

Identify and analyse critically the strategic approaches adopted by China during the Korean War 1950-53.

Introduction

The Korean War (1950-1953) was the first extensive conflict to disrupt the world order that emerged after World War II (WWII), known as the Cold War. It was a highly destructive strife, which not only inflicted heavy casualties but permanently changed the course of world history. Undoubtedly, the conflict reached a major scale after China's intervention in favour of the North Koreans, who were fighting against the South, which was backed by a United Nations military alliance, led by the United States (US).

For China, the war did not represent an opportunity to access economic resources. On the contrary, it was a costly enterprise for a country that was "weak and divided".¹ Korean internal issues were the causes of the conflict, and China did not claim for any territory beyond its frontier. Thus, what motivated China to take the political decision to enter the war? Why was the Chinese involvement so intense and aggressive? What were China's intentions beyond protecting its territory from possibly being affected by the conflict? Were the approximate 900 thousand Chinese casualties worth it?² In this context, the purpose of this essay is to identify and analyse the strategic approaches adopted by China to understand the rationale of its behaviour during the Korean War.

First, it will be briefly explained how the war was initiated. Then, the political objectives of the Chinese grand strategy will be identified, as well as the threats and opportunities that the Korean War represented to China's security, stability, and prosperity.³ These elements will be used in the subsequent analysis to understand the Chinese decision to enter the conflict and their logic of war, which indeed reflected the strategic approaches adopted. Finally, the conclusion will suggest that

¹ Callum A. MacDonald, *Korea, the war before Vietnam*. (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 6.

² Ibid, 261.

³ The Royal College of Defence Studies, *Getting Strategy Right (Enough)*, (London: The Royal College of Defence Studies, 2017), 15.

strategic culture and the personality of the Chinese leader (Mao Tse-Tung) had a decisive role in the course of actions.

The prelude to the war

After the end of WWII, Korea was under the control of the United States of America (US) and the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). These states deployed forces in Korea to conduct the withdrawal of the defeated Japanese troops that had occupied that Korean peninsula during the war. In the Potsdam Conference (1945), both superpowers agreed to divide Korea in two zones from the 38th parallel. The Soviet forces were responsible for the security of the northern part, whilst the Americans were in charge of the southern one. Over the following four years, all attempts to devolve the control of the country to the Koreans failed because there was a strong division between the two opposing ideologies implanted in the country: communism, embraced and defended by the Soviets, and the western liberal democracy, preached by the Americans.

In June 1950, after the withdrawal of Soviet and American forces from the peninsula, North-Korean troops launched a large-scale invasion towards the south. Immediately, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) was summoned and a resolution was promulgated. A coalition of 19 states, led by the US, was formed to provide military assistance to the South Koreans. In November, when the UN forces reversed the military situation and the North Koreans had withdrawn to the North, China entered the conflict to come to their aid and the “first major hot war of the Cold War erupted”.⁴ The decision came from its leader, Mao Tse-Tung (Mao), Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the strategy designer of the newly proclaimed People’s Republic of China (PRC).

PRC Grand Strategy: political objectives

It is necessary to extract, from the strategic context, what the Chinese grand strategic political objectives were. This is important because these goals are intrinsically related to the desired end-state, providing “purpose, focus, and justification for the actions embodied in a strategy”.⁵ The analysis that follows suggests that the PRC grand strategy was underpinned by three main political goals.

⁴ Chen Jian, “From Mao to Deng: China’s Changing Relations with the United States”, *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper 92 (2019):7, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/cwihp_wp_92_chen_jian_from_mao_to_deng_chinas_changing_relations_with_us_november_2019_0.pdf.

⁵ Harry R. Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy*, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 7-9.

In October 1949, the CCP established the PRC, after a long and violent internal battle against the nationalist party. The nationalist leaders were banished and fled to the Formosa Island (Taiwan) to establish the Republic of China. However, party sympathizers were still present on the mainland, striving to reverse the political situation and destabilize Mao's government. Arguably, one of the political objectives of Mao was to strengthen the communist regime implemented by the CCP in China, and also to eliminate the nationalist insurgents still on the continent. The stability of the state and the maintenance of the new government depended on the accomplishment of this aim.

A second clear objective resulted from historical factors. China had faced, since the XVII century, significant and undesirable external influence. In particular, the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, which started in 1937 and which was enhanced during WWII, contributed to the Chinese repulsion to any kind of external control. It suggests that the assurance of absolute sovereignty over its territory was a non-negotiable political aim of Mao's government. Furthermore, the CCP deeply wanted to be free to conduct the state according to Chinese values (since then, Chinese communist values), without any external interference, to guarantee the security of the PRC.

The third objective relates to geopolitical aspects. Internationally, communist China was not well-viewed by the Western capitalist states, particularly the US. For instance, in June 1950 the United Nations, influenced by the US, did not consider it legitimate for the Chinese communist government to represent the country in an emergency meeting of its Security Council.⁶ It is reasonable to speculate that the CCP wanted recognition, not just internally but from the other actors in the international system.

From a strategic perspective, it may be argued that this political goal is also related to security and stability. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the norms and dynamics of the Cold War were not yet clearly set and the blocs of states were still being formed. To play the 'Great Game', China had to be viewed by other actors as a strong ally or as an imponent opponent. Thus, it is also appropriate to propose that the prosperity of China also depended on international recognition.

Finally, there is one aspect that is crucial to understand the Chinese political context at that time: the role of Mao himself. The Chinese leader was "the only real decision-maker in Beijing", and his rationality did not reflect the "Western thinking about Global politics".⁷ His mind was a product of his culture and personal history and his decisions reflected that. Indeed, as Gray asserts, "all

⁶ William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: a new diplomatic and strategic history* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 62-63.

⁷ Bruce Reidel, "Catastrophe on the Yalu river: America's Intelligence Failure in Korea", *The Brookings Institute*, 13 Sept. 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/13/catastrophe-on-the-yalu-americas-intelligence-failure-in-korea/>.

strategic behaviour is a cultural behaviour”.⁸ This aspect will become prominent throughout this paper.

The Korean War: threats to Chinese national security

The classical thesis proposes that the Chinese intervention in Korea was just grounded on security issues, as upheld by authors such as Allen S. Whiting.⁹ Even though more recent research presents a more complex set of motivations that influenced the Chinese decision to go to war, the threats to its national security remain a crucial aspect, as Stueck develops in his work.¹⁰ Ultimately, these include the threat of a potential invasion of Chinese territory, due to the proximity of potential enemies who were fighting the conflict.

Indeed, the theatre of operations was the Korean territory and its geographical characteristics influenced the Chinese decision-making. As Baker observes, from a military viewpoint, the Korean peninsula was the arena where external powers balanced “each other in order to deal with the dual security threats from maritime and land-based neighbours”.¹¹ First, it may be supposed that Mao and his advisors took into consideration the lack of natural insurmountable barriers between its territory and Korea. The Yalu river hallmarked the frontier, but there were bridges that could be utilized to cross it.

Secondly, inside the Korean territory there was also no significant natural obstacle that could deter the South-North flux of military troops, as was seen in the movements of the UN and North Korean armies throughout 1950, before China entered the war.¹² Mao might have observed with major concern the speed at which the allied forces advanced towards the Chinese frontier. Indeed, as Stueck observes, the 38th parallel was just a line on the map.¹³

⁸ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129.

⁹ Chalmers A. Johnson, Review of *China Crosses the Yalu, the Decision to Enter the Korean War*, by Allen S. Whiting, *The China Quarterly* n°9 (Jan. – Mar. 1962): 200-204, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651702>.

¹⁰ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 87-117.

¹¹ Rodger Baker, “Beyond Brinkmanship: Geographical Constraints and North Korea's Evolving Tactics”, *North Korean Review* vol. 4, no. 2 (2008), 84, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908782>.

¹² *Ibid*, 87.

¹³ Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War*, 12.

Finally, the PRC was concerned about the presence of US military forces in Japan. The alliance of a traditional enemy with a new one was an undesirable situation that could compromise its security. Due to the confrontation with the USSR, the US enhanced its presence in Japan to contain the communist spread in the region, an initiative that was materialized by the Mutual Security Treaty, signed by both countries, that enabled the US to deploy military troops in Japanese territory.¹⁴ The US was China's ally during the two World Wars of the 20th century. However, this situation changed dramatically after the end of WWII. As Jian observed, "when the Chinese communists defeated the Nationalists in the civil war, China and the US quickly turned from allies to bitter enemies".¹⁵ It is likely that Mao looked at this situation with military lenses and became highly concerned about the security threats that the American-Japanese alliance represented.

The Korean War: vulnerabilities and opportunities

The decision to enter the war in Korea also had internal motivations. The Chinese communist revolution was based on an ideological discourse that embodied the hope for a nation that was tired of the long civil war. Mao knew that if the "new doctrines were not understood" by the Chinese population, the PRC would fail to bring peace and stability to the country.¹⁶ Therefore, from his perspective, Communism was a means to consolidate power, and it had to be supported and protected at any cost.

Revisionist studies consider that the psychological, institutional and domestic political aspects related to the Chinese communist regime were decisive for China to enter the war.¹⁷ An attack against this ideology could destabilize the whole nation and, presumably, was seen as a dangerous threat. In this regard, Mao's communist ideas for China opposed US foreign policy. The so-called "Truman Doctrine" aimed to deter the expansion of communist regimes all over the world.¹⁸ Indeed, as evidenced by Garver, what probably upset Mao and worried the CCP leaders was the ostensive support the US was giving to the nationalists in Taiwan: those who could initiate

¹⁴ Ibid, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid, 6.

¹⁶ Jonathan Fenby, *History of Modern China: The fall and rise of a great power (1850-2009)*, (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 353.

¹⁷ Chao Guo and Rongrong Ren, "Learning and Problem Representation in Foreign Policy Decision-Making: China's Decision to Enter the Korean War Revisited", *Public Administration Quarterly* (2003):278.

¹⁸ Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the character of Nations and the course of History* (London: Allen Lane, 2014), 287.

a counter-revolutionary movement in mainland China.¹⁹ Arguably, the war in Korea was seen as a vulnerability to the stability of the communist regime.

Furthermore, the prospect of having a neighbouring country controlled by Western states was also an opportunity to boost and consolidate the CCP power over the Chinese society.²⁰ Once the nationalists withdrew to Taiwan, it may be speculated that the regime, whose legitimacy was built through violence and fighting, needed another enemy to keep the people united under the leadership of the CCP. The US and the Western states could perform this role. This means that, on the one hand, the anti-communist American speech signalled a menace to Chinese stability; but on the other hand, it was also a cohesion factor to maintain the communist regime.

Lastly, regarding geopolitical aspects, a wide-ranging military support to the communist North Korean forces was also an ostensive manner to demonstrate the strong Chinese willingness to be recognized as an important player in the international system. Considering the Chinese involvement in Korea, Riedel argues that one of Mao's purposes was to obtain some influence and "control of the communist movement worldwide".²¹ Favouring this perspective, Jian advocates that a possible military victory in Korea would be a message to the world that "China had indeed stood up".²² Arguably, the intervention in the Korean War was also a Chinese struggle to build up its geopolitical dimension in East Asia.

Mao's decisions and the logic of war

The positional strategy adopted by the PRC to achieve the proposed political objectives related to the war in Korea was a substantial military intervention in that conflict. As established, the situation in Korea represented dangerous threats to PRC security and stability. It was also an opportunity to increase its prosperity. The lack of international recognition in the UNSC diminished the feasibility to use of diplomatic means. Furthermore, the weak economy also indicated that any kind of coercion or negotiation in this dimension was impossible. Thus, a military initiative was the only strategic option remaining to mitigate the mentioned threats.

Once the decision to enter the conflict was taken, the Chinese strategy followed a peculiar logic. Some concepts of the Theory of Victory offered by Bartholomees could amplify the

¹⁹ John W. Garver, *The Sino-American Alliance: Nationalist China and American Cold War Strategy in Asia* (London: Routledge, 2015), 1.

²⁰ Jian, "From Mao to Deng", 7.

²¹ Reidel, "Catastrophe on the Yalu river".

²² Jian, "From Mao to Deng", 7.

understanding of this matter.²³ Firstly, it must be understood that the victory in a war may not be merely ensured by the number of casualties, or territories conquered and lost.²⁴ Sometimes these parameters do not indicate whether the political goals are being reached or not. It seems that Mao understood this really well, and considered that any sacrifice on the battlefield was worthy to achieve the political objectives of the PRC grand strategy. Indeed, Mao himself wrote that “every war exacts a price, sometimes an extremely high one”.²⁵

The second observation is based on the perception that it was not credible that China could achieve a final military victory in the conflict and expel the allied troops from the Korean peninsula. For instance, many intelligence appraisals indicated that a Chinese intervention in Korea was unlikely because the PRC was not in any condition to confront the UN forces, and this was not a reasonable decision.²⁶ It is plausible to suggest that Mao also comprehended this reality, but he could have understood that victory was more than a set of positive results on the battlefield. If winning may mean only “not losing”, as proposed by Liddell Hart, the endurance of the conflict could be, per se, a victory.²⁷ In that regard, it is possible to speculate that the sacrifice of thousands of soldiers was a worthy cause in Mao’s evaluation, since the political objectives were being reached. Indeed, during the war, the Chinese leader approved the six major offensives against the allied forces, two took place during the armistice negotiations. From a western perspective, the morality and ethics of such decisions are questionable, but the cultural context and the strategic view of Mao must be taken into consideration.

In that sense, Mao’s military-strategic decisions were strongly influenced by Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*.²⁸ He understood that the ancient Chinese military tradition was the key to defeating his opponents, as it had been for thousands of years. As it may be observed, Mao’s writings contain many citations of that book.²⁹ Kissinger makes it evident when he asserts that the Chinese major offensives during the Korean War reflect some principles of Sun Tzu’s work because they aimed to affect the enemy’s psychological resilience.

²³ J. Boone Bartholomees, “Theory of Victory”, *Theory of War and Strategy*, 3rd edition (2008): 79-94. <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/1964.pdf>.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 92.

²⁵ Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writing of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1972), 155.

²⁶ Christian H. Heller, “Failure to Communicate: U.S. Intelligence Structure and the Korean War”, *The Strategy Bridge Journal*, Feb. 6, 2018.

²⁷ Bartholomees, “Theory of Victory”, 85.

²⁸ Kissinger, *World Order*, 294.

²⁹ Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writing of Mao Tse-Tung*.

Conclusion

This essay has shown the importance of understanding the strategic circumstances that drove China during the Korean War. As established, the PRC was a new-born state in 1950, and the objectives of its grand strategy were to consolidate the communist regime, to ensure absolute sovereignty over its territory, and to gain international recognition. The war that started in Korea brought dangerous threats to China. First, the lack of natural barriers to contain the conflict in Korea and the presence of western capitalist military forces were a menace to its security. Second, from a broader perspective, it manifested the clash of the two opposing ideologies. To Mao, an attack against communism represented a risk to Chinese stability. However, the conflict also meant an opportunity to show the world that China was standing up again.

In conclusion, this essay has argued that geographical, historical and ideological factors influenced the strategic context and induced Mao to establish his political goals. The decision to enter the war and the aggressive behaviour that the PRC adopted during the conflict reflected how determined Mao was to achieve his objectives. His decisions should be understood from a Chinese cultural perspective. Furthermore, Mao's personality and personal background should be taken into consideration to understand the Chinese strategic approach and the rationality of his decisions during the Korean War.

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