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Donggil Kim. "Prelude to War? The Repatriation of Koreans from the Chinese PLA, 1949-50."

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Review by **Balázs Szalontai**, Kwangwoon University

On the basis of newly accessible Chinese and Russian archival materials, Donggil Kim's article critically re-examines the view that the repatriation of ethnic Korean divisions from the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to North Korea in 1949-1950 was a manifestation of a strong reciprocal relationship between the Chinese and North Korean Communist leaders, and that this Chinese step possibly indicated Beijing's consent, or even active support, for Kim Il Sung's planned invasion of South Korea. The author carefully investigates both the composition of these units and the international context in which the decision to repatriate them was made, paying due attention not only to Chinese and North Korean motives but also Soviet ones. The article describes the process of repatriation in great detail, revealing that the troops involved were composed of ethnic Koreans whom the PLA had recruited in Northeast China rather than returning units of the North Korean armed forces (as was previously believed).

Earlier scholarly publications which covered the issue of repatriation, despite otherwise quite marked differences between the 'conservative' and 'revisionist' interpretations of the origins of the Korean War, were considerably in agreement with each other in that they regarded this Chinese step as a factor that ultimately facilitated – and possibly even encouraged – North Korea's attack on the South, both in a material and a political sense.¹ While Kim focuses his attention on the statements that Bruce Cumings has made on this subject in "The Origins of the Korean War," it is worth mentioning that some other scholars, on the basis of additional sources not accessible to Cumings, also came to a similar

¹ See, among others, Bruce Cumings, *The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950: The Origins of the Korean War*. Vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 445-448, 619; Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 106-111; and William Stueck, *The Korean War. An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 29.

conclusion. For instance, Chen Jian, having interviewed such Chinese researchers as Hu Guangzheng, Xu Yan, and Qi Dexue, summed up the effect of the repatriation process as follows: “The offensive capacity of [the] North Korean Communists was thus tremendously increased.”²

Similarly, the scholarly debates over the question as to whether China’s military commitment to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) served primarily defensive aims or the purpose of revolutionary expansion rarely questioned the strength of this commitment. In the light of the decades-long history of close contacts between the Chinese and Korean Communist movements, it indeed seemed plausible that in 1947, Sino-DPRK cooperation did include the massive dispatch of North Korean soldiers to China to assist the PLA in its struggle against the Guomindang (GMD) forces – as Cumings, on the basis of inaccurate U.S. intelligence reports, declared, and that in 1949-1950, the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were ready to reciprocate this much-needed assistance by supporting Kim Il Sung vis-à-vis the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States.

Kim challenges these assumptions on the following grounds: First of all, he provides ample and convincing documentary evidence that in 1945-1948, the PLA’s ethnic Korean units were of local (i.e., Manchurian), rather than North Korean origin. Thanks to his discovery of the unpublished memoirs of Han Cheong, a former leader of the CCP-affiliated Korean Volunteer Army (KVA), Kim unearthed some particularly interesting information about how in October 1945 the joint opposition of Kim Il Sung and the Soviet occupation forces prevented the KVA Vanguard Column – which Zhu De, the commander-in-chief of the 8th PLA Army, had instructed to participate in the liberation of Korea – from entering Soviet-controlled North Korea. Unable to return to their motherland, the ethnic Korean units, beefed up by new recruits, were subsequently sent to the northeastern and northern fronts of the Chinese Civil War, where they carried out those operations which the U.S. military intelligence service (G-2) mistakenly attributed to North Korean troops. Kim clearly demonstrates his familiarity with the organizational evolution, deployment, and troop strength of these forces by enumerating not only division-level units but also various specific brigades, detachments, and regiments. Furthermore, he double-checks his calculations by providing reliable archival information about the number and size of the North Korean military units established in 1946-1949, from which he draws the logical conclusion that in 1947, Pyongyang simply could not have transferred as many soldiers to China as G-2 believed.

Having pointed out that Kim Il Sung neither welcomed the early return of the CCP-affiliated ethnic Korean units nor did he dispatch his own soldiers to China in 1947, Kim also implies that the significance of North Korea’s pre-1950 “China connection” (a term coined by Cumings) should not be overestimated. In the abstract of his article, he maintains “that at no time did North Korea dispatch troops to Northeast China in order to help Chinese communists in the Chinese Civil War, showing the limits of both reciprocity and fraternal

² Chen, *China’s Road to the Korean War*, p. 110.

socialism in the Sino-North Korean relationship” (227). Nonetheless, North Korea’s logistical and economic contribution to the PLA operations in Manchuria – a subject that Kim mentions only passingly in the penultimate paragraph of his article – seems to have been important enough to reinforce the Sino-North Korean partnership even if North Korea did not send its own troops to the Chinese battlefields. As Chen Jian notes, “Without the assistance of the North Korean Communists, CCP forces in southern Manchuria could have been totally destroyed by the GMD.”³

Second, Kim stresses that the repatriation of ethnic Korean units was originally motivated by defensive, rather than offensive considerations. Similarly to the observations made by Evgueni Bajanov,⁴ he points out that in April 1949 – at which time Pyongyang, after consultations with the Kremlin, made a decision to ask the CCP to transfer the ethnic Korean troops to the DPRK – both the Soviet and the North Korean leaders thought that a South Korean attack on the North might take place in the near future. These anxieties, as the Russian archival documents quoted by Kim reveal, were inspired by the clashes which the South Korean armed forces initiated along the 38th parallel.

In the light of the frequently biased nature of Stalinist intelligence reports, one might be less inclined than Kim to take the Soviet reports about South Korea’s conduct at face value, but, ironically, the relative accuracy of this picture is confirmed by the very author whose statements Kim seeks to refute in this article, that is, Bruce Cumings. The U.S. diplomatic documents examined by Cumings also prove that the withdrawal of American troops from the ROK in 1949 was not motivated by the intention “to give freedom of action to the South Korean army” (232) against the DPRK (as the Soviet intelligence reports claimed), for the U.S. government actually disapproved of the belligerent attitude adopted by South Korean President Syngman Rhee.⁵ Thus it seems that in certain respects, both U.S. and Soviet intelligence were groping in the dark as far as the intentions, capabilities, and actions of the ‘other’ Korea were concerned.

Third, Kim backs up his statements about the non-offensive nature of the initial repatriations by pointing out that in September 1949 – by which time the repatriation process was already well under way – Stalin found it necessary to dissuade the North Korean leadership from launching an attack on the South. This indicates that while Kim Il Sung apparently did gain encouragement from the arrival of the ethnic Korean units to adopt a more aggressive attitude toward the southern government, at that stage his Soviet allies, whose consent was essential to complete the troop transfers, did not intend to use the repatriations for this purpose. While the article provides relatively less insight into the motives for Mao’s evident readiness to fulfill Kim Il Sung’s request than Stalin’s Korea

³ Chen, *China’s Road to the Korean War*, p. 108.

⁴ Evgueni Bajanov, “Assessing the Politics of the Korean War, 1949–51,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 6-7 (Winter 1995/1996), p. 54.

⁵ Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War II*, pp. 381-383.

policy, Kim persuasively explains that in December 1949, “the direct impetus for the transfer of the remaining ethnic Korean troops was the demands of those soldiers to be repatriated.” (234). Despite the chronological coincidence of the latter decision with Mao’s visit to Moscow, Kim correctly emphasizes that “the first signs of Stalin’s acquiescence with Kim’s proposal to forcefully reunify the peninsula emerged at the end of January 1950. Yet arrangements for the return of the Korean PLA troops had already been concluded almost a month before, at the beginning of January. Therefore, it can be concluded that the former was not the direct cause of the latter.” (234).

While Kim’s observations and arguments are mainly valid and convincing, his article fails to investigate an important issue of the Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean decision-making process that resulted in the transfer of the ethnic Korean units to the DPRK. Namely, it does not raise the question as to why the Kremlin did not seek to deter a possible South Korean (or American) attack on the DPRK by signing a treaty of friendship and mutual assistance with Pyongyang in the same way as it concluded such treaties with Mongolia, China, and most East European Communist regimes in 1946-1950. The significance of these agreements in Soviet security policy may be gauged from the fact that in 1946-1949, Stalin also pressured the reluctant East European “people’s democracies” to overcome their disagreements and conclude treaties of friendship with each other.⁶ Yet North Korea remained outside this complex network of treaties, despite the fact that over the Korean question, an unbridgeable diplomatic rift had appeared between the two superpowers as early as 1947-1948, and in 1949, as Kim correctly notes, Stalin did have a reason to expect some sort of confrontational action from South Korea.

It appears likely that the Kremlin’s reluctance to sign a treaty of mutual assistance with the DPRK was motivated by the consideration that such a step would hinder national unification (a factor emphasized by Bajanov and Cumings⁷), and possibly induce the United States to conclude a similar agreement with the ROK. After all, the USSR similarly refrained from signing a security treaty with East Germany until West Germany joined NATO. In Germany, however, the continued massive presence of foreign troops, combined as it was with the belated emergence of the West and East German armed forces, effectively prevented both the FRG and the GDR from engaging in a military confrontation unless it occurred in the context of a global war. In contrast, post-1949 Korea faced a far more explosive situation. Due to the absence of foreign troops and mutual security treaties, the likelihood of a “limited war” confined to the two rival states was much greater there than in Germany, for the Soviet Union could realistically expect that it would be able to avoid

⁶ On the Soviet-Mongolian Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance signed on 27 February 1946, see Emgent Ookhnoin Batsaikhan, *Mongol undesten buren erkht uls bolokh zamd, 1911-1946* (Mongolia: Becoming a Nation State, 1911-1946) (Ulaanbaatar: Admon Press, 2007), pp. 353-365; on Stalin’s efforts to pressure the East European Communist states to conclude such treaties with each other, see Galina P. Murashko and Albina F. Noskova, “Stalin and the National-Territorial Controversies in Eastern Europe, 1945-47 (Part 2),” *Cold War History* 2: 1 (October 2001), pp. 153-154.

⁷ Bajanov, “Assessing the Politics of the Korean War,” p. 54; Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War II*, pp. 345, 355-356.

entrapment in an inter-Korean confrontation. Thus one may conclude that despite Stalin's original intentions, the specific form of deterrence that the Soviet, Chinese, and North Korean leaders opted for in April 1949 – that is, the repatriation of the ethnic Korean units, instead of the conclusion of a treaty of friendship – ultimately did contribute to the process that led to the outbreak of the Korean War.

Still, the absence of references to this particular subject by no means invalidates Kim's insightful observations and conclusions, nor does it lessen the scholarly significance of his article. While slightly polemical at times, it is a sufficiently objective, carefully argued, and superbly documented analysis of a highly important episode of Sino-Soviet-North Korean diplomatic and military interactions in the year preceding the start of the Korean War.

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