**Soviet View of The Origins of the Korean War** - An Interpretation from the Soviet Archives- Evgueni Bajanov

This article is based on recently declassified Soviet archives. The article was originally presented by Dr. Evgeni Bajanov to the conference on "The Korean War, An assessment of the Historical Record," 24-25 July 1995, Georgetown Univ., Washington, D.C. Dr. Evgueni Bajanov is Director of the Institute for Contemporary International Problems, Russian Foreign Ministry, Moscow, Russia. Only the first three of ten sections of his article are shown.

1. Stalin fears an attack from the South

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 he did everything to avoid provoking Washington and Seoul. In 1947-1948 Soviet leaders still believed in the possibility of a unification of Korea, and refused to sign a separate friendship and cooperation treaty with North Korean leader Kim II Sung. (1) In the beginning of 1949 the Soviet embassy began to alert the Kremlin to the growing number of violations of the 38th parallel by South Korean police and armed force. On 3 February 1949 Soviet Ambassador to North Korea Shtykov bitterly complained that the North Koreans did not have enough trained personnel, adequate weapons and sufficient number of bullets to rebuff intensifying incursions from the South. Receiving Kim II Sung in the Kremlin on 5 March 194, Stalin showed an open concern about growing pressure from the opponent in the vicinity of the 38th parallel and emphatically told Kim "The 38th parallel must be peaceful. It is very important." (2)

After Kim's return to North Korea, the situation did not improve. On 17 April 1949, Stalin informed his ambassador of an imminent attack from the South. The Soviet ambassador confirmed that a large-scale war was being prepared by Seoul with the help of Americans and raised alarm about the inability of North Korean troops to withstand the aggression. (3) In May-August 1949 the Kremlin and Pyongyang continued to exchange data about a possible attack from the South. The USSR was clearly afraid of such an attack, and was nervous not knowing pondered how to prevent the war. Stalin repeatedly castigated Ambassador Shtykov for failing to do everything in his power to maintain peace on the 38th parallel. (4)

2. Kim insists on war. Stalin disagrees.

While Stalin tried to prevent a war in Korea in 1949, the North Korean leadership increasingly put pressure on the Kremlin, demanding permission to liberate the South. On 7 March 1949, while talking to Stalin in Moscow, Kim II Sung said: "We believe that the situation makes it necessary and possible to liberate the whole country through military means." The Soviet leader disagreed, citing the military weakness of the North, the USSR-USA agreement on the 38th parallel and the possibility of American intervention. Stalin added that only if the adversary attacked Pyongyang, North Korea could they try military unification by launching a counter attack. "Then," the Kremlin chief explained, "your move will be understood and supported by everyone." (5)

In August and again in September 1949, North Korean leaders resumed pressure on Moscow. hoping to convince it that: a) peaceful reunification was totally impossible; b) the Korean people wanted liberation and would not understand if the chance for reunification was missed; c) Northern armed forces were superior to the Southern army; d) after the withdrawal of American troops from Korea, the 38th parallel lost its meaning; e) Seoul had postponed its plans for an overall offensive against the North and use of a counterattack for re-unification was no longer possible. (6)

 Finally Stalin ordered a new appraisal of the situation in Korea, sending, on 11 September 1949, instructions to the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang to study the military, political and international aspects of a possible attack on the South. The embassy gave a negative view on the matter (14 September 1949) and on 24 September 1949, the CPSU CC Politburo rejected the appeal of the North Koreans to start the war, concluding that the North Korean army was not prepared for such an attack militarily, that "little has been done to raise the South Korean masses to an active struggle," and that an unprovoked attack by the North "would give the Americans a pretext for all kinds of interference into Korean affairs." (7)

As can be seen from this Politburo document, Moscow no longer flatly rejected the idea of military reunification of Korea. Instead it called upon Pyongyang to become better prepared for the operation. Evidently couraged by this shift in the Kremlin's mood, the North Korean leadership increased pressure to win Soviet support for the war. On 17 January 1950, Kim II Sung complained to Soviet ambassador Shtykov: "I can't sleep at night because I am thinking of the unification of the whole country. If the cause...is postponed, then I may lose the confidence of the Korean people." Kim II Sung requested permission to make a new visit to the USSR to receive "orders and permission" from Stalin for the offensive. (8)

3. Stalin blesses the invasion

After ambassador Shtykov informed Moscow of this wave of demands by Pyongyang, Stalin (on 30 January 1950) replied (through diplomatic channels): "I understand the unhappiness of comrade Kim II 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." (9) So, Stalin finally took the decision to initiate preparations for the war. At exactly the same time that the above-mentioned exchange of cables between Moscow and Pyongyang took place, Mao Zedong was present in the Soviet capital. Stalin discussed with Mao the Korean situation, but according to all available data the Soviet dictator never mentioned to the Chinese guest his decision to launch an attack on the South as well as his invitation to Kim II Sung to come to Moscow.

Kim II Sung and his delegation spent almost all of April 1950 in the Soviet Union. The first issue on the agenda was: ways and methods of unification of Korea through military means. (10) Stalin gave his approval to an invasion of the South and outlined his view on how the war had to be prepared. Unfortunately, memorandums of conversations between Stalin and Kim in April 1950 have not been found as yet in the Russian archives. However, from some secondary sources (testimonies of people involved in the negotiations, reports of the Foreign Ministry of the USSR), and from earlier and later statements and positions of Moscow and Pyongyang, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Stalin changed his mind on the Korean war because of: a) the victory of the communists in China; b) the Soviet acquisition of the atom bomb (first tested by Moscow in August 1949); c) the establishment of NATO and general aggravation of Soviet relations with the West; and d) a perceived weakening of Washington's position and of its will to become militarily involved in Asia.

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.

2. Stalin did not consult Mao in advance because he wanted to work out the plans for the Korean war himself without Chinese interference and objections and then present Beijing with a fait accompli when Mao would have no choice but to agree with the invasion and assist it. While in Moscow Mao insisted on the liberation of Taiwan. Stalin was negative to the idea. It would be hard for Stalin to convince Mao in Moscow to help the Koreans before the Chinese had completed the reunification of their own country.