The Reasons and Implications of Chinese Troops Withdrawng from North Korea in 1958

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As early as the beginning of the armistice talks of the Korean War in 1951, Chinese and North Korean side had requested that all foreign forces should withdraw from Korean Peninsula. However, the issue of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea was not settled by the armistice talks. After the Korean War, Chinese and North Korean side raised the issue again and again, at least three times: during the Geneva Conference in 1954, in April 1956, and in February 1958. Every time, the proposal of Chinese and North Korea side was rejected by the United Nation (UN)/United States (US) side. Nevertheless, Chinese troops completely withdrew from North Korea in 1958. Actually, most of Chinese troops participated in the Korean War withdrew openly and secretly before 1958. The troops withdrew in 1958 were only one fifth of all Chinese troops in North Korea when the Korean War ended.¹

Why did Chinese troops gradually withdraw from North Korea since the end of the Korean War and withdraw completely in 1958, while the proposal of withdrawing all foreign forces from Korea was rejected repeatedly by the UN/US side? Obviously, withdrawing all the Chinese troops initiatively could not achieve the objective of urging the UN/US forces to withdraw likewise. Then what was the real purpose of Chinese and North Korea side? Professor Shen Zhihua partially answered this question from the perspective of the relationship between China and North Korea.² Following Professor Shen’s research, and also inspired by Professor Chen

¹ Military History Research Department of Academy of Military Sciences, Kangmei yuanchao zhanzhengshi (History of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea), Beijing: Junshi kexue, 2000, vol.3, pp.519-520.
Jian’s analysis to Mao’s China, this paper will further study the issue of the withdrawal. On the one hand, it will supplement Professor Shen’s analysis to the reasons of the withdrawal as well as clarify some historical facts; on the other hand, it will try to indicate the implications of Chinese troops withdrawing from North Korea in 1958.

Giving that there have been few studies on the issue of the withdrawal, this paper will first review the evolution of the issue since 1951, to make the context of Chinese withdrawal in 1958 explicit; it will then discuss the reasons and implications of Chinese withdrawal respectively; and in the conclusion part, it will summarize this research and point out some questions to be deeply explored in the future.

**The Evolution of the Issue of the Withdrawal, 1951-1958**

As mentioned above, since 1951 Chinese and North Korean side proposed to discuss and solve the problem of withdrawing all the foreign troops from Korean Peninsula again and again. However, these proposals were refused by the UN/US side repeatedly. Although both sides agreed on the final objective of the unification of Korean Peninsula, neither approved the other side’s solution. Chinese and North Korean side insisted that all foreign forces (including the Chinese People’s Volunteers in North Korea and the UN/US forces in South Korea) should withdraw from Korean Peninsula first, so that the whole peninsula could accomplish the objective of unification without foreign interventions. However, the UN/US side asserted that the process of the unification must be supervised by the UN, and the UN/US forces in South Korea represent the UN rather than foreign forces.

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The issue of the withdrawal was first raised before the Korean War was ended. On 10 July 1951, the first day of armistice talks between the two sides of the Korean War, Chinese and North Korean side proposed that the issue of the withdrawal of all foreign forces should be negotiated in the following talks. However, this proposal was refused firmly and continuously by the UN/US side. At last, in order to start the discussion of such substantial issues as cease-fire, military demarcation line and prisoners of war earlier, with the approval of Stalin, Chinese and North Korean side agreed to negotiate the issue of the withdrawal after the Korean War.4

When the Korean War Armistice Agreement was signed on 27 July 1953, both sides of the war agreed that "within three (3) months after the Armistice Agreement is signed and becomes effective, a political conference of a higher level of both sides be held by representatives appointed respectively to settle through negotiation the questions of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea, the peaceful settlement of the Korean question, etc."5 However, the differences between the two sides led to delays in the convening of the political conference of a higher level, and finally it failed.

In Geneva Conference in 1954, the two sides negotiated on the peaceful settlement of the Korean, but differences were too great, the end was still unable to reach any agreement. On April 9, 1956, through the British Charge at Beijing, the Chinese government on behalf of Chinese and North Korean side issued a note to the UN/US side, proposed to convene a meeting of related countries to discuss the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea and the peaceful reunification of Korea and other issues. But the UN/US side refused the proposal, saying that

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there are fundamental differences between the two sides, met again only to repeat the Geneva Conference, and unable to reach any substantive agreement.  

In February 1958, the North Korean government issued a statement demanding the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea, then on this basis to come true the final reunification of the Korean peninsula through direct contact of North and South Korea. The UN/US side said it was glad to see Chinese troops withdrawing from Korea, but the UN forces would not withdraw. Because Korean reunification should be realized under the supervision of the UN forces which represent the United Nations.

While repeatedly proposed or requested the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea since 1951, the Chinese government had begun to withdraw its troops from North Korean secretly or openly after the end of the Korean War. In 1954 and 1955, there had been three batches of 19 divisions withdrawn from North Korea. To the end of 1955, the secret withdrawal of Chinese troops was up to 37 divisions (including artillery, antiaircraft artillery, public security, railway corps and other Special Forces units in total of 19 divisions). Since then, the Chinese troops remained in North Korea were only fifteen divisions, as well as artillery, antiaircraft artillery, the armored corps, logistics units, in total up to 250,000. In 1958, the three batches of 250,000 troops then withdrew North Korea.

On 18 September 1956, when discussing the joint intervention in the Korean Workers Party’s “August Incident” with Mikoyan, Mao Zedong pointed out that, it was possible that Kim Il Sung would request the withdrawal of Chinese troops because of the joint intervention. Mikoyan

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7 Military History Research Department of Academy of Military Sciences, Kangmei yuanchao zhengzhengshi (History of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea), Beijing: Junshi kexue, 2000, vol.3, pp.519-520.
expressed doubts on this possibility. Mao also pointed out that, “We are willing to withdraw troops. Now the situation is, Americans in the south, and the forces of Syngman Rhee are strong. It is Kim Il Sung who asked us to stay [in North Korea].”\(^8\) In January 1957, Zhou Enlai visited Moscow to help CPSU deal with the Polish and Hungarian Crises. On 9 January, he put forward the idea of withdrawing Chinese troops from North Korea and received the consent of Khrushchev. At the same time, Zhou Enlai may propose the Soviet Union to withdraw its troops from the Democratic Republic of Germany, but the Soviet Union replied that whether to withdraw depended on the conditions and timing.\(^9\)

On November 9, 1957, Mao Zedong met Kim Il Sung in Moscow and had a talk with him. Mao Zedong put forward the idea of the withdrawal of Chinese troops. At first Kim Il Sung worried that the condition for the withdrawal was not mature enough. Finally Kim Il Sung was persuaded by Mao to agree the withdrawal.\(^10\) After Kim Il Sung’s returning, the Korean Workers Party Central Committee (KWP CC) discussed Chinese withdrawal, and approved it finally. Meanwhile, KWP CC proposed two optional procedures of the withdrawal to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). CCP CC decided to adopt the first option, that is, first the North Korean government issued a statement calling for withdrawal of both sides, then the Chinese government to respond and support. Got the consent of the Soviet Union, Mao replied to Kim Il Sung and put forward the detailed withdrawal arrangement.\(^11\) In February 1958, Zhou Enlai led a Chinese government delegation to North Korea to discuss the issue of withdrawal of Chinese

\(^8\) Minutes, Talks between Chairman Mao and the delegation of CPSU Central Committee, 18 September1956.
troops. On February 19, the two governments issued a joint statement on the withdrawal. Since then, from March to October 1958, all Chinese troops withdrew from North Korea in three batches. Only the representatives of Chinese People’s Volunteers to the Korean War Armistice Commission remained in Korea after October 1958.

**Reasons of the Withdrawal**

From the evolution of the issue of the withdrawal, China had initially hoped through negotiations to achieve the goal of both sides’ withdrawal from the Korean peninsula. Thus, since the armistice talks began, Chinese and North Korea side repeatedly proposed or requested to hold consultations on the withdrawal of all foreign troops. However, because of the continuous refusal of the UN/US side, this goal had not been achieved. Nevertheless, most of the Chinese troops in Korea after the armistice were gradually withdrawn from North Korea openly or secretly (about four-fifths of the total number of Chinese troops in Korea when the Korean War ended).  

Before 1958, the reasons why Chinese government had not withdrawn all its troops from North Korea was that, the armistice on the Korean Peninsula was not stable, North Korea also needed time to recover and consolidate the rule of the KWP. Until 1956, after three years of rehabilitation and reconstruction, North Korea completed a three-year economic recovery plan, and proposed the first five-year plan of economic development. In April 1956, the KWP held the Third Congress. In the final report, on the issue of peaceful unification Kim II Sung pointed that

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12 According to the date provided in *Kangmei yuanchao zhanzhengshi* (History of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea). When the Korean War ended in 1953, there were about 1,200,000 of Chinese troops in total stayed in North Korea. And in 1958, the amount of all the Chinese troops withdrawn from North Korea was up to 250,000. So the total number of Chinese troops withdrawn before 1958 should be about 1,000,000, nearly four-fifth of the total number of Chinese troops when the Korean War was ended. See *Kangmei yuanchao zhanzhengshi* (History of the War to Resist US Aggression and Aid Korea), vol.3, pp.519-520.
“In order for the Korean issue can be resolved by the Koreans ourselves, all foreign forces, including the U.S. imperialist aggression forces and the Chinese People's Volunteers, must withdraw from North Korea. Foreign interference in our internal affairs is not allowed.”\textsuperscript{13} This shows that the situation in North Korea was basically stable in 1956. China could consider a complete withdrawal of its troops. Also on 9 April 1956, before the Third Congress, the Chinese government once again proposed a meeting to the UN/US side to discuss the issue of withdrawal of all foreign troops. So in September 1956, when prepared the joint intervention of the KWP, Mao Zedong pointed to Mikoyan that Kim Il Sung may request the withdrawal of Chinese troops. Mikoyan expressed his doubt to Mao’s speculation. Obviously, when tensions between Beijing and Pyongyang intensified due to Chinese intervention to “August Incident” of the KWP, the withdrawal of Chinese troops was not wise.

In November 1956, the North Korean Government proposed a solution of the Korean issue through United Nation intervention. The proposal was opposed by Chinese Government. After consulting with Moscow, the Chinese Government sent a memorandum to the North Korea Government on 8 December, stating that the United Nations in fact and legally entered the Korean War as one side, and the United Nations only recognized the South Korean Government, so it is not eligible for intervention; at present “conditions for comprehensively solving the problem of Korean reunification are not yet mature,” it “still needs a protracted struggle to achieve the reunification of Korea.”\textsuperscript{14} The Chinese Government also noted that UN involvement in a Korean peace negotiation was unacceptable since the UN had been a tool of US intervention

in Korean issues and all the socialist countries regarded the UN as an enemy on this issue.\textsuperscript{15} In January 1957, before Zhou Enlai’s visit to Moscow, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet government still thought that should be emphasized that, in the current situation, the Chinese People’s volunteers continue to station in North Korea “is necessary, either for the interests of Korean people or for the interests of the whole socialist camp.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus, in 1956 the conditions for the withdrawal of Chinese troops from North Korea were not yet ripe. China also needed to communicate with North Korea and the Soviet, in order to agree on the withdrawal.

At the beginning of 1957, Mao Zedong and the CCP leaders should have made the decision of completely withdrawing troops from North Korea. Therefore on January 9, Zhou Enlai who was then helping deal with the Poland and Hungary Crises in Moscow proposed the idea of withdrawing troops from Korea, and he got Khrushchev’s consent.

But since the Chinese intervention in Korea Party’s “August Incident”, and Chinese government refused to hand over some KWP cadres fled to China, Sino-Korean relations at this time was still “cannot be considered completely normal,” and “relations between the DPRK and PRC leadership have been of a strictly official nature. Personal contacts between party and government leaders are rarely maintained.”\textsuperscript{17} The CCP leaders did not immediately put forward to North Korea the idea of withdrawing its troops.

In January 1957, Mao Zedong formed the policy of “making the United States to be in an isolated position”. On January 27, at the Conference of Provincial, Municipal and Autonomous Region Party Secretaries, Mao gave a speech saying that, “We are in no hurry to join the United

Nations, just as we are in no hurry to establish relations with the United States. We have adopted this policy in order to deprive the United States of as much political capital as possible, so that it will find itself in an unreasonable and isolated position.” “The longer you delay [to establish relations with us], the more unreasonable your [position] will be and the more isolated you will became both at home in the United States and in [the area of] international public opinion.” In Yang Shangkun’s Diary, Mao’s speech also included these words: “[American’s] internal friends in China will be fewer. [We] should encourage and promote patriotism.” This means that not only to make the United States in an isolated position in the area of international public opinion, but also among Chinese people. The experiences of the negotiations on troop withdrawal with the Unites States showed that, even if the Chinese People’s Volunteers take the initiative to withdraw from North Korea, the UN/US forces would not be withdrawn. However, the contrast of the withdrawal of Chinese troops, while the UN/US forces not withdrawn, will make the Unites States in an isolated position both in the face of international opinion and among Chinese people. Therefore keeping the stalemate with the United States, rather than taking the initiative to withdraw Chinese troops which could make the Unites States isolated.

Through series efforts, before the meeting in Moscow in 1957, China-DPRK relations had gradually returned to normal. When Mao Zedong met Kim Il Sung in Moscow, Kim Il Sung stressed the independence of the legal status of the DPRK, and gave an detailed account of the “August Incident” which had conspired to subvert the North Korean regime. Kim Il Sung

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achieved Mao's approval and trust. On November 9, Mao Zedong told Kim Il Sung the idea of Chinese troops withdrawal and received the consent of Kim Il Sung. In the viewpoint of Mao Zedong, the withdrawal of Chinese People’s Volunteers, “can promote a number of countries also called for withdrawal of their troops in the UN/US forces, the United States would be isolated,” while also eliminating Syngman Rhee’s excuse of refusing reduce armaments in South Korea. On the other hand, “the Korean People's Army can relieve the guard of the military demarcation line, and gradually be skilled up.” “The withdrawal of Chinese People's Volunteers, benefit both China and North Korea politically.” “The current international situation is east wind prevailing over the west wind, and now the United States not dare to aggress.” “If the United States and South Korea dare to attack further north, the Chinese People's Volunteers can come back, since we are separated by only a Yalu River.” After a discussion of the KWP CC, Pyongyang endorsed the withdrawal of Chinese troops and proposed two optional withdrawal procedures to Beijing for advice.

Thus, the withdrawal of Chinese troops from North Korea had been a constant policy of Chinese government. Nevertheless, the final decision on complete withdrawal in 1958 depends on the situation changes in North Korea, the evolution of PRC-DPRK relations, and China’s U.S. policy. North Korea became basically stable since 1956, but because of Chinese intervention to “August Incident”, tension between China and North Korea intensified. Before Moscow Conference in 1957, China-DPRK relations got back to normal. Early in 1957 the CCP leaders established the US policy of “making the United States to be in an isolated position”. Under the

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interaction of these factors, Mao finally in November 1957 in Moscow Conference put forward to Kim Il Sung the idea of complete withdrawal of Chinese troops in 1958. Therefore the decision of complete withdrawal of Chinese troops cannot only be seen as Mao Zedong’s decision “to appease Kim Il Sung, and to further consolidate the China-DPRK relations.”

**Implications of the Withdrawal**

In October 1958, the last batch of Chinese People’s Volunteers returned to China. On October 30, General Yang Yong, the commander of Chinese People Volunteers, reported at the enlarged joint conference of National People’s Congress Standing Committee (NPC SC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Standing Committee (CPPCC SC). His report titled “On the Chinese People's Volunteers’ Work of Resisting U.S. Aggression and Aiding Korea since 1950.” Yang Yong's report and the NPC SC, the CPPCC SC’s resolution on the report, can be roughly summed up in four key words, that “Victory”, “Friendship”, “Anti-American” and “Reunification.” The four key words, embodies the Implications of the 1958 withdrawal.

First of all, all the Chinese troops returned from North Korea, marked the end of the struggle “to resist US Aggression and aid Korea”. Through summarizing the history of 8 years’ struggle since the Korean War, not only affirmed the great achievements of Chinese and North Korean people, but also proved the ability and confidence of Chinese and North Korean people to counter aggression.

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23 Primarily from the perspective of the PRC-DPRK relations, Professor Shen Zhihua argued that “In order to appease Kim Il Sung, and to further consolidate the China-DPRK relations,” Mao Zedong made the decision of withdrawal. See Shen Zhihua, “‘Chunchi Xiangyi’ Haishi ‘ Zhengzhi Lianyin’?—Zhongchao Tongmeng de Jianli Jiqi Yanxu, 1946-1961)”, pp.181.

Secondly, by emphasizing the Korean people’s support and help to the Chinese People’s Volunteers during and after the war, by emphasizing the great achievements of the North Korean people during the war and in the process of building socialism, the one-sided Chinese aid to North Korean shifts to mutual assistance of the two countries. Then North Korea’s status transferred from the merely assisted side to an equal brother of China. China and North Korea both clearly utilized the withdrawal as an opportunity to further strengthen and develop the friendship between the two countries. Before the withdrawal, Chinese People’s Volunteers continued to help the Korean people in various labors, widely carried out activities to learn from the Korean people and the Korean People's Army, and propagated the Korean party and government as well as Korean people’s full support and good-to-excellent care. When withdrawing, North Korean arranged lots of large-scale warm send-off activities for Chinese troops. Chinese government also organized large-scale activities among the public to welcome returned troops.\(^{25}\)

As for the visit of the DPRK government delegation to China, Chinese government arranged series of high-level reception, and actively promoted the friendly relations between the two countries.\(^{26}\) In addition, in September that year, the establishment of the PRC-DPRK Friendship Association, Korean People's Army directly sent military delegation to visit China rather than contact through Chinese People’s Volunteers, both marked the relations between North Korea and China became full equality. Zhou Enlai, in a conversation with Kim Il Sung said: “China's assistance to the DPRK, large but time is short; while North Korea’s assistance to China, the


\(^{26}\) See Liu Jinzhi, Yang Huasheng ed., *Zhongguo dui chaoxian he hanguo zhengce wenjian huibian* (Compilation of Chinese Policy documents to the DPRK and the ROK), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, December 1994, pp.1081-1111. The Chinese top leaders such as Mao Zedong, Liu Shaoqi, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and Peng Dehuai, all received and talked with the DPRK Government Delegation. 8 December 1958, the PRC and the DPRK issued a joint declaration.
amount is small, but time is long. From China's first Revolutionary Civil war to the Anti-Japanese War, many Korean comrades, including Prime Minister Kim Il Sung have struggled in China. Generally speaking, Korea’s assistance to China is more [than China’s assistance to Korea]. We should first thank the Korean people, [if the Korean people would like to thank China.]

This shows even more clearly that in the mind of Chinese leaders, North Korea has not been simply an aided object, but rather of mutual assistance and brotherly country of China. And this relationship of mutual assistance could even be dated from the founding of the two countries.

Third, the Korean and Taiwan issues were linked through the withdrawal. On the on hand, in order to promote the reunification of Korea, Chinese government withdrew its troops from North Korea. Meanwhile, Chinese government searched for its own reunification of nation. On the other hand, the United States refused to withdraw its troops from South Korea which obstructs the reunification of Korea. Meanwhile, the United States frustrates the Chinese hopes of reunification. Thus, Chinese government could attribute the responsibility of tension in Far East to the United States, and meanwhile convert the external tension to “source of domestic mobilization, helping to legitimate the revolution at home and to maintain its momentum”.

As Mao Zedong said, “Imperialist refused to leave. It is detrimental to the people, but it also has the role of educating the people. You want to oppose the aggressor, without an object, without a target, without a confrontation, it’s not easy to oppose. Now he ran up as the opposite and refused to leave, [this situation] played as the role of mobilizing the people all around the world to object the U.S. aggressor. So [the situation] it delayed to withdraw, is not surely and only

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27 Wang Ping huiyi lu (Memories of Wang Ping), Beijing: Jiefangjun, October 1992, p.495.
harmful to the people. Because it can urge the people to ask him to go away everyday: Why do not you go? ”

29 Before and after Chinese withdrawal, the relating editorials and commentaries of “People's Daily ”repeatedly stressed that China and the DPRK's sincerity and efforts of the peace and accused the United States’ role of creating tension in the Far East and elsewhere, and constantly demanded that the U.S. withdrawal from Korea. 30 One the one hand, this has played a role in exposing the United States, on the other hand also a reminder that China's surrounding environment is not safe, so Chinese people need to alert the U.S. imperialist aggression. Chinese government achieved the goal of mobilizing domestic public through the tension of the external environment.

Conclusion

As indicated above, this paper explore the reasons and implications of Chinese troops withdrawing from North Korea in 1958, primarily from the perspectives of the PRC-DPRK relations (especially the CCP-KWP relations), China’s US policy, the relationship between domestic mobilization and external tension. However, the reasons and implications of the withdrawal should also be further explored under a wider context, namely, the general situation between the capitalist and socialist camp after Moscow Conference in 1957. Moreover, these questions also need to be studied deeply, such as the specific process, reasons, and implications of the openly and secretly withdrawal before the complete withdrawal of 1958; the evaluations and reactions of the UN/US side to Chinese withdrawal.

29 Mao Zedong, “Speech at the Supreme Conference”, 5 September 1958. Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao (Mao Zedong’s Manuscripts since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China), Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian, August 1992, vol.7, pp.386-387. This passage of Mao’s speech refers to the U.S. and British forces refused to withdraw troops from the Middle East. However, it is also appropriate to describe the situation that the United States refused to withdraw its troops from Korea.