

# Lost Chance for Peace

## The 1945 CCP-Kuomintang Peace Talks Revisited

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This article reconsiders the 1945 Chongqing peace talks between the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). These talks—in particular, meetings between Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and CCP Chairman Mao Zedong—paved the way to the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) and for this reason have been the subject of extensive study by Chinese, Taiwanese, and Western historians. The main questions to consider are whether the talks were a missed opportunity for averting the civil war and, if so, why the two sides failed to come to terms. One answer would be to apply the ancient Chinese adage that two tigers cannot live on one mountain. One or the other had to give, and no agreements could have mattered in the eat-or-be-eaten struggle of the two political titans, Chiang and Mao. Another answer would be to resort to the blanket term of “ideology.” Mao was as committed to the success of Communist revolution, the argument goes, as Chiang was committed to preventing it. The ideological rift between the KMT and the CCP was put aside for the duration of a national emergency, the Sino-Japanese war, but it was never healed. The end of war heralded the ostensibly inevitable resumption of the KMT-CCP struggle for supremacy.

Yet, explanations relying on historical determinism gloss over the range of options open to policymakers, applying retrospective coherence to open-ended situations that were anything but clear to those directly involved. When Chiang and Mao met for their fateful parley in August–October 1945, the future—the war, CCP victories, the division of China—were months and years away. It is important to consider how the two leaders perceived this future, and why they could not achieve a lasting compromise. Depending on the answers to these questions, scholars may need to revisit the relationship between ideology and power and disentangle propaganda and policy. It is also important to understand the relative weight of internal and external factors in the unfolding civil war. Is it fair, for instance, to say that the Chinese Communist revolution had an internal dynamic that would play out irrespective

*Journal of Cold War Studies*

Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring 2017, pp. 84–114, doi:10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00742

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of the external environment? A CCP-centered approach may support such an interpretation, but it is also clear that no matter how isolated the Communists felt in their remote base in Yan'an, they were never really isolated from the broader international environment and were shaped by, and contributed to the shaping of, the Cold War.

Another important reason to reconsider the 1945 peace talks is the much greater availability of archival evidence. This is not because of a sudden torrent of new materials. The release of relevant documentation has been a slow and ongoing process, starting with the first installments of declassified documents in the U.S. State Department's *Foreign Relations of the United States* series in the 1970s. In the 1980s the Republic of China (ROC), in Taiwan, released large batches of important documents, and in the 1990s the Communist government of the mainland People's Republic of China (PRC) began putting out various official sets of collected writings, chronologies, and memoirs. Over the past quarter century, rich collections of Soviet documents have become accessible in Moscow. Quantity has turned to quality, providing historians with an invaluable, multi-country resource base with which to reassess long-debated events of the twentieth century. This article draws on the new materials to show that the Chongqing talks actually did represent an important "lost chance" for peace. Peace did not materialize because Mao and Chiang were at odds about the future of China. Chiang Kai-shek could not accept Mao's pragmatic offer to divide the country, leaving the CCP in control of the north and the KMT preponderant in the south. For Chiang, such a scenario was unacceptable ideologically, morally, and emotionally. It was also unnecessary, for, as he saw it, full victory was within grasp.

## **Mao's Road to Chongqing**

No one expected Japan to surrender as quickly as it did. In early 1945, even as Adolf Hitler's armies were tottering on the brink of defeat in Europe, Allied victory in Asia seemed years away. At a remote outpost in Yan'an, Mao had not yet had the opportunity to work out a detailed action plan for the postwar period. Most observers expected that the civil war—in a state of suspension since the establishment of the Second CCP-KMT United Front—would resume. The CCP was prepared for this eventuality, having built up a strong base in Shaanxi Province and in other base areas across China, controlling in Mao's estimate a population of some 95 million people. Internally, Mao consolidated his leadership over the party during the brutal "rectification" campaign of 1942–1944. In April–June 1945 the CCP held its Seventh Congress,

the first to enshrine “Mao Zedong Thought” in the party constitution. Mao’s report to the congress dwelt on the coming struggle with the KMT and the endpoint of this struggle: the abolition of the KMT government and establishment of a “New Democracy” under the leadership of the working class.<sup>1</sup> The exact terms of this struggle were yet to be worked out. The ongoing war with Japan overshadowed preparations for the civil war. As late as 4 August 1945, CCP leaders still estimated that the war against the “Japanese bandits” would last until at least the winter of 1946, at which point a civil war would “inevitably” follow.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6 and 9 August 1945, and the Soviet entry into the war on 8 August radically changed the situation. Within days Emperor Hirohito announced Japan’s surrender. Japanese forces in Manchuria put up little resistance to a last-minute Soviet offensive. The rapidly changing situation caused confusion among CCP leaders, forcing a rethink of postwar strategy. As Zhou Enlai, already a senior CCP official, noted at the time, “The end of the war and the Japanese capitulation were for us very sudden and unexpected events. We had absolutely no idea that the finale to the war would come so quickly.” Another senior cadre recalled, “America dropped the atomic bomb, the Soviet Union sent forces, hastening Japan’s capitulation. The coming of victory was very sudden, even though the Seventh Congress made preparations for it.”<sup>3</sup> The most startling thing for CCP leaders, however, was not that Japan surrendered more quickly than expected but that the ROC and the Soviet Union signed a new treaty of alliance on 14 August 1945. The treaty committed the USSR to “close and friendly cooperation” with the KMT, which the CCP had until then denounced as a “reactionary clique.” Mao’s plans for the “abolition” of the KMT government were almost impossible to reconcile with what appeared to be Iosif Stalin’s recognition of the Nationalist government’s legitimacy.

Mao was unaware of the extent of the Sino-Soviet discussions that led to the conclusion of the 1945 treaty, which stemmed from decisions taken at the February 1945 Yalta Conference committing the Soviet Union to participate in the war against Japan in exchange for certain gains in the Far East. Many of these gains were in direct violation of China’s sovereignty. Chiang Kai-shek, who was not consulted, fumed in his diary, “I did not recognize the Yalta

1. See Mao Zedong, “On Coalition Government,” in *Mao Zedong Selected Works*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), p. 255.

2. Chen Jian and Zhang Shu Guang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy and the Cold War in Asia: New Documentary Evidence, 1944–1950* (Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1996), p. 26.

3. Hu Qiaomu, *Hu Qiaomu Huiyi Mao Zedong* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1994), p. 81.

[decisions]. I did not participate. I have no responsibility [for the decisions]. Why should I carry [them] out? They [the allies] really see China as their vassal.”<sup>4</sup> In the end, though, he had to give in to Stalin’s demands, including China’s recognition of Mongolia’s independence, joint Sino-Soviet ownership of a major railroad in Manchuria, and Soviet control of the base of Port Arthur (Lüshun) at the tip of the Liaodong Peninsula. As a quid pro quo, Stalin promised to support the Kuomintang as the sole government of China.

Stalin’s promise had far-reaching consequences. Until the summer of 1945 the Soviet leader’s strategy in China was to weaken the central government’s control over its northern frontiers by supporting anti-government forces. For instance, in Xinjiang Stalin provided weapons and even manpower to a Uighur-Kazakh insurgency. By late 1944, with Soviet support, the rebels had established control over northern Xinjiang, proclaiming the establishment of the Republic of Eastern Turkestan. However, in mid-1945 Moscow reversed course and phased out material support for the insurgency (all Soviet troops and most types of non-Chinese arms and ammunition were withdrawn from the rebels by 20 October) while actively pressuring insurgent leaders to begin negotiations with the KMT, leading by 6 June 1946 to a peace agreement that preserved Xinjiang as part of China.<sup>5</sup> Stalin’s remarkable about-face in Xinjiang revealed that he valued a stable relationship with the Chinese government based on solid gains recognized at Yalta and that he did not shy away from direct pressure on his clients whose dreams of national liberation were something that Stalin, in the end, really cared nothing about.

Stalin’s approach to the CCP underwent a similar transformation. During the secret negotiations of the Sino-Soviet treaty in July–August 1945 Stalin repeatedly assured Chiang’s envoy, the President of the Executive Yuan, T. V. Soong (Song Ziwen), that the Soviet Union would support the central government. “We consider [that] China has one government,” Stalin said. “As to Communists in China we do not support [them] and don’t intend to support them.” He spoke about the Chinese Communists in a positive vein, calling them “good patriots” even as he questioned their Communist credentials.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Wang Jianlang, “Xinren de liushi: Cong Jiang Jieshi riji kan kangzhan houqi de zhongmei guanxi,” *Jindai Shi Yanjiu*, No. 3 (2009), p. 62.

5. The best accounts are Dzhamil’ Gasanly, *Sintszyan v orbite sovetskoi politiki: Stalin i musul’manskoie dvizhenie v Vostochnom Turkestane (1931–1949)* (Moscow: FlintaNauka, 2015); and V. A. Barmin, *Sintszyan v sovetsko-kitaiskikh otnosheniyakh* (Barnaul, Russia: Barnaulskii Gosudarstvennyi Pedagogicheskii Universitet, 1999), pp. 90–112. See also the Xinjiang documents collection at <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/234/china-and-the-soviet-union-in-xinjiang-1934-1949>.

6. See, for example, Conversation between T. V. Soong and Stalin, 2 July 1945, Chinese version, in Hoover Institution Archives (HIA), T. V. Soong Papers, Folders 6–9. For the Russian version, see

Stalin encouraged the KMT to begin negotiations with the CCP and other “democratic” forces in China. The Soviet draft of the Sino-Soviet statement included a passage about national unity and “democratization,” though it was opposed by the Chinese delegation on the grounds that it entailed interference in China’s internal affairs. Stalin grumbled that the KMT were unwilling to “democratize.” “The Chinese Communists will curse us!” he said, but he agreed to drop the passage.<sup>7</sup>

Stalin evidently wanted a face-saving formulation to counter CCP accusations of a sell-out but did not deem it important enough to insist on it in ways he did with matters that had a more direct bearing on Soviet interests in Asia. It is likely that Stalin’s main interest with the CCP was to have the Communists take part in a coalition government that would give the Soviet Union a degree of indirect influence on the KMT’s policies. He did not think Mao would stand a chance in a general military showdown with Chiang. As for the possibility of having two governments in China—effectively dividing China and leaving Communist areas under Communist control—Stalin thought the idea “stupid.”<sup>8</sup> An additional agreement signed alongside the 14 August treaty committed the Soviet Union to hand Manchuria to the KMT, effectively undercutting the CCP’s efforts to extend political and military control over the Chinese northeast. Although some scholars have claimed that Stalin from the start intended to allow a “fraternal party”—the CCP—to govern Manchuria on Moscow’s behalf in order to maintain the region as a de facto Soviet protectorate, there is no credible evidence to support this interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Stalin wanted to maintain influence in Manchuria, but the Yalta framework already allowed that without any involvement of the “good patriots,” the CCP.

A few days after the signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty, even before the text of the treaty was published in the press, Stalin informed Mao that the CCP would have to change its policy. On 18 August Georgi Dimitrov (former head of the Comintern) wrote in his diary that he and the former Soviet ambassador in China, Aleksandr Panyushkin, were supposed to draft a telegram telling the

Andrei Ledovskii, Raisa Mirovitskaya, and Vladimir Myasnikov, *Sovetsko-kitaiskie otnosheniya*, Vol. 4, Book 2, 1945 (Moscow: Pamyatniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 2000), p. 73.

7. Conversation between T. V. Soong and Stalin, 10 August 1945, Chinese version, in HIA, T. V. Soong papers, Folders 6–9. For a more detailed discussion, see Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China 1945–1950: The Arduous Road to the Alliance* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), pp. 59–69.

8. Conversation between W. Averell Harriman and Iosif Stalin, 27 August 1945, in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1945, Vol. VII, p. 454 (hereinafter referred to as *FRUS*, with appropriate year and volume numbers).

9. Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China*, p. 78.

CCP to negotiate with the KMT in view of the “radically changed” situation. The telegram, of which the full text has not yet been found, reportedly said that were a civil war to break out in China it would put the Chinese nation “in danger of destruction.” Mao, his long-time Russian interpreter later recalled, scoffed at the suggestion: “I don’t believe that. The people are struggling for emancipation. How can a nation be destroyed?”<sup>10</sup> The telegram was likely received in Yan’an on 20 August, and there are indications that Mao rejected it. In any case, within days the Soviet leader sent another telegram, which, oddly—probably to emphasize Stalin’s annoyance—replaced Stalin in the first person with a royal “we, the Russians” and was signed “the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks).” In this telegram, Stalin again asserted that civil war would ruin the chances of China’s reconstruction and therefore “advised” that Mao “meet Chiang Kai-shek and come to terms with him.”<sup>11</sup>

In the meantime, on 14 August Chiang sent Mao a cable inviting him to Chongqing for talks.<sup>12</sup> U.S. Ambassador Patrick J. Hurley, who saw Chiang the following evening, reported to Washington that the Generalissimo appeared satisfied with Stalin’s promise to back the central government. Hurley predicted that if Mao accepted Chiang’s invitation, “the armed conflict between the Communist Party of China and the National Government may be reduced to a political controversy. . . . The logic of events would seem to indicate this result,” unless of course the CCP got hold of the Japanese weapons.<sup>13</sup> Chiang shared this latter concern, writing on 16 August that the most urgent task was “to get rid of the weapons of the puppet regime quickly so that the [Communist] traitors cannot use them.” These were not idle concerns insofar as the CCP had made efforts to receive Japanese capitulation, even issuing a special instruction to the liberated areas on 11 August to “force the puppets to surrender to us.”<sup>14</sup> From Chiang’s standpoint, the most important thing was “to mobilize all levels of the society to respond to the call for

10. Ivo Banac, ed., *The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 379; and Shi Zhe, *Zai Lishi juren Shenbian: Shi Zhe Huiyilu* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1992), p. 308.

11. Cable, CC CPSU to Mao Zedong, n.d. (late August 1945). A copy was kindly provided to me by Alexander Pantsov. See also Alexander Pantsov and Steven Levine, *Deng: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 121–122.

12. Full text in Zhuo Zhaozheng, *Chongqing Tanpan Ziliao* (Chengdu, China: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), pp. 4–5.

13. Hurley to Department of State, 15 August 1945, in *FRUS, 1945, Vol. 7*, p. 446.

14. Instruction, CCP Central Committee, “The Party’s Tasks after Japan’s Surrender,” partial translation in Chen and Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, pp. 28–29. For Mao’s hand-written original, see [http://www.shac.net.cn/sy\\_59/kzsl/lqgsb/diershijiu/201508/t20150827\\_3313.html](http://www.shac.net.cn/sy_59/kzsl/lqgsb/diershijiu/201508/t20150827_3313.html).

solidarity and unity in order to attack the sinners and cheaters plotting armed rebellion.”<sup>15</sup> Inviting Mao to Chongqing was from the start a public relations exercise rather than a serious attempt to negotiate peace with the Communists, which was why Chiang’s invitation was immediately published in the government newspaper.

Mao realized what Chiang was driving at. On 16 August he drafted a cable in the name of the commander of the Communist forces, Zhu De, outlining six points to prevent a civil war in China, claiming that the CCP had done most of the fighting in the war (which was patently untrue), should therefore receive Japanese capitulation in the nineteen “liberated areas” in which Communist forces were present—from Manchuria in the north to Guangdong in the south—and should even be allowed to send a delegation to the United Nations (UN) peace conference. “You and your government have aroused the dissatisfaction of the people and cannot represent the broad masses,” the cable read.<sup>16</sup> Mao sent another telegram to Chongqing on the same day, saying he wanted Zhu De’s points answered before he would discuss any possible meeting with the Generalissimo. “To summarize the recent gestures and arrogant attitude of the CCP toward the authority [*junzuo*], they have resolved to take advantage of the chaotic situation and openly betray the country,” Chiang commented on the same day, deciding, for the moment, to “ignore” Zhu De’s telegram.<sup>17</sup>

Four days later, on 20 August, Chiang issued Mao another public invitation. Stalin’s secret telegrams urging Mao to negotiate came in at just about this time. This development created a whole new dynamic. Mao could spar with Chiang—he had been doing that for months—but pressure from Stalin was a different matter.

On 22 August, under Soviet pressure, the CCP Central Military Commission issued an instruction to all local party committees and military districts, “On the Change of Strategic Direction.” This document spelled out the hard truth: “The Soviet Union, constrained by the Sino-Soviet Treaty and for the purpose of maintaining peace in the Far East, cannot help us.” Moreover, “neither the United States nor the Soviet Union wants to see a civil war in China.” This was presented as something of an advantage for the CCP insofar as it meant that the Kuomintang was not in a position to unleash a civil war immediately. Hence, the strategy would be to engage in talks with the KMT

15. Wang Zhenghua, ed., *The Chiang Kai-shek Collections: The Chronological Events (62): August–September 1945* (Taipei: Guoshiguan, 2011), p. 210 (hereinafter referred to as *Shilüe Gaoben*, Vol. 62).

16. Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong Selected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 36.

17. *Shilüe Gaoben*, Vol. 62, p. 210.

under the slogans of “peace, democracy, and unity,” while consolidating control over the nineteen liberated areas and expanding the Communist presence in the big cities “to mobilize the masses, to win over the puppet troops, to publish newspapers [and] to develop our secret service.”<sup>18</sup> A comparison with the set of instructions Mao had sent out to his military commanders ten days earlier, on 11–12 August, shows a remarkable about-face. Back then he wanted rapid expansion of the “liberated areas” and takeover of big cities across central and eastern China, whereas now the emphasis shifted to controlling “the vast countryside” and leaving large cities and, for the most part, large transportation arteries in the hands of the Kuomintang.

On 23 August the Standing Committee of the Politburo discussed the new situation. Mao made a grim, subdued speech. “The Soviet Union,” he reiterated, “is not in a position to assist us.” Chiang had the upper hand: with control of the big cities. He had accepted Japan’s surrender and was China’s “legitimate leader.” The CCP also had certain advantages, controlling “powerful liberated regions” and enjoying high standing in public opinion because of a successful record of “promoting democracy and improving people’s livelihood.” At the close of the meeting Mao made a remarkable announcement: “We must prepare to make certain concessions to gain a position of legitimacy, to use the podium of the National Congress to go on attack. We really need this kind of opportunity to educate the people of the entire country and to exercise ourselves.” He explained that if Chiang decided to fight “we will fight him” but if he stopped “we will also stop.” Mao added: “We will continue to try to wash Chiang Kai-shek’s face but not to cut off his head.”<sup>19</sup> The meeting also discussed what kinds of demands the CCP should now put forward, adopting the “Proclamation on the Current Situation” (published on 27 August). This proclamation emphasized the new CCP line of “peace, unity, and democracy” and called for a coalition government with the KMT.<sup>20</sup> The civil war that only weeks earlier appeared inevitable now receded.

The “Proclamation on the Current Situation,” adopted on 23 August, differed from the demands Mao had presented to Chiang just days earlier. For instance, the CCP no longer insisted on being represented at a postwar

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18. Chen and Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*; amended translation. Compare Zhongyang Dang’anguan, *Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenjian Xuanji*, Vol. 15 (Beijing: Zhonggong Zhongyang Dangxiao Chubanshe, 1991), pp. 243–244.

19. Chen and Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, pp. 31–32.

20. For the text of the proclamation, see *Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenjian Xuanji*, Vol. 15, pp. 247–249.



UN conference dealing with the fate of Japan.<sup>21</sup> This was very much in line with Mao's decision to "recognize the reality" of Chiang's legal position. In his remarks at the Standing Committee meeting, Zhou stressed that the CCP would have to make additional concessions if the peace talks were to succeed," adding that, "of course, we cannot lose ground."<sup>22</sup> The CCP was thus beginning to formulate its bottom line in the talks with the KMT. The next few days would show just how far the Communists were willing to go in reaching compromise.

At the meeting, Mao announced his intention to meet with Chiang in Chongqing.<sup>23</sup> Circumstantial evidence suggests that Mao was extremely concerned about his safety in Chongqing, fearing—not unreasonably given the KMT's unsavory record in this regard—that if he were to go he would be assassinated. For this reason, on 22 August Mao responded to Chiang with an offer to send Zhou Enlai first. "I will conduct reconnaissance," Zhou explained on the following day. "The most important thing is to see what Chiang has on his plate."<sup>24</sup> But that clearly was not enough for Chiang. Hurley, who discussed the matter with the Generalissimo, wrote that Zhou "apparently has never had any authority to act. He has authority only to confer."<sup>25</sup> Chiang cabled Yan'an on the same day, insisting that Mao come along as well.<sup>26</sup> Mao was trapped: he could refuse to go, giving Chiang a reason to say the Communists wanted war. This would not be good for Mao's standing with "progressive" public opinion. Such a scenario would also anger Stalin, who had insisted on negotiations and whose support the CCP continued to value. Mao resisted to the last, cabling Chiang on 24 August to send the plane—Zhou would go first and then Mao would come "immediately after."<sup>27</sup> But the following day, after another agonizing discussion, Mao resolved to take the risk. In the end, he had very little choice.

Mao's personal secretary, Hu Qiaomu, recalled that ahead of Mao's departure for Chongqing the atmosphere in Yan'an was "very nervous." "Many of

21. The first draft of the proclamation, authored by Zhou Enlai, still contained this proposition. See *Zhou Enlai Xuanji*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), pp. 221–222.

22. *Zhou Enlai Nianpu, 1898–1949* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1998), p. 630.

23. Chen and Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, p. 32.

24. Jin Chongji et al., *Zhou Enlai Zhuan, 1898–1949*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1998), p. 728.

25. Draft cable, Albert Wedemeyer to Ivan Yeaton, 24 August 1945, in University of Oklahoma, Patrick J. Hurley Papers, Box 96, Folder 12.

26. The text of Chiang Kai-shek's telegram is in Zhuo Zhaoheng, *Chongqing Tanpan Ziliao*, pp. 7–8.

27. Zhuo Zhaoheng, *Chongqing Tanpan Ziliao*, p. 5.

the cadres were scared out of their wits.”<sup>28</sup> Mao himself put on a brave show. “There is not much danger involved,” he said at the Politburo on 23 August, reiterating three days later: “One has to be fully aware of the possibility that Chiang Kai-shek will force me to sign an agreement under duress [*cheng-xiazhimeng*] but he still needs my signature. . . . If I am put under house arrest, that’s nothing to be afraid of. I can then handle some matters there.”<sup>29</sup>

Mao was not taking any chances, however. Already on 25 August Zhou began calling Chongqing to make arrangements for the Chinese leader’s security and bodyguards.<sup>30</sup> “Mao Zedong is concerned about questions of personal security at the talks,” Petr Vlasov (Vladimirov), Stalin’s operative in Yan’an, noted on 26 August. “He believes that Chiang Kai-shek’s invitation is a trap and is concerned for his life.”<sup>31</sup> Mao even asked Vlasov to obtain Stalin’s guarantee for his personal safety while he was in Chongqing, requesting that the Soviet military mission in Chongqing give him asylum in case of need. Vlasov confirmed that Mao would be safe. “Chiang Kai-shek will not dare to make an attempt on his life. This is Moscow’s firm guarantee.”<sup>32</sup> It is unlikely that Mao believed any such firm guarantee. Even Stalin later acknowledged that Mao’s trip to Chongqing was “dangerous” for the Chinese leader.<sup>33</sup>

In the meantime, appropriate guarantees were also offered by the United States. On 21 August, Ambassador Hurley, noting that “Mao Tze Tung [Zedong] and his party do seem to be fearful about what may happen to them,” offered, through the head of the U.S. forces in China, Albert C. Wedemeyer, that he would fly to Yan’an to escort Mao to Chongqing on the same plane.<sup>34</sup> Mao agreed, cabling Wedemeyer on the 24th to send Hurley to Yan’an.<sup>35</sup> Hurley’s presence would make it unlikely that Chiang would order the plane shot down. Hurley, accompanied by a senior KMT official, Zhang Zhizhong, flew to Chongqing on 27 August. On 28 August, Mao and his

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28. Hu Qiaomu, *Hu Qiaomu Huiyi Mao Zedong*, p. 82.

29. Pang Xianzhi, *Mao Zedong Nianpu, 1893–1949* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1993), pp. 11, 15.

30. *Zhou Enlai Nianpu, 1898–1949*, p. 630.

31. Petr Vladimirov (Vlasov), *Osobyi Raion Kitaya, 1942–45* (Moscow: APN, 1977). The so-called Vladimirov diaries are at least in part a forgery, though this particular point is supported by other evidence.

32. *Ibid.*

33. See Liu Shaoqi’s report on his conversation with Stalin in Moscow on 27 July 1949, in *Jianguo Yilai Liu Shaoqi Wengao* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2005), Vol. 1, p. 40.

34. Patrick J. Hurley’s cable, 21 August 1945, in University of Oklahoma, Patrick J. Hurley Papers, Box 96, Folder 11.

35. Cable, US Observer Group (Yan’an) to Albert Wedemeyer, 24 August 1945, in University of Oklahoma, Patrick J. Hurley Papers, Box 96, Folder 12.

small party were seen off at the Yan'an airstrip by senior cadres and the community of foreigners. Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, reportedly broke into sobs, as if not expecting to see him again, and Mao himself looked "as if he was going to his execution."<sup>36</sup> He arrived in Chongqing the same day, driving away from the airfield in the same car with Hurley, even though Chiang had sent a different car to pick him up.<sup>37</sup> The Generalissimo penned a scathing assessment in his diary: "This affair is most ridiculous. The Communist bandits are so shameless and chicken-hearted [*wuchiwudan*]. Three days ago the Communist newspapers and radio almost daily denounced Hurley as a reactionary and an imperialist and now they want him to be the guarantor [of Mao's safety]."<sup>38</sup>

## Talk-Talk, Fight-Fight

Mao Zedong's agreement to hold talks with Chiang offers an interesting angle on one of the most debated aspects of CCP foreign policy: the role of ideology. Mao never made a secret of his intention to pursue a socialist revolution in China: This was a consistent theme of his writings before 1945. Although socialism per se was deemed far off, the idea of "new democracy," as outlined in Mao's speech to the Seventh Party Congress, was a more immediate task. The CCP's push for a rapid expansion of the "liberated areas" in the immediate days after Japan surrendered was an effort to put the Communists in a position to dictate the terms of national reconciliation to the KMT. These plans were frustrated in both military and political terms. But the change of direction in August 1945 did not mean that the revolutionary goals were being abandoned. The long-term goals remained the same, but their realization was being postponed to an uncertain future. As Zhou Enlai put it at the CCP Politburo meeting on 23 August, "the goal of the realization of new democracy in China has not changed. In the future there will be a new revolutionary high tide. We will prepare to welcome it."<sup>39</sup>

36. Cited in Andrei Ledovskii, *SSSR i Stalin v Sud'bach Kitaya* (Moscow: Pamyatniki Istoricheskoi Mysli, 1999), p. 200, on the basis of a TASS report, 28 August 1945, in AVPRF, Fond (F) 56, Opis' (Op.) 6, Papka (P) 47, Delo (D.) 67, Listy (Ll.) 11–12. The same passage is cited in Vladimirov, *Osobyi Raion Kitaya*, p. 648, suggesting that the "diary" was at least in part based on TASS bulletins. See also Dieter Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China*, p. 442 n. 168.

37. William Morwood, *Duel for the Middle Kingdom: The Struggle between Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung for Control of China* (New York: Everest House, 1968), p. 7.

38. *Shilüe Gaoben*, Vol. 62, pp. 347–348 (entry for 26 August 1945). The same passage is cited in Furuya Keiji, *Chiang Kai-shek: His Life and Times* (New York: St. John's University, 1981), p. liii, but the translation is imprecise.

39. *Zhou Enlai Junshi Huodong Jishi*, Vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 2000), p. 605.

Mao and Zhou had a heated conversation about this future with Wedemeyer, whom they met in Chongqing. Wedemeyer questioned the Chinese leaders about whether the CCP could achieve the goals embodied in Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the Peoples without recourse to a "foreign ideology." Zhou replied that the CCP would have to rely on the Soviet Union and the working class of the United States, Great Britain, and other Western countries. Mao, who was listening to the conversation through a female interpreter, added at this point: "Chinese revolution is an integral part of world revolution against imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism. . . . [W]e want to help our people who are so ignorant and backward to become educated, civilized, and progressive."

Wedemeyer explained that although Communist goals may sound humanitarian, their realization was invariably accompanied by relentless brutality. Zhou, Wedemeyer reported,

was obviously aroused by my remarks, because he burst forth in Chinese. Then, realizing that I did not understand, he returned rather haltingly to English, trying to find the correct words to refute my statements. He emphasized that the power of the reactionary forces in the world was so great that the common people were compelled to resort to any means in order to accomplish the overthrow of their deadly enemies.<sup>40</sup>

Wedemeyer recalled later,

I had heard many times that they were not true Marxists but were simply agrarian reformers interested in the welfare of the Chinese people. However, this historic meeting under informal circumstances gave the lie to such reports, which were being widely disseminated in the United States. I recorded this provocative discussion immediately after my Chinese Communist guests had departed.<sup>41</sup>

Wedemeyer's British colleague, Adrian Carton de Wiart, who was Winston Churchill's personal envoy to Chiang, had a similar impression after meeting Mao and Zhou just after their arrival in Chongqing. Mao, he felt, was "uncompromising" and "quite a good type of man but a fanatic." "If the Generalissimo can effect a compromise with him," Carton de Wiart wrote to London on 6 September, "I shall be more than surprised."<sup>42</sup> He later recounted how he was "asked by several eminent people" to persuade Chiang to stop fighting with the Communists. But, Carton de Wiart wrote,

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40. Albert Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer Reports!* (New York: Holt, 1958), pp. 285–287.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

42. Adrian Carton de Wiart to Esmay, 5 September 1945, in Bodleian Library, Oxford University, Atley Papers. The author is grateful to Sheng Peng for help in obtaining this document.

The Generalissimo was aware that my own personal feelings were different and that I felt that there was only one answer to the Communists, and that was defeat. To me the right time for negotiations is after victory when, backed by force, words seem to attain a meaning not so well understood before.<sup>43</sup>

Carton de Wiart, at least in retrospect, sided with Chiang in his complaints that the untimely U.S. pressure for peace talks derailed the KMT from defeating the Communists who, in any case, did not understand any language other than force.

Wedemeyer, too, in retrospect spelled out what he felt was wrong with U.S. policy, namely, a naïve belief that the Chinese Communists were simply “reformers” and would therefore come to terms with a Kuomintang government that, many observers readily agreed, was sorely in need of reform. Whether Wedemeyer believed so consistently or (as with many others) was wise only in retrospect, the key issue was that the United States should have recognized the CCP for the revolutionary party that it was and, relinquishing a priori unrealizable hopes of a CCP-KMT détente, should have offered more direct and active support to Chiang. This is all part of the argument in the broader “who lost China” debate, one of the most acrimonious debates of U.S. foreign policy.

The prevailing scholarly consensus on this debate is that Wedemeyer was right insofar as CCP leaders really were Communists and not agrarian reformers. The Chinese revolution had its own internal dynamic that was quite separate from anything the United States did or failed to do. The United States, the argument goes, could neither prevent the Communist victory in China nor avoid the break in relations between the Communists and the United States.<sup>44</sup> There was, in other words, no “lost chance” in the relationship. This may be true, but the question should also be considered from a different angle: lost chance for what, precisely? The Chinese Communists were ideologically committed to the cause of the revolution, and U.S. policymakers clearly misjudged the situation in hoping that the conflict between the CCP and the KMT could be reduced to “political controversy” or, as the head of the U.S. Observer Group in Yan’an, Ivan Yeaton, reported on the day of Mao’s departure for Chongqing, that the CCP’s “long and short range aim is a true coalition government which allows them free

43. Adrian Carton de Wiart, *Happy Odyssey* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950).

44. See, for instance, “Rethinking the Lost Chance in China: A Symposium,” with John Garver, Michael M. Sheng, Odd Arne Westad, and Chen Jian and an introduction by Warren I. Cohen, in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 21, No.1 (Winter 1997), pp. 71–115.

competition.”<sup>45</sup> Mao’s unwillingness to abandon revolutionary goals implied that the CCP would not lay down arms and become just another political party, freely competing for the future of China from the podium of the National Assembly. But this does not mean that accommodation was impossible or that Mao was resolved to fight it out with Chiang, and that the peace talks were just a diversionary maneuver. The available evidence suggests that this was not what Mao had in mind when he went to Chongqing. What, then, did he have in mind?

Mao’s intentions can be discerned from the discussions at the highest levels of the CCP and from orders issued to CCP military commanders. At a Politburo meeting on 26 August, Mao outlined three “concessions” the CCP would be willing to make. The first was to yield [*rangchu*] the area between Guangdong and Hunan provinces in southern China.<sup>46</sup> The second was to yield all the areas south of the Yangtze River, and the third—the bottom line—was to leave the areas north of the Yangtze River up to the Longhai railway, the major artery that ran from Lianyungang in the east to Xi’an in the west.<sup>47</sup> Mao counted on having control of the areas between the Longhai railway and Manchuria, which would mean effective division of the country into two parts, the north and the south. However, the status of Manchuria itself, then controlled by the Soviet army, was uncertain. The CCP was in a good position to contemplate a takeover, unless actively barred by Soviet forces. In April–May 1945 Mao reportedly had contemplated sending 150,000–200,000 troops to Manchuria to fight alongside the Soviet army in the coming liberation.<sup>48</sup> These plans came to nothing because the Soviet Union had no intention to involve CCP forces in anything of the kind. Chiang, too, eyed the northeast, preparing a rapid deployment of forces to establish KMT control over big cities and lines of communications. Still, the situation permitted the CCP to “contend” with the Nationalists for control of one of the most resource-rich and industrially developed parts of China. On 26 August the Politburo agreed to begin quiet infiltration of Communist troops and cadres to the three Manchurian provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning.<sup>49</sup>

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45. Telegram, Yan’an (probably Ivan Yeaton) to Patrick J. Hurley, 27 August 1945, in University of Oklahoma, Patrick J. Hurley Papers, Box 97, Folder 3.

46. All Chinese-language materials refer to Henan (much further north) rather than to Hunan. Hunan makes much more sense, as already pointed out by Chen and Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, p. 32 n. 66.

47. *Zhou Enlai Nianpu*, p. 630; and *Mao Zedong Nianpu*, p. 15.

48. Cited in Heinzig, *The Soviet Union and Communist China*, p. 79.

49. *Ibid.*

The reasons for this decision are still not clear. The record of the meeting on 26 August has still not been made public. All we have are snippets of information, such as comments from Central Committee Secretary Ren Bishi:

As I see it, our control of the Northeast is a guarantee that peace in the Far East will be preserved. Capturing the Northeast is a problem of utmost importance. If we capture it, we can bring revolution nearer by a few years. If we don't, we'll postpone the revolution by a few years. One can say that the Northeast will decide the fate of the Chinese revolution, so the capture of the Northeast is a question of priority. If we lose some of the other places, that's no big deal.<sup>50</sup>

Comments such as these can be read retrospectively as evidence that the CCP leaders already intended to wage the civil war by using Manchuria as the base (a strategy that ultimately paid off), but in August 1945 this future still appeared highly uncertain. The move into the northeast was thus largely opportunistic, occasioned by the CCP leaders' belief that the Sino-Soviet Treaty could yet be turned to the advantage of the CCP—that it was, as Zhou Enlai put it during that day's discussion, “in the interest of the people” (i.e., the Communists).

The CCP's expectations can be inferred from the Central Committee's instruction dated 29 August, “Enter the Northeast and Control the Vast Rural Areas.”<sup>51</sup> The instruction acknowledged that under the Sino-Soviet Treaty the Soviet army would hand control in Manchuria to the KMT government (on 28 August Moscow published an agreement with the Nationalists to this effect) and noted that the Soviet Union had vowed not to interfere in China's internal politics.<sup>52</sup> In addition, an article published in the 28 August issue of the Soviet military daily *Krasnaya Zvezda* proclaimed that the Soviet Union would support China's “democratic” development.<sup>53</sup> Given that “democratic” was a Soviet euphemism for Communist or pro-Communist elements, CCP leaders had reason to believe that as long as the party's penetration of Manchuria remained low-key and did not explicitly contradict the terms of the Sino-Soviet Treaty, Soviet forces would treat CCP units with “great sympathy.”<sup>54</sup>

50. Tian Xuan et al., *Jiefang Zhanzheng Quanjilu* (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1999), pp. 97–98. Here and elsewhere page numbers refer to the electronic version of the book.

51. The full text is in Chen and Zhang, *Chinese Communist Foreign Policy*, pp. 33–34.

52. For the text of the agreement and various drafts discussed in the course of Sino-Soviet negotiations, see AVPRF, F. 06, Op. 7, D. 512, P. 36, Ll. 1–17.

53. The article is summarized in *FRUS*, 1945, Vol. 7, pp. 454–455, and is also mentioned in the instruction. This was the formulation Stalin intended to introduce in a joint statement on the conclusion of the Sino-Soviet Treaty, but he dropped it in the face of resistance from Soong.

54. *Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenjian Xuanji*, Vol. 15, p. 257.

A great deal of uncertainty about Soviet intentions remained, however. Because the CCP was unsure about the situation in the Northeast or about Soviet intentions, CCP officials believed they should quietly expand into the area “as long as the Red Army remains silent and does not resolutely oppose our actions.”<sup>55</sup> The CCP’s initial decision was to send 50,000 troops (and 10,000 cadres) to Manchuria. In Zhu De’s estimate in late August, it would take at least half a year for Chiang’s forces to reach the northeast, so the opportunity was clearly there.<sup>56</sup> Speaking to the departing cadres on 28 August, Zhu De said they would have to engage in “arduous work” to struggle for the 30 million people of Manchuria: “We have a great hope: to turn the Northeast into a Democratic Northeast.”<sup>57</sup> Zhu’s remarks were echoed by Liu Shaoqi: “we’ll have to see the situation. If there is space, we will get in.”<sup>58</sup> This way, Liu explained, the CCP would gain “capital” for peace talks with the Kuomintang.<sup>59</sup>

Another way of gaining “capital” was Mao’s decision to intensify military operations. On 22 August he issued instructions for CCP forces in Shandong and Central China to “annihilate” 40,000–50,000 Kuomintang troops in each theater: “If you are able to fight several good battles of elimination in Shandong and Central China, this will have a big influence on the entire situation.”<sup>60</sup> On 29 August Liu Shaoqi reiterated to the command of the New Fourth Army the importance of fighting a few large battles of “complete annihilation.” “This would help internal peace and the present peace talks,” Liu argued. Similar instructions were also issued for the Jinjiyu base area (at the convergence of Shanxi, Henan, and Hebei provinces) to deliver a heavy blow against the advancing forces of KMT General Yan Xishan. When the CCP commander, Liu Bocheng, and his political commissar, Deng Xiaoping, were departing for the base area on 26 August, Mao told them to “fight full-heartedly.” “Don’t worry about the question of my safety in Chongqing. The better you fight, the safer I will be, and the better the talks will be. There is no

55. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

56. Tian Xuan et al., *Jiefang Zhanzheng Quanjilu*, p. 101.

57. *Zhu De Nianpu*, censor’s version (manuscript), in the author’s possession, p. 446.

58. Tian Xuan et al., *Jiefang Zhanzheng Quanjilu*, p. 102.

59. Liu Chongwen, ed., *Liu Shaoqi Nianpu, 1898–1969* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1996), p. 481.

60. Mao Zedong’s cable to the New Fourth Army, Shandong Military District, and the Jinpu frontline, 22 August 1945, in *Mao Zedong Jushi Wengao* (Beijing: Zhongyang Wenxian Chubanshe, 1987), p. 280.



other way.”<sup>61</sup> Or, as Mao explained to another set of cadres at about the same time,

If you fight well on the front-line, I will be a little safer. If you don't fight well, I will be in greater danger. If you achieve a victory, I will find it somewhat easier to talk—otherwise, somewhat more difficult.<sup>62</sup>

Mao called this strategy “fight-fight, talk-talk.” Large-scale fighting in what became known as the Shangdang campaign began two weeks after Mao's arrival in Chongqing.

It is of course possible, to view Mao's strategy in a cynical vein, as some historians have done. By fighting selected “battles of annihilation,” Mao was, in this view, merely trying to protect himself in Chongqing by showing Chiang that even in his absence the CCP was a serious fighting force.<sup>63</sup> But although partly true, such a conclusion is simplistic. Mao's projected “concessions” regarding “liberated areas” south of the Longhai railway, taken together with his instructions to “annihilate” tens of thousands of enemy troops in strategic battles in the Jinjiyu base area, Central China, and Shandong, as well as the CCP's opportunistic and open-ended infiltration of the north-east clearly suggest what idea Mao brought to the negotiations in Chongqing: the division of China. Although in the long term he and other CCP leaders thought in terms of revolution, actual realization of this revolution was being indefinitely postponed. In the face of internal challenges (Chiang Kai-shek's rapid moves to consolidate power in the Japanese-occupied regions) and external pressure (exemplified by Stalin's unexpected betrayal of the CCP cause), Mao had to hunker down for the long haul, and the only realistic way of doing so was to consolidate CCP control in northern China, best with Manchuria but quite possibly without. Saying that these were just temporary measures before Mao's bid for power in all of China underestimates the severity of the CCP's difficulties as it suddenly found itself on the defensive. Ideology mattered, but Mao's decision to travel to Chongqing shows that it was not the only factor in play. Here, as at other turning points of his career, Mao proved to be much more of a realist than both his admirers and his detractors were willing to allow.

61. As described by Liu Bocheng in a speech to Jinjiyu cadres, in *Liu Bocheng Zhuan*, censor's version, in the author's possession, p. 340.

62. Xiao Jinguan, *Xiao Jinguan Huiyilu* (Beijing: Jiefangjun Chubanshe, 1987), p. 325.

63. This is the argument made, for instance, in John Halliday and Jun Chang, *Mao: The Unknown Story*.

## Northern and Southern Dynasties

China's 5,000-year history is replete with examples of national division. "United China," as a modern nation state, was a shared project of the KMT and CCP. Both aspired to national unity, on their own terms. In 1945, however, national unity as a cause was much dearer to Chiang than to Mao. In the days before Mao's arrival in Chongqing, Chiang also developed a strategy for the forthcoming parley, a strategy that hinged on the CCP's agreement to surrender control over its armies to the KMT, which would then "reorganize" them. As a quid pro quo, Chiang was willing to end the years of KMT tutelage and embrace "constitutional government," which, for the initial period at least, would still be controlled by the KMT, even if the CCP and other parties were able to appoint the heads of some of the ministries. In a further concession, the CCP and other parties could elect additional deputies to the existing National Assembly (as long as the number of these deputies did not exceed those of the KMT). This way, Chiang surmised, not only would the opposition parties be able to participate in the government (with overall Kuomintang control) but also "in the eyes of the British and the Americans I would indeed abandon party rule and tend toward the democratic system."<sup>64</sup> The bottom line for Chiang was that the CCP would have to recognize the "unity of military command and political authority."<sup>65</sup>

Mao had a very different approach. The CCP's official position, containing eleven points, was presented to the KMT on 3 September. Some of these points were couched as important concessions. For instance, the CCP promised to abide by the manifesto of the KMT's First National Convention in pursuing peaceful reconstruction on the basis of the Three Principles of the Peoples (point one) and pledged "loyal support of the leadership of President Chiang Kai-shek" (point two). The more important points, however, were buried deeper in the text. These included (under point nine) the proposition that the CCP be allowed to nominate the governors of Shanxi, Shandong, Hebei, Rehe, and Chahar provinces and (under point ten) the proposition that CCP armies be maintained at 48 divisions, stationed north of the Longhai railway and in the Huai River Valley (northern Jiangsu and northern Anhui).<sup>66</sup> The latter provision was quite clearly a negotiating ploy: Mao was already reconciled to withdrawing CCP forces to northern

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64. Cited in Yang Kuisong, *Shiqu de jibui* (Beijing: Xinxing Chubanshe, 2010), p. 244.

65. *FRUS*, 1945, Vol. VII.

66. *Ibid.*

China. He spelled out his tactic to Soviet Ambassador Apollon Petrov on 6 September:

We know ahead of time that many of our demands will not be accepted by the Kuomintang and we are prepared to make concessions. We, however, will do everything to defend our positions. And if we have to retreat, we will strive to do so slowly and with great resistance. Concessions are possible only on the main condition that our core interests will not be harmed. We will not retreat from the line, behind which our vital interests begin.<sup>67</sup>

The 3rd of September was Victory Day—for Chiang, a bittersweet moment. The war the country had fought for eight long years under his leadership was over at last—but at what cost? Moreover, the prospects of national unification were clouded by the stubborn resistance of “Mao the Commie” (*Gong Mao*), as Chiang unkindly referred to his nemesis in his diary. “On this day of victory in which the multitudes are rejoicing, Mao the Commie . . . makes insatiable demands,” Chiang wrote. “I have treated him with utmost sincerity, yet he goes so far as to use my sincerity to demand appointment of his people as governors for five northern provinces and the chair of the Beiping military headquarters. . . . The Communist bandits are impervious to reason. This matter can be resolved only by relying on God’s strength. It is exceedingly painful.”<sup>68</sup> During their first substantial meeting the previous day, Chiang had told Mao that his demands were “impossible to carry out,” even as he promised to invite individual members of the CCP “on the basis of their ability and merit” to participate in the government and even become governors of provinces.<sup>69</sup>

After this somewhat unhappy start, Mao and Chiang distanced themselves from negotiations, which were carried on by Zhou and Wang Ruofei for the CCP and by Zhang Zhizhong (former governor of Xinjiang), Zhang Qun (governor of Sichuan), and Chiang’s associate Shao Lizi for the KMT, with the occasional participation of other KMT officials. The gulf between the two sides was made apparent at the first meeting, on 4 September. Shao Lizi explained that only two of Zhou Enlai’s eleven points (those concerning recognition of Chiang Kai-shek’s leadership and Sun Yat-sen’s Principles of the Peoples) were any good. As for the rest, “there is basically nothing to

67. Memorandum of conversation between Apollon Petrov and Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Wang Ruofei, 6 September 1945, in AVPRF, F. 0100, Op. 33, D. 13, P. 244, Ll. 220–240.

68. *Shilüe Gaoben*, Vol. 62, pp. 459–460.

69. Summarized in *FRUS*, 1945, Vol. VII, p. 313.

discuss.”<sup>70</sup> The most unacceptable part of the CCP position dealt with the Communist troops and the idea of appointing Communist governors to northern provinces. The KMT negotiators attacked both proposals as going against the basic idea of a modern nation-state. The terms “modern” and “modernization” crept up repeatedly in the conversations, highlighting the centrality of these concepts to the KMT postwar outlook. Zhang Zhizhong, for instance, emphasized that a modern nation-state could not have a KMT army any more than it could have a CCP army. China had to have a national army.<sup>71</sup> Zhang Qun questioned the whole idea of having separate CCP-controlled provinces, with their own laws and regulations, as fundamentally incompatible with the idea of national unity.<sup>72</sup> Zhang called the whole proposed arrangement “feudal,” and Shao Lizi intimated that the Communists wanted to divide China into “northern and southern dynasties,” which, to be sure, was exactly the point.

Chiang continued to meet with Mao at dinners and similar social functions, maintaining an outward display of civility. In private he was absolutely furious, venting his anger and dismay in diary entries. Chiang had struggled for years to unite China by subduing its many warlords. He had refused to bow to Japanese pressure and clawed his way to final victory in the Sino-Japanese war. But now, in the hour of triumph, his revolution was incomplete. The state was still divided. The Communist problem was only one of his many headaches. Equally disconcerting was the Soviet problem, for, in spite of Stalin’s assurances, Chiang was far from certain that Soviet forces, who were then in full control in Manchuria, would ever pack up and go home. An additional problem was the ongoing rebellion in Xinjiang. Although Stalin had already decided to cut off support for the rebels, Chiang continued to suspect foul play. He was also worried that Stalin would break his promise not to support the Communists, his doubts in this regard fed by intelligence reports of the CCP delegates in Chongqing boasting about their close links with Stalin and their resolve to capture Manchuria with the quiet acquiescence of the Soviet occupation authorities.<sup>73</sup> Then there was the problem of U.S. (and British) meddling, including the pressure from “confused” people

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70. Discussion between the KMT and the CCP delegations, 4 September 1945, in *Zhonghua Minguo Zhongyao Shiliao Chubian*, Vol. 7 (2) (Taipei: Zhongguo guo min dang zhong yang wei yuan hui dang shi wei yuan hui, 1981), p. 47.

71. Discussion between the KMT and the CCP delegations, 8 September 1945, in *Zhongyao Shiliao*, Vol. 7 (2), p. 58.

72. Discussion between the KMT and the CCP delegations, 4 September 1945, p. 49.

73. *Shilüe Gaoben*, Vol. 62, pp. 518–519.

like Ambassador Hurley to come to terms with Mao. “Humiliation,” Chiang wrote, speaking of his experience with the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and the CCP; “it is like an old tree being cut down by four axes.”<sup>74</sup>

Notions like “shame” and “humiliation” appear frequently in Chiang’s diary, as do distinctions between “evil” and “virtuous.” These suggest that Chiang regarded the project of building a modern nation-state in Confucian terms, as a kind of a moral imperative. This recasting of the problem in moral terms narrowed Chiang’s scope for compromise with Mao. Most importantly, Chiang felt he held the upper hand in military terms, making it possible to force the outcome he preferred. Still, “virtue” precluded Chiang from resorting to more decisive action, such as assassinating his rival. “He is so evil, death would be too good for him,” Chiang wrote of Mao on 20 September. “But I still must tolerate [him] in the interest of the country, be guided by virtue, hoping that he may repent.”<sup>75</sup>

This hope proved illusory in the end, premised as it was on the false notion that Mao shared Chiang’s understanding of virtue. Mao had his own revolution with its own notions of right and wrong. Although Mao and his comrades, just like Chiang, were nominally committed to national unity, in practice they exhibited considerable flexibility. Their north-south proposal, correctly interpreted by Chiang as an effort to “divide the country into two parts—two states,” was an effort to freeze the status quo, putting the CCP into position to consolidate its power in the north while leaving the KMT in control of the rest of China.<sup>76</sup> This was unarguably a more realistic approach at the time. One of the CCP negotiators, Wang Ruofei, repeatedly stressed during the protracted talks that the only way to avoid a civil war was to “recognize realities.” The “reality” was that China was already divided, and this division assured the CCP’s survival. No exaltations of virtue could compel Mao to relinquish this bottom line.

## The Endgame

Negotiations between the CCP and the KMT dragged on through September and into early October 1945, with meager progress. Symbolic concessions were being made by both sides, as with the KMT’s agreement to postpone the

74. *Ibid.*, p. 471.

75. *Ibid.*, pp. 618–619.

76. Conversation between Apollon Petrov and Chiang Chingkuo, 7 September 1945, in AVPRF, F. 0100, Op. 33, D. 13, P. 244, Ll. 226–229.

convention of the National Assembly originally scheduled for 12 November, an occasion that would go a long way toward bestowing Chiang with much-needed “democratic” legitimacy and was for this reason much resented by the CCP. The Communist negotiators in the meantime backed away from their previous insistence on a coalition government, realizing (correctly) that Chiang would never give up the levers of power. Perhaps the most dramatic breakthrough of the talks was the agreement on the number of divisions that the CCP would be allowed to have: from Mao’s insistence on 48 and Chiang’s offer of 12, the two sides settled on 20, which was quite a bit lower than even Mao’s original bottom line of 25. However, this alleged concession was not a concession at all. As Mao explained to Soviet diplomats in Chongqing on 10 October, no matter how many divisions were allowed, the number of CCP troops would stay as high as the Communists needed. They would simply be reorganized into larger units.<sup>77</sup> Despite making scant headway, the two sides at last issued a joint communiqué on 10 October, “The Double Ten Agreement.” The next day, Mao departed for Yan’an, “looking thinner than when he arrived,” reported *The New York Times*. “The question about China is optimistic,” Mao announced on departure, “There are difficulties but they can be overcome.”<sup>78</sup> He never saw Chiang again.

Such poor results had not been completely unexpected. The diplomatic community in Chongqing was rife with predictions of a deadlock, because (in the words of one head of mission) “these two people [Mao and Chiang] have not only substantial political disagreements but also personal mistrust and mutual dislike.”<sup>79</sup> Among the more optimistic observers was U.S. Ambassador Hurley, who continued to believe, improbably late into the game, that “the rapprochement between the two leading parties of China seems to be progressing and the discussion and rumors of civil war recede as the conference continues.”<sup>80</sup> But this was mainly because Hurley was himself so deeply invested in the success of the Chongqing talks, crediting himself with bringing Chiang and Mao to the negotiating table. Soviet officials, too, seemed keen to see these talks to a fruitful conclusion. Stalin, whose pressure was instrumental in bringing Mao to Chongqing, appeared disappointed and even frustrated

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77. Conversation between Apollon Petrov and Mao Zedong, 10 October 1945, in AVPRE, F. 0100, Op. 40, D. 7, P. 248, Ll. 39–44.

78. Henry R. Lieberman, “Chunking, Reds in Limited Accord,” *The New York Times*, 11 October 1945, p. 3.

79. Conversation between Apollon Petrov and G. K. Officer, 31 August 1945, in *Sovetsko-kitaiskie otnosheniya*, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 215.

80. *FRUS*, 1945, Vol. VII, p. 468.

that the talks came to nothing, telling Chiang's son Chiang Chingkuo (whom the elder Chiang had sent to Moscow in December 1945) that the Soviet government "does not proffer advice to the Chinese Communists. It is not happy with their behavior. The Chinese Communists have not asked [the Soviets] for advice."<sup>81</sup>

Stalin was not entirely truthful here. In reality, Mao, Zhou, and Wang asked their Soviet "friends" for advice and even instructions. As Mao put it in a conversation with Ambassador Petrov, it was "fairly difficult for [CCP members] to orient themselves as they are not clear about either the U.S. position or the USSR's position in case of the outbreak of a civil war." Petrov did not go beyond the general recommendation to achieve compromise through mutual concessions.<sup>82</sup> Crucially, however, there is no evidence that Stalin ever pressured the CCP to back away from its key demands. If anything, by December 1945 Stalin was voicing certain disappointment that Chiang did not make greater concessions by allowing Communist governors for at least some of the provinces.<sup>83</sup> Stalin never explained how such administrative arrangements would work with the idea of one government and one army, which, he continued to insist, was important for China. His thinking on this point was marred by contradictions, which Mao fully exploited.

Mao closely followed the direction of U.S.-Soviet relations in the fall of 1945. The nature of the queries he made to the Soviet ambassador suggests he believed that the wartime partnership between Moscow and Washington could not last much longer. The CCP's internal instructions from this period put stress on "friendly" cooperation with U.S. forces, but Mao had no doubt that when push came to shove the United States would back the KMT against the CCP. Mao got a taste of what he could expect when he was confronted in Chongqing by Wedemeyer, who angrily demanded to know about the circumstances of the killing of the U.S. intelligence officer John Birch, who was gunned down and mutilated by CCP troops near the town of Xuzhou in Jiangsu Province. In a tense meeting on 30 August, Wedemeyer said he wanted a "full explanation" of the incident, giving Mao until 10 September

81. Conversation between Stalin and Chiang Chingkuo, 30 December 1945, in *Sovetsko-kitaiskie otnosheniya*, Vol. 4, Book 2, p. 331.

82. That is, according to the Russian records of Petrov's conversations with the CCP delegation from late August until early October 1945. Yang Kuisong argues that the Soviet ambassador conveyed Moscow's instructions to the CCP to deny Chiang certain strategic points in northern China (Zhangjiakou, Gubeikou, and Shanhaiguan), but he provides no source for his claim, and the Russian record does not support this interpretation. See Yang Kuisong, *Mao Zedong yu Sidalin: Enen Yuanyuan* (Nanchang: Jiangxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1999), p. 231.

83. *Ibid.*

to produce a “full written report.” Wedemeyer added that “as American commander I am going to use whatever force is necessary to protect American lives. I want to make this perfectly clear.”<sup>84</sup>

Mao was apologetic, but he was inclined to see U.S. troops as the CCP’s enemy. One of the issues he, Zhou, and Wang raised with the Soviet ambassador was what would happen if U.S. forces advanced north into Manchuria (into Soviet-occupied areas). They also wanted to know whether Moscow would help the CCP if it came under attack from KMT forces with U.S. support and what the Soviet Union would do if U.S. troops directly attacked the Communists, which was “the only thing,” according to Mao, “that the CCP is worried about.”<sup>85</sup> Petrov offered vague assurances that the United States would not go that far but advised the Communists to avoid coming into conflict with U.S. troops and to settle problems through friendly negotiations. By raising this issue with Petrov, Mao was clearly testing the ground for U.S.-Soviet frictions, but he also wanted to signal to Stalin that the CCP could be relied on to resist U.S. and KMT encroachments in northern China. If the Soviet Union backed Mao’s strategy of establishing control over the northern provinces and Manchuria, the CCP’s position would be immeasurably strengthened. By mid-September 1945, when the Soviet command established contacts with the CCP headquarters in Yan’an, it became clear that Soviet forces, while not actively helping the Communists in Manchuria, would at least turn a blind eye to their operations in the countryside.<sup>86</sup>

The international situation was rapidly changing—and Mao knew it. The key turning point was the London Conference of Foreign Ministers, which overlapped with the Chongqing talks, running from 11 September to 3 October 1945. The conference soon ground to a halt because of disagreements over the West’s recognition of pro-Soviet governments in Bulgaria and Romania, Stalin’s demands for a base in the Mediterranean, and his resentment at being effectively sidelined in the postwar occupation of Japan. Soviet leaders were clearly concerned that U.S. officials would be tempted to deal with the Soviet Union from a position of strength, reinforced by the U.S. nuclear monopoly. An influential Soviet diplomat, Ivan Maiskii, told U.S. Ambassador Averell Harriman that “the Soviet people think that as of late the Americans have

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84. Minutes of Meeting Held at Ambassador Hurley’s Home, 30 August 1945, in University of Oklahoma, Patrick J. Hurley Papers, Box 97, Folder 4.

85. Conversation between Petrov and Mao, 10 October 1945.

86. For a detailed discussion, see Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Sidalin*, pp. 230–231.



become somewhat arrogant, and are not even trying to hide it.”<sup>87</sup> Stalin’s response to this perceived arrogance was, in his own words, to “display complete obduracy.”<sup>88</sup> This did not mean he was now resolved to provoke an open confrontation. But he became increasingly suspicious of potential U.S. encroachments on Soviet interests in Europe and Asia.

One of Stalin’s main concerns in China was the impact of the U.S. “Open Door” policy and whether it entailed a demand for access to Manchuria, which the Soviet leader perceived to lie within his sphere of interest. The landing of U.S. marines along the Tianjin-Beiping corridor and in Qingdao from the end of September through mid-October 1945, highlighted the possibility of a U.S. military presence in the Chinese northeast, which Stalin deemed unacceptable. On top of this, in early October the KMT requested Soviet permission to land troops in Dalian on the Liaodong Peninsula, which projected southward from Manchuria. The Soviet Union refused, fearing that a rapid KMT military takeover could jeopardize Soviet gains in the region and potentially bring in U.S. forces through the “Open Door.” In November 1945 an actual shootout took place between a U.S. reconnaissance plane and Soviet fighters off Dalian, and isolated skirmishes took place between U.S. troops and CCP forces in northern China.

A 75-page political report filed by Petrov in December 1945 went to great lengths to highlight the perceived U.S. threat to Soviet interests in China. Petrov noted that the aim of U.S. policy was to turn China into a market for U.S. goods, while keeping it preindustrial and backward. The landing of U.S. forces in northern China was interpreted as having three related aims: first, to help the KMT defeat the CCP forces; second, to strengthen U.S. political and economic positions in the area; third, to plant agents to undermine the Soviet position in Manchuria. Petrov argued that Chiang was personally committed to these aims because the KMT “owed huge sums of money to America” and therefore had to subordinate his domestic and foreign policy to U.S. imperialism. This stark analysis, which egregiously misconstrued the dynamic of Chiang’s relations with Washington, suggests that Soviet officials believed they were merely reacting to a hideous U.S.-KMT plot to undermine Moscow’s gains in the Far East. Petrov stressed the apparent change in U.S. policy compared to just a few months earlier. Previously, Petrov wrote,

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87. Conversation between Ivan Maiskii and W. Averell Harriman, 12 December 1945, in AVPRF, F 06, Op. 7, D. 51, L. 69.

88. Cable, Joseph Stalin to Vyacheslav Molotov, September 27, 1945, in RGASPI: F 558, Op. 11, D. 770, L. 68. See also Vladimir Pechatnov, “The Allies Are Pressing on You to Break Your Will,” CWIHP Working Paper No. 26, Cold War International History Project, Washington, DC, 1999, p. 6.

the United States supported the idea of a coalition government, deemed it possible to cooperate with political forces other than the KMT, and did not fully commit to Chiang. But after Japan's defeat, according to Petrov, "Chiang Kai-shek and American military authorities engaged in a direct conspiracy against the CCP."<sup>89</sup>

In reaching these conclusions, Petrov relied extensively on intelligence materials. His report makes clear, for instance, that he had access not just to the highest level of discussions inside the KMT (where, predictably, Chiang made clear that his purpose was to annihilate the CCP) but also, curiously enough, to the correspondence between Hurley and the U.S. State Department. After seeing Hurley's cables to Washington, Petrov concluded there had been a "conspiracy" between the United States and the KMT to destroy the CCP. We do not know how Stalin reacted to such views or whether he even saw Petrov's report (it was circulated only as high up as Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov), but this way of thinking was very much in tune with Stalin's own dark view of the world. After the London fiasco, Stalin more than ever suspected the United States of attempting to undercut Soviet interests. He was just then preoccupied with what he saw as a U.S. effort to deny the Soviet Union its legitimate rights in establishing the control mechanism for postwar Japan, where, he raged, the Soviet Union "was not being treated as an Ally" and had been reduced to "a piece of furniture."<sup>90</sup> Developments in China seemed to fit the same worrying pattern.

In line with these changes of perceptions, Soviet policy on the ground in Manchuria also began to change. From mid-September, the Soviet command in Manchuria facilitated the Communist takeover of certain strategic areas. On 16 September, Soviet commanders informed Yan'an that once Soviet occupation forces were withdrawn from Chahar and Suiyuan provinces, they wanted the CCP to take control of the area. This was necessary for maintaining a connection between the Soviet-Mongolian army and the CCP. The CCP would be provided with weapons if it needed them.<sup>91</sup> Soon—according to Wang Ruofei, who mentioned this news to the Soviet intelligence operative Leonid Miklashevskii—the Communists were told they would be allowed to take control over the entire region from Shenyang to Shanghaiguan, thus

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89. Apollon Petrov, "Report on the Foreign Policy and Internal Political Situation in the Country," December 12, 1945, in AVPRE, F. 0100, Op. 40, P. 248, D. 4, Ll. 39, 58-59.

90. Memorandum of conversation between Averell Harriman and Josif Stalin, 25 October 1945, in *FRUS*, 1945, Vol. VI, p. 789.

91. Telegram, Yan'an to the CCP delegation in Chongqing, 17 September 1945: cited in Yang, *Mao Zedong yu Sidalin*, p. 231.

effectively barring large-scale KMT entry to Manchuria via land routes. Wang reported that the two sides (the CCP and the Soviet command) had agreed to increase the Chinese Communist presence in the area to 250,000 troops and that the CCP units in Shenyang had already been given fifteen thousand rifles, fifteen pieces of artillery, and other weapons. All of that, Wang told Miklashevskii, represented an improvement—at least in comparison to “the Red Army’s [previously] insufficient help to the CCP forces.”<sup>92</sup>

This is not to say that Stalin threw all caution to the wind. He continued to play both sides, partly out of concern that excessive obstructionism on Moscow’s part could give Chiang a pretext to accuse the Soviet Union of violating the Sino-Soviet Treaty. But a more important reason was that although he did not trust the KMT or the United States, Stalin was also concerned that by associating himself too closely with the CCP he could potentially be dragged into a situation over which he had no control. This had become apparent in early October, when U.S. marines in China skirmished with CCP forces along their route of advance. One might think Stalin would have been pleased with the Communist resistance to the U.S. forces, whose intentions Stalin had every reason to suspect. But Stalin was deeply worried that these skirmishes would somehow implicate the Soviet Union. To this end, on 16 November he ordered the Soviet command in Manchuria to halt military withdrawal and assist the KMT takeover of large Manchurian cities. “When the so called Communist regiments,” Stalin wrote on the telegram with an unsteady hand, “approach to take over Changchun, Mukden [Shenyang] and other locations, chase them away with force and do not allow them into these locations. Keep in mind that these regiments want to drag us into a conflict with the U.S.A., which we cannot allow.”<sup>93</sup>

Stalin’s position thus retained a degree of ambiguity even after relations with the United States took a turn for the worse. By mid-autumn of 1945 he had moved away from the uncompromising views he had held as recently as August, when he pressured Mao into negotiating with the KMT. The changes in his position were caused by perceived U.S. encroachments on Soviet positions in China, and one wonders in retrospect how things would have played out if the United States had been less eager to be seen projecting force close to Stalin’s sphere of interest. One could object to this by saying that, actually, the U.S. presence in northern China was extremely limited and its objectives there

92. Conversation between Leonid Miklashevskii and Wang Ruofei, 8 October 1945, in AVPRF, F. 0100, Op. 40, P. 248, D. 7, L. 110.

93. Stalin’s copy of Aleksei Antonov’s telegram to Rodion Malinovskii, 16 November 1945, in RGASPI, F. 558, Op. 11, D. 98, L. 144.

were more benign than the likes of Petrov imagined them to be (the main goal was to accept Japan's surrender rather than to fight someone else's civil war). The irony is that although the token U.S. presence in northern China did little to help Chiang in beating the Communists, it did more than enough to arouse Soviet suspicions. Still, the slide toward the Cold War was gradual, and the U.S.-Soviet relationship even enjoyed a short-lived improvement toward the end of the year, although the general trajectory remained negative.

With the Cold War logic increasingly making itself felt, Mao had reasons to believe that Stalin's pressure, which brought him to Chongqing in the first place, would abate. Of all the players in this multilayered drama, Stalin was the one who had the leverage to force Mao to yield to Chiang's demands. But Mao was only as adamant in Chongqing as Soviet leaders themselves had been in London—in fact, Mao proved far more flexible. As he told Petrov on 10 October, when asked about the results of his talks with Chiang, “one cannot say that they are good. But one cannot also not say that they are perfectly bad. The results are a little better compared to the London conference of [foreign] ministers.”<sup>94</sup> What could Stalin have said to that? The Soviet leader could certainly still deny the CCP entry into Manchuria, as well as the provinces of Suiyuan, Chahar, and Rehe. He could also transfer all of Manchuria to the CCP. Instead, Stalin tried to navigate a middle road. But even this ambiguous position was a blessing to the Communists, for it gave the CCP a much-needed breathing space.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

Was a chance for peace lost in the fall of 1945, and, if so, who was responsible? During a one-on-one conversation, Chiang made a passionate appeal to his rival: “The fate of the country is in our hands . . . if we cannot come to an agreement between ourselves, we will be committing a crime before future generations.”<sup>96</sup> But Mao and Chiang approached their talks from incompatible angles. Chiang, driven by a commitment to modernization, could not contemplate a return to the past, ideologically or emotionally. Chiang had led China on a long struggle to unity, bringing the country together by military

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94. Conversation between Petrov and Mao, 10 October 1945.

95. For a classic statement of this argument, see Steven Levine, *Anvil of Victory: The Communist Revolution in Manchuria* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 240.

96. As recounted by Mao in his conversation with Petrov, 10 October 1945.

force and political acumen, only to lose it to the Japanese. The end of the Second World War seemingly put national unity within Chiang's grasp, blocked only by the Soviet menace in the north and the Soviet-sponsored CCP. Having struck a bargain with Stalin by renouncing Outer Mongolia and agreeing to special Soviet gains in the northeast, Chiang believed he could force the Communists to abandon their "liberated areas" and give up their army. Anything less was unacceptable to Chiang. Having realized that "Mao the Commie" did not share these aspirations, Chiang rapidly moved to reassert military control in northern China and especially Manchuria, cursing U.S. officials for their "ignorance" and insufficient support.<sup>97</sup> Even with insufficient U.S. support, though, Chiang felt he could achieve complete victory.

Mao's game was altogether different. He initially planned for swift consolidation of power in the Japanese-occupied areas, including in central and southern China, but these plans mostly failed, as Chiang successfully prevented the CCP from taking over Japanese or "puppet" forces or Japanese weapons. More ominously, signals from Moscow made clear that Stalin wanted to avoid a civil war in China at all costs. He did not believe in the possibility of Communist success and feared that an outright civil war would jeopardize Soviet gains in China. Stalin leaned on Mao to engage in peace talks, and Mao, ever the pragmatist, flew to Chongqing. What he offered to Chiang was the division of China. Such division went against the notion of national unity, which was why Chiang immediately rejected it. For Mao, however, it represented a realistic chance of consolidating the CCP position and averting a civil war that, at this point, he could very well lose. The CCP turned to "defending in the South, advancing in the North," the military counterpart of the political aims Mao pursued in Chongqing. As the pressure from Moscow lessened after the London Council of Foreign Ministers meeting, Mao thought he could count on direct Soviet assistance, which was what he ultimately got in Manchuria, albeit not quite to the extent he hoped for. Stalin conceded by December 1945 that allowing Communist governors "for some provinces" was a good idea, as close as he ever came to endorsing Mao's scheme for the division of China.<sup>98</sup>

From Mao's perspective, the division of China was just a temporary step, another stage in revolutionary struggle. Like Chiang, Mao was driven by ideological considerations. But unlike Chiang, Mao did not see national unity as the most urgent task. The most urgent task was the survival and consolidation

97. On U.S. "ignorance," see *Shilue Gaoben*, Vol. 62, entry for 20 September 1945.

98. Conversation between Stalin and Chiang, 30 December 1945, p. 331.

of the CCP-controlled areas. Mao was not an agrarian reformer who could be coaxed into a coalition government with Chiang in which he would exercise no real power. But he was also not a fanatic who would plunge himself into the purifying flames of a national revolution without any regard for the balance of internal and external forces. Instead, Mao was a pragmatist who believed that the best chance for the long-term survival of the Communist project was in dividing the mountain, letting the two tigers roam freely in their own domains in preparation for a potential showdown down the road. It was impossible to tell when that showdown would come. If Chiang was not so keen to go on the offensive against the Communists, it might have never come. China would have been left divided but arguably on terms much more favorable to Chiang than to his hated rival.

The broader question that emerges from consideration of these events is exactly what to make of Mao's legacy. In the Chinese historiography, Mao invariably comes across as a "patriot" and a "revolutionary," which makes it difficult to contemplate that in 1945 he actually favored something as unpatriotic and even "feudal" (to use Zhang Zhizhong's term) as the division of China. This ideological casting of Mao finds echoes in the Western historiography, in the shape of the scholarly consensus that there was no "lost chance" with Mao or with China. The "lost chance" thesis looks primarily at U.S.-China relations and more at 1948–1949 than at 1945. This article shows that the scope of the debate needs to be expanded. If we regard Mao as a revolutionary fanatic in 1945, the same logic also applies to 1948–1949. All the arguments are nicely aligned on the ideological compass, pointing in only one direction: revolution, liberation, Communism. This may well be so, but such an approach ignores Mao's remarkable ability to postpone or even abandon his revolutionary agendas, an ability that was evident in 1945 but also characterized his policies well into the 1970s, with the U.S.-China rapprochement as the most obvious example. The issue was not that Mao ran out of "revolutionary steam" by 1972 but that his "revolutionary" agenda was severely circumscribed by pragmatic considerations—in 1972 no less than in 1945.

One can perhaps dispute this conclusion by citing a well-known Maoist maxim: "despising the enemy strategically while taking full account of him tactically." By this account, Mao's willingness to come to an accommodation in 1945 (by dividing China) was but a tactical ploy: His long-term strategy was something else entirely. This argument, however, does not hold because it reads history backward, projecting what we know about certain consequences of Mao's actions back on to decisions that led to these consequences. Mao himself liked to engage in such backward reading of history, crediting himself

with great foresight, though many of his decisions in 1945 were dictated by immediate circumstances rather than by long-term strategy. But even if we permit an element of strategy in Mao's thinking—so what? Where is the line that divides tactics from strategy, and when does one move from tactical gains to strategic outcomes—perhaps, using another of Mao's favorite maxims, in ten thousand years?

Taking this discussion to a yet broader plane, it all comes back to ideology. In the 1990s, historians of the Cold War highlighted the importance of ideological imperatives after the opening of the archives confirmed that policymakers on the “other” side of the Iron Curtain actually believed their own revolutionary propaganda. Whether with Mao, ever standing up on behalf of the Chinese people, or with Nikita Khrushchev and his comrades feeling like boys about the Cuban revolution, or with Leonid Brezhnev supporting revolutionary undertakings in the Third World because Karl Marx said so, or with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara waging brave jungle wars for noble ends, the New Cold War historiography seemingly embraced Cold War revolutionaries as, well, revolutionaries. The rest was tactics. Such an embrace, however, comes with the danger of buying into self-serving revolutionary discourses and, as a result, failing to understand that even the most revolutionary ideas in the most revolutionary minds, even as they shape the world, are also shaped by the encounter with the world, and that this process of shaping while being shaped (rather than a prepacked luggage of “ideas”) accounts for policy outcomes, and for chances taken and lost.

## **Acknowledgments**

The author is grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this article for their constructive comments and to the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation (in particular, Elizaveta Guseva) and the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (in particular, Vladimir Urazov) for help in conducting research.