

2.3 North Korean invasion of South Korea, 1950

Conceptual understanding

Key questions

- To what extent was the outbreak of the Korean War due to Cold War tensions?
- Why did the Chinese become involved but not the Soviets?
- What was the impact of the Korean War on the development of the Cold War?

Key concepts

- Cause
- Significance
- Perspective

The Korean War was the first proxy war of the Cold War. When the USA took advantage of the Soviet boycott of the United Nations and implemented a UN police action, it intervened directly in the war between the North and South Korean governments. It is now known that the Soviets were involved in the war, but both sides studiously denied their involvement to prevent the war from escalating. Even though there was short-lived consideration of nuclear war, it was against the People's Republic of China and was not supported by US political leadership. Nuclear parity served as a deterrent to direct confrontation.

The division of Korea, 1945–1948

In the 1940s the geographical focus of the Cold War was Europe and the military focus was on nuclear weapons and technology. The year 1950 saw a change to both of these as the world focused on Asia and the resumption of limited, conventional warfare with the onset of the Korean War. The Japanese had annexed Korea in 1910 and so the issue that arose with Japan's surrender was how to administer this once independent country. In the Potsdam Declaration its freedom and independence were promised but what shape this would take was unclear.

Korea was an area of Russian interest dating back to the 19th century and the Japanese expelled Russia from Korea in 1904. In their search for a warm-water port, the Russians and later the Soviets saw this as a desirable area; when resources were found it made Korea even more so. Although Stalin did little concerning Korea during the course of the war, Soviet troops entered north-eastern Korea on 12 August 1945.

Roosevelt envisioned a trusteeship of Korea, supervised by the United Nations, and gained a verbal agreement to this at Teheran. In his vision, this trusteeship would last for 40 years to give the Koreans an



opportunity to develop before the country became fully independent. Officials in the State Department felt that Soviet expansion needed to be considered and checked, however, and when Roosevelt died Truman inherited an administration with split foreign policy. Consistent with State Department recommendations, after the Japanese surrender the USA was determined to claim part of Korea to stop Soviet expansion into the entire peninsula, by dividing Korea at the 38th parallel and occupying the southern part. The US military was opposed to the decision as it did not see Korea as being within its sphere of influence, and it recognized the historical interest of the Soviets in the peninsula and wanted to prevent conflict.

Nonetheless, policymakers prevailed and US forces occupied the southern part of the country. Somewhat surprisingly, Stalin acquiesced and instructed Soviet forces to halt at the 38th parallel. The reasons for this are not entirely clear but it seemed to be a combination of fearing the large number of US forces in the region, the US use of the atom bomb in Japan, and fear that Truman might broker an agreement with the Japanese in Korea that could prolong Soviet fighting.

North of the 38th parallel, the Soviets established a military occupation force but they gave the Koreans autonomy. After the collapse of the Japanese army, the Koreans established People's Committees that consisted of communists and nationalists who organized the distribution of land and food, and occupied the few remaining Japanese industries. These committees were instrumental in the Soviet occupation of the country. Among the socialists there were several contenders for leader of the newly liberated country. One of the main Korean communist leaders, Pak Han-yang, was in southern Korea trying to establish government control there; he was pro-Soviet but distant from the political machinations. Instead, the guerrilla leader, Kim Il-Sung emerged as a key communist leader but he was a strong nationalist who sought to expel foreign influence in Korea. He had spent part of the war in Moscow and worked with the Soviets and the Chinese communists. From 1945 to 1948 the main concern of the North Koreans was rebuilding their country as the Japanese had destroyed most of their infrastructure when fleeing. They also implemented land reform, ending a longstanding feudal system.

In the south, the USA was suspicious of the motives of the People's Committees and instead removed them from government positions. Instead, it supported Syngman Rhee, the American-educated president of the Korean government in exile from 1919 and kept in place the Japanese framework. Both of these decisions alienated the South Koreans. The government structure advocated by the USA was, in the minds of many Koreans, a continuation of colonial subjugation, and Rhee proved to be a brutal authoritarian ruler who refused to work with the National Assembly that was created in the south. Even though Truman was uncomfortable with Rhee's brutality, the USA kept him in power as ballast against communist expansion. This was the model the USA continued to follow for the duration of the Cold War that helped make the USA unpopular abroad: the support of dictatorships on the basis of their anti-communism.

During the occupation years 1945–1948, both the Soviets and Americans experienced uprisings in their respective zones. In 1945 the Soviets were confronted with riots due to shortages of rice and raw materials. In 1946, the USA blamed riots in the south on communist agitators and sought to suppress all leftist organizations there. Neither power thought that occupation was beneficial and both sought to withdraw their forces as soon as possible.

The tensions in the country were intensifying and, with civil war in China, the USA and Soviet Union alike were fearful of civil war in Korea. In August 1947 Truman proposed elections for all Koreans. The Soviets were hoping to establish a unified Korea that was pro-Soviet and thus rejected this suggestion; the North Korean population was 8 million and there were 20 million South Koreans, making communist defeat a near certainty. Stalin proposed that both the USA and Soviet Union withdraw their forces in 1948, but Truman rejected this suggestion and referred the matter to the United Nations.

In November 1947 the UN created the Temporary Commission on Korea to supervise the process of unification and selection of a new government. It suggested that supervised elections be held no later than March 1948, and required that UN representatives be admitted to Korea to observe the transition. The Soviets refused to grant entry to the representatives, so in February 1948 the UN decided to proceed with its plan in the south. The US wanted to withdraw its financial and military support of South Korea and thus supported this decision. Therefore, in May 1948, the UN supervised free elections by secret ballot and Rhee was elected President of the Republic of Korea. The UN recognized this country as its newest member and the USA made plans to withdraw its forces.

North Korea soon followed suit; in September 1948 the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was formed under the leadership of Kim. Stalin withdrew his own forces in December 1948, even before the USA had the opportunity to do so in the south. North Korea maintained close links with the Soviets, largely in the economic sector, and this created a relatively stable regime.

By the end of 1948, therefore, Korea was politically divided and it was highly unlikely that unification would ever occur peacefully. The withdrawal of occupation forces, desired by all the governments involved, made civil war ever more probable.

Causes of the North Korean invasion of South Korea, 1950

Prior to the opening of the Soviet archives, there was a western misperception that the Korean War was a product of Soviet aggression, but in actuality it was the North Koreans themselves who were responsible. Kim was determined to unify the peninsula as a communist country. However, North Korea was not a strong enough military power to act alone. It needed Soviet military and financial assistance, thus Kim began to press Stalin to agree to an invasion



of the south in early 1949. Although the army of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) outnumbered the South Korean (135 000 to 98 000), they lacked the weaponry needed to conduct modern warfare. At this point, Stalin refused, unsure of the US position regarding Korea, but following the Soviets successfully detonating their first atom bomb and the communist success in China, Stalin began to rethink his position.

The south also bore responsibility. Rhee had similar aspirations, but South Korea was also unable to act alone; it needed US assistance if it were to launch a successful invasion of the north. Additionally, Rhee wanted the USA to remain in Korea as protection against communist China and the Soviet forces. However, the USA was less willing, fearing that providing the assistance needed would provoke war and could result in conflict with the USSR.

While the USA might not have put Korea in its sphere of influence, its policies elsewhere might have led Stalin to fear US intervention in the event of an invasion from the north. In April, the USA issued **NSC 68**, which argued for a large stockpile of weapons and expansion of conventional forces. In the face of Soviet possession of atomic capabilities, the threat of nuclear war was no longer a deterrent. The document argued that the Soviets were determined to expand in both Europe and Asia and that the USA had to prepare for potential armed conflict.

There were other considerations. For example, Truman wanted to end the occupation of Japan. From 1946 to 1949 the USA provided \$2 billion to rebuild the economy, which many saw as a way to prevent communist expansion into the country. With the nationalist defeat, US fears of Japanese vulnerability were intensified and it tried to create conditions that would contain communism within Asia.

The US policy was ambivalent: it felt it had an obligation to engender democracy and stability but it feared Rhee's open hostility and aggressive attitude towards North Korea. The USA offered \$150 million for economic assistance and education purposes in the hopes of stabilizing the country and promoting support for Rhee's government, but refused to provide Rhee with the armaments he requested. In January 1950 the US Secretary of State Dean Acheson spoke to the National Press Club. He gave what is known as the Pacific Perimeter Speech, explaining that the US defence perimeter in Asia included the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, the newly independent Philippines, Japan and Okinawa – with no mention of Korea. Both the US withdrawal of troops from South Korea in June 1949 and the Soviet intelligence that the USA was wary of its support for Rhee influenced Stalin's decision-making when approached by Kim.

Kim argued that the south would welcome his rule and would willingly become part of the DPRK. In addition to petitioning Stalin, he also went to Mao, who agreed with Kim's judgment that the country could only be united through military action. Without US assistance the South Korean army was weak and poorly armed. Since the USA had excluded Korea from its sphere of influence in the Pacific Perimeter Speech, Stalin

NSC 68

A secret document produced by the American National Security Council issued in April 1950. It stated that the US needed to maintain substantial armed forces so that it could prevent Soviet expansion.

came to believe that the USA would not intervene if Kim were indeed to attempt to unify the country by force and thus in April 1950 he authorized Kim's plan to invade the south.

On 25 June 1950, North Korean forces invaded the south, taking the South Korean government and army by surprise. By the 27 June the North Korean army controlled most of the peninsula, including the southern capital of Seoul.

Consequences: US response and United Nations actions

The United States was truly surprised and shaken by this attack, and immediately referred the matter to the United Nations for action. In a series of swift and decisive resolutions, the UN agreed to take military action against the invading North Korean forces. This was made possible only because the USSR had been boycotting the UN over its refusal to recognize the People's Republic of China as the legitimate Chinese government. The resolution passed 9 to 0 and the UN agreed to send forces. Fifteen countries agreed to send troops to defend South Korea but the majority of foreign troops were American. US troops stationed in Japan were dispatched to Korea.

The USA was hesitant about this move; Acheson worried that the invasion of South Korea was a Stalin-initiated action intended to distract the world's attention (and military) away from Europe as a means of exerting Soviet influence. The UN leadership ensured US commitment to the action by giving the leadership of the police action to US military and civilian officials.

The UN forces were led by US General Douglas MacArthur who developed a risky but ultimately successful plan. Rather than simply battling the North Koreans in the toehold that the South held in Pusan, the UN armies launched an amphibious attack at the port of Inchon, near Seoul. The North Koreans were surprised by this tactic, and quickly lost ground to the UN forces. Not only did they lose their control over the south, but the UN forces chased the North Korean armies all the way up to the Yalu River, the Korean border with China by October 1950.

At the moment the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, the issue of the nature of the war was hotly debated. For those who were strict adherents to the policy of containment, it was argued that UN forces should not have gone beyond the South Korean border. Furthermore, General MacArthur was contemplating an attack on the Chinese army as a preemptive measure, and in an attempt to undermine the newly established communist regime there. Truman and Acheson both argued against this and stated very clearly that it was not the objective of the USA to attack mainland China.



Consequence of Chinese involvement

In the midst of this debate, and during a period in which the USA was congratulating itself for a rapid victory, Chinese volunteers crossed the Yalu River and launched a counter-attack against the US forces. In October 1950 Kim wrote to Stalin begging for military assistance to prevent the UN forces from crossing the 38th parallel. Unwilling to engage in direct confrontation with the USA, Stalin instead requested that the Chinese send in forces to assist the North Koreans. The Chinese communist army had been fighting almost continuously for decades and the CCP did not want to mobilize them yet again. They were also reluctant to engage American forces because they were poorly armed and unprepared for another war. In the end, however, Mao agreed and made plans to assist the North Koreans.

The Communist Volunteer Army Corps was created in October 1950 and 300 000 soldiers were mobilized; some fought with the North Koreans and battled UN forces while the rest were sent to the Sino-Korean border, awaiting instructions. Their surprise attack was very effective and once again the UN forces were driven south, out of DPRK territory and back to the South. However, in January 1951 the UN forces recovered their technological advantage and the Chinese army was forced to retreat.

Although the UN forces had technological superiority, the North Korean and Chinese forces had numerical superiority. In an attempt to prove their strength and assure a privileged position in the communist world, Chinese leader Mao Zedong provided unlimited numbers of “volunteers” to defeat the UN forces. MacArthur went so far as to suggest the use of nuclear weapons against the Chinese, something that Truman was adamantly against. The fear of the use of nuclear weapons was that the USSR would retaliate using its nuclear weapons, most likely in Europe. MacArthur was extremely vocal in his criticisms of government decisions despite an order to restrict public comments. He argued that direct attacks on mainland China was the best course to end the war quickly. Due to the public nature of this conflict, MacArthur was relieved of his command in April 1951 and replaced by General Matthew Ridgway.



▲ Korean War 1950–1953 including troop movements of North Korea (purple), UN and South Korea (blue) and communist China (red)

Meanwhile, the battle lines had stabilized near the 38th parallel, not far from the initial border between North and South Korea. The USA and UN decided that they would not advance into North Korean territory again, and ceasefire was called to discuss terms for ending the conflict.

From 1951 to 1953, the two sides were engaged in sporadic battles while ceasefires were declared, terms for armistice discussed and talks broke down. The main issue of conflict between the two sides was that of repatriation of prisoners of war. While the USA and UN forces argued for voluntary returns, the Chinese would only agree if a majority of North Korean and Chinese forces would return voluntarily and this did not happen. The war turned into a lengthy, costly stalemate for both sides, with the Korean populations in the north and south suffering the heaviest casualties.

Behind the scenes, and conspicuously absent from all discussions and official participation, was the USSR. Although it is now known that Soviet pilots did engage US aircraft in battle, this was kept secret by both sides, and the official position of the USSR was one of neutrality. It seemed fairly clear, however, that Stalin was unwilling to accept a communist defeat in Korea and this further complicated the armistice talks. Thus, the death of Stalin in March 1953 was of critical import to the end of the Korean War.

With Stalin's death, a power struggle ensued in the Soviet leadership, and Korea was not seen as critical to Soviet power and influence by those who succeeded Stalin. The USA was governed by a new President, Dwight Eisenhower, whose election was partially based on withdrawal from Korea. Thus, in 1953, the two superpowers were governed by men who did not see Korea as being in their interest. On 27 July 1953, the UN, North Korean and Chinese forces signed a ceasefire and agreed to the division of Korea near its pre-war borders; only South Korea refused to sign.

Impact of the North Korean invasion of South Korea

Korea was the first major war in the Cold War and its significance for all sides is great. Of paramount importance was the decision made by the nuclear powers to keep wars limited, and to not directly engage against one another in any official, legal capacity. The Soviet decision to remain neutral – at least officially – reflected this determination.

The USA questioned but ultimately stood by its policy of containment and saw the Korean War as a success in this regard. Eisenhower kept troops in South Korea and expanded Acheson's defence perimeter. The Korean War convinced the Americans that the communist world was working in concert towards global domination and took actions to prevent it. Devastating to the Soviets was the rearmament of West Germany and an indication of its inevitable NATO membership. The USA also intensified its espionage networks in eastern Europe, developing the CIA into an agency of covert operations.



Communist unity was not nearly as assured as the USA thought but both the Soviets and Chinese felt they needed to show a united front to the non-communist world. The relationship between Mao and Stalin had been uneasy but Stalin was the elder statesman and Mao respected that. Stalin's death heightened the tension between the two communist powers and in less than a decade they would split.

When the North Koreans refused to allow United Nations supervisors in to oversee elections for a united Korea, it seemed that once again the idea of an international organization that could govern and supervise sovereign states was impossible. The invasion proved to be a litmus test of its member states' willingness to act in support of its decision-making. When the USA called for military support for South Korea to stop North Korean forces from advancing further its allies responded in full force; a majority of the UN member states agreed to support the police action in some way and 15 countries agreed to send troops to support the South Koreans. The strength of commitment, however, was tempered by the Soviet boycott and the refusal of its client states to send forces. Even when the Soviets rejoined the Security Council they used their veto power numerous times to block UN actions in Korea. Thus, the Korean War demonstrated the weakness of the UN system: either superpower had the ability to block resolutions that went against their national interests, and their allies and satellites demonstrated unquestioned support for the countries they relied upon.

North and South Korea remained divided and hostile towards one another. North Korea's brand of communism and nationalism, christened "Juche" persevered but the country remained impoverished and underdeveloped. South Korea went through a series of governments that included six republics and two coups but was an economic success and thrived.

Source skills

In their own words: Kim Il-Sung

"The time has come when we Korean people have to unite our strength to build a new, democratic Korea. People from all strata should display patriotic enthusiasm and turn out to build a new Korea. To contribute positively to the work of building the state, let those with strength give strength, let those with knowledge give knowledge, let those with money give money, and let all people who truly love their country, their nation and democracy unite closely and build an independent and sovereign democratic state."

Victory speech in Pyongyang, 14 October 1945

To what extent is this statement consistent with North Korea's activities after 1950?

ATL Research skills

After the Korean War, Kim Il-Sung adopted the policy of "Juche", roughly translated as self-reliance. Why was this policy implemented in the 1950s and to what extent was North Korea self-reliant?

Research the policies of Juche and write a 1000-word response to these questions. Be sure to use proper referencing forms.