MAO, STALIN, AND KIM IL SUNG: AN INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

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To secure Soviet interests in Manchuria after the Yalta agreement on the Far East had been invalidated by the Kuomintang’s defeat, Stalin was forced to welcome the PRC into the “socialist camp.” In attempting to eliminate Mao’s foreign policy alternatives, he was assisted by an unwitting United States, where Truman was under fire for “losing” China. Data which has recently become available shows that Stalin cemented his accord with Mao by urging him to lead revolution in Asia. Mao’s heroic self-image and need to prove to Stalin that he was not “another Tito,” caused him to overrule his Politburo and plunge China into the Korean War, thereby assuring its isolation and lasting dependence on the Soviets.

The author has long been a student of relations among socialist states; a few interviews in Beijing with Mao Zedong’s personal interpreters and a multitude of newly declassified documents have inspired him to reconstruct the Stalin-Mao-Kim relationship during the formative years of the PRC.

Until recently, the story of the establishment of relations between Stalin and Mao Zedong was known only in a general outline form. Far from a natural union of the two foremost communist leaders, the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance laid no true foundation for Sino-Soviet amity. The treaty was signed despite great misgivings, driven primarily by external developments. The perceptions these men held toward an alliance differed to a high degree. For both, however, such a step held more symbolic meaning than real significance. Although we have previously been unaware of how severely this bond was tested as China became drawn into the Korean War, we now know that Mao had little to do with its inception, and that Stalin did not fully realize the implications of such a union. In authorizing Kim Il Sung to launch his attack, Stalin believed that the ensuing war would last only 3–4 days. Fearing the provocation of a third World War, neither Mao nor Stalin attempted to relate their alliance to the Korean War. In keeping the Soviet Union detached from the situation on the Korean Peninsula, Stalin affirmed his superior international standing and assured China’s continued isolation.

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These are some of the conclusions that can now be drawn following the declassification of secret correspondence between Mao and Stalin, the publication of insiders’ memoirs, and the willingness of some of the surviving witnesses of those fateful events to submit themselves to searching interviews by Chinese and Russian scholars. Findings thus accumulated now allow us to understand the motivations and actions of these two communist leaders as they groped for a unified strategy during the formative years of the PRC.

While the published diary of Pyotr Vlasov (Vladimirov), Stalin’s personal representative in Yan’an in 1942–1945, is tarnished by the injection of anti-Mao polemics, the insights it offers into Stalin’s hostility toward Mao retain their value. More important to our subject are the reminiscences of Ivan Kovalyov, Stalin’s trusted aide, who attended all top-level meetings in 1948–1950 and who, like Vlasov, had near-unlimited access to Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai during his service in China. At considerable risk to himself Kovalyov preserved copies of Stalin’s secret cables to Mao. Mao’s cables to Stalin have been published in Beijing.

Chinese sources include the slender memoirs of Wu Xiuquan, Zhou’s favorite aide, and the rich recollections of Shi Zhe (Karsky), since 1940 Mao’s personal interpreter who also operated the portable radio-transmitter to maintain Mao’s communications with Stalin. Shi Zhe served as interpreter in every meeting Mao, Zhou, and Liu Shaoqi had with Soviet leaders in those critical years, often alongside Kovalyov. Mutual dislike between the two aides adds an extra dimension to their reminiscences. Like Wu, Shi was trained in Moscow and was for a while attached to the Chinese delegation to the Comintern. Arrested on Mao’s orders in 1962, he was kept in confinement for 17 years but, as I discovered in my conversations with him in 1989, this experience did not shake his belief in Mao’s greatness. Such was not the case with several other interpreters of Mao and Zhou, an exceedingly knowledgeable group of people whom I met in Beijing. While declassification of documents has been slow, Chinese researchers with access to state and party archives have produced many valuable studies and sometimes granted interviews to other scholars. Most welcome also, are recent memoirs of former North Korean officials who have broken the silence they had maintained for forty years.

Finally, there has appeared, in recent years, a number of insightful American (including Chinese-American) studies based on interviews and newly released documents. Some of them have been sponsored by the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, and have been most helpful in recreating a broader picture of Sino-Soviet relations in the late Stalin era. Absolutely unique is Uncertain Partners, a study collectively written by Sergei Goncharov, a Russian Sinologist (and currently a diplomat), and John W. Lewis and Xue Litai, both of Stanford University. They have drawn upon a huge