Korean Communist counterpart who loyally obeyed and executed this War."<sup>81</sup> Similarly, writers have attempted to attribute Stalin's decision to support an invasion of South Korea to Acheson's Press Club speech. Kim Hakjoon claims that when Stalin referred during his April meeting with Kim Il Sung to favorable changes in the international environment, he "probably had in mind the speech given ... by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson three months earlier in January, 1950."<sup>82</sup> According to James G. Hershberger, Acheson's speech "may have been seen in Moscow as lending credence to the argument that Washington would not intervene militarily to rescue South Korea from being overrun."<sup>83</sup> "The timing of Stalin's approval," Weathersby initially concluded in 1995, "must therefore have been at least in part a response to the new defense policy ... that placed South Korea outside the American defense perimeter in the Pacific."<sup>84</sup> But Soviet documents do not sustain this interpretation, not least because just one of them even mentions the Press Club speech.

Stalin thought US military intervention was possible until the very day the Korean War began. But he authorized North Korea's invasion because he feared that delay would give South Korea the chance to stage an offensive to destroy the DPRK at some future date. His anxiety about the North Korea's weakness, though unfounded, had been the principal reason for his refusal to approve an offensive since late 1948. In the spring of 1950, Stalin could not have ignored signs that US policy in Asia was stiffening. "In his mind," Weathersby writes of Stalin, "the American failure to ensure a Guomindang victory in China indicated that Washington 'was not ready' to intervene in Korea, rather than that it had abandoned its intention to take over the North at a more propitious moment."<sup>85</sup> North Korea's conquest of the ROK would remove this possibility. Finally, as Nikita Khrushchev recalled later, "Stalin couldn't oppose the idea [of invading South Korea] since it would undermine his reputation as a staunch defender of revolutionary movements."<sup>86</sup> For the same reason, Acheson was confident Stalin would not permit Kim Il Sung to attempt reunification through military means because open aggression would confirm the charges of Soviet imperialism he had made in his National Press Club speech. Ironically, the Korean War began not because Stalin knew the United States would not intervene, but rather because he feared it would do so before North Korea eliminated the gravest threat to its survival.

## Endnotes

1. Dean G. Acheson, Albert Wedemeyer, and Louis A. Johnson, Testimony to US Congress, 81st Congress, 1st Session, *US Senate Joint Committee on Armed Services and Foreign Relations*, Hearings held May-June, 1951, pp. 1672-75, 2286, and 2578-79.
2. Harry S. Truman Statement and Dean G. Acheson Clarification, 5 January 1950, US Department of State *Bulletin* [hereafter, DSB] 22 (16 January 1950), pp. 23-24.
3. Ronald L. McGlothlen writes that the "much misunderstood" National Press Club speech was Dean G. Acheson's "defensive political gambit" that Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson had compelled him to write to silence Republican criticism of administration policy in China. It merely repeated past policy, he writes, while leaving the US military in control of policy toward South Korea. Ronald L. McGlothlen, *Controlling the Waves: Dean Acheson and U.S. Foreign Policy in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993), pp. 73-74.
4. James I. Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), pp. 151-205.
5. Dean G. Acheson, "Crisis in Asia - An Examination of United States Policy," *DSB* 22 (16 January 1950), pp. 111-16.
6. *Ibid.*; See also, Dean G. Acheson comments, 13 February 1954, Princeton Seminars, reel 1, tape 2, Dean G. Acheson papers, Harry S. Truman Library [hereafter HSTL], Independence, MO., p. 2.
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8. John J. Muccio Oral History Interview Transcript, 10 February 1971, HSTL, p. 16; *New York Times*, 2 March 1949, p. 22.
9. Tang Tsou, *America's Failure in China, 1941-1950* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 536. See also, Russell D. Buhite, "'Major Interests': American Policy Toward China, Taiwan, and Korea, 1945-1950," *Pacific Historical Review* 47, no. 3 (August 1978), pp. 425-51; Richard Whelan, *Drawing the Line: The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1990), pp. 86-88.
10. Quoted in Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman, 1949-1953* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), p. 221.

11. Dean G. Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), pp. 354-58, 691. According to John Merrill, Acheson rewrote his Press Club speech on the night before he would deliver it. The address thus did not undergo normal State Department vetting. John Merrill, *Korea: The Peninsular Origins of the War* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1989), p. 166. Bruce Cumings records that Acheson, on the day of the address, spent "all morning at home working on [the] speech." Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol II: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 420.
12. Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs, Vol II: Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956).
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14. Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 322; Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), p. 12.
15. Robert T. Oliver, *Why War Came in Korea* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1950), p. 8. See also, Edgar O'Ballance, *Korea: 1950-1953* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1969), p. 28. Four decades later, Robert T. Oliver had altered his assessment somewhat, merely adding Secretary of State Acheson's name to a list of other US leaders who were vocalizing an established US policy of withdrawal. Robert T. Oliver, *A History of the Korean People in Modern Times: 1800 to the Present* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1993), p. 222.
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