Mao Zedong’s Erroneous Decision During the Korean War: China’s Rejection of the UN Cease-fire Resolution in Early 1951

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Previous studies of the Korean War have given much attention to the armistice negotiations that started in July 1951. Little has been written of the peacemaking efforts between the time of China’s entry into the war in October 1950 and the creation of the United Nations cease-fire resolution in early January 1951. Relying on Chinese, Russian, and US archival sources, in particular Mao Zedong’s recently published military papers and Chinese foreign ministry archives, this article examines China’s views and policies toward the UN resolution. It argues that Mao made an erroneous decision not to accept the UN resolution in January 1951. Because of the mistake, China completely lost its advantage on the Korean battlefield and in the international arena. Keywords: China, Korean War, Mao Zedong, Chinese foreign policy in Korea.

Getting involved in the Korean War was the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) first attempt to participate in managing international affairs and resolving crises on its periphery. But sixty years later, the crisis on the Korean peninsula still has not been resolved. It has become one of the two toughest security issues for China, along with the Taiwan issue. From a historical perspective, it is imperative to reassess China’s policies during the war—in particular, how to make effective use of both military power and diplomacy in turn and how to alternate between war and negotiations.

The Korean War lasted for more than three years, two-thirds of which involved negotiating while fighting. Previous studies have given much attention to the study of the armistice negotiations that started at Kaesong in July 1951 and continued at Panmunjom (Xia 2006). But little has been written on the peacemaking efforts between...
the time of China’s entry into the war in October 1950 and the creation of the United Nations (UN) cease-fire resolution in early January 1951 (Chen 2001, 88–96; Qi and Liu 1998; Shen 2000; Shen 2001). This is a major gap in the scholarship. Relying on Chinese, Russian, and US archival sources, in particular Mao’s recently published military papers and Chinese foreign ministry archives, this article examines China’s views and policies toward the UN resolutions on a Korean War cease-fire. It argues that Mao made an erroneous decision in turning down the UN cease-fire resolution in January 1951. Because of the mistake, China completely lost its advantage on the Korean battlefield and in the international arena. It forced China into a passive situation politically, diplomatically, and militarily.

Mao’s Decision Not to Negotiate Before Chinese Soldiers Crossed the Thirty-eighth Parallel

China’s War Aims

To both Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, the thirty-eighth parallel served as an important demarcation line and condition for China’s entry into the Korean War. When he first discussed the issue of China’s sending troops to Korea, Stalin’s prerequisite was “when the enemy crosses the thirty-eighth parallel [headed north]” (Archive of the President of the Russian Federation [APRF], 1950, d. 331, l. 79). This statement is also verified by Chinese sources. On July 9, 1950, when relaying the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) center’s instruction at an expanded meeting of the East China Bureau, Liu Xiao, second secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Committee of the CCP, reported that when the United States counterattacked and crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, the Chinese army would assist the Korean people “to drive the U.S. imperialists out [of Korea]” (Liu 2001). When the war stalemated along the Nakdong River, Mao, on several occasions, indicated his willingness to send Chinese troops. He planned to have the Chinese soldiers wear the (North) Korean People’s Army (KPA) uniforms and fight together with its soldiers. But Stalin turned Mao down on the grounds that the timing was not ripe (Shen 2010; Bajanov 1995/1996, 88–89).