

Conflict in Korea

The Causes of the Korean War

Korea had been ruled harshly by Japan from 1905-45. After Japan's defeat in WWII, Korea was liberated, but instead of being made independent, it was divided at the 38th Parallel: the Soviet Union occupied the North, and the United States occupied the South. This was supposed to be temporary, but when talks failed, two separate governments developed – both claiming to be the rightful government of all Korea.

In the North, the Soviets helped set up a communist regime led by Kim Il Sung. He was backed by returning guerrillas from the Chinese Civil War and Soviet-trained officers, and by 1950 the North had a strong, confident, highly militarised state with tanks, planes and 150,000 soldiers. In the South, the Americans installed Syngman Rhee, a nationalist Christian who claimed to be democratic but ruled as a dictator. His government tortured communists, murdered protesters, and was deeply unpopular. But the Americans kept supporting him because they saw communism as the main threat.

Both sides prepared for war. Rhee hoped to reunite Korea by force and attacked the North in May 1949. Kim also wanted reunification and asked Stalin for permission to invade. At first Stalin said no, fearing a US reaction, but after China turned communist in 1949, the USSR exploded its first atomic bomb, and the US left South Korea without tanks or aircraft, Stalin changed his mind. In April 1950, he gave Kim permission. Mao Zedong also agreed to help. The plan for invasion – Operation Pokpung – was drawn up with Soviet support.

South Korea was in chaos. Rhee had lost the 1950 elections, and his government was falling apart. In June 1950, Kim Il Sung visited Mao, to make final preparations. On 25 June 1950, the North Korean army (NKPA) invaded.

The US and UN reacted quickly. Although Secretary of State Acheson had said in January that Korea was outside the US security zone, he now saw the invasion as a global communist threat. The US wanted to stop the spread of communism, protect Japan, and keep its status as a world power. US General MacArthur was sent to assess the situation, and ordered US airstrikes. Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Trygve Lie declared the invasion a war against the UN. On 27 June, the Security Council passed Resolution 83, calling on members to help South Korea; with the USSR boycotting the UN over China's membership, there was no veto. The US led the effort ... though they were going to intervene anyway (the UN vote gave them moral cover).

The Development of the Korean War

At first, the North Korean invasion was a disaster for the South. The NKPA's tanks and artillery overwhelmed the ROK (South Korean) army. Within three days Seoul had fallen. The ROK forces were unprepared, badly led, and had no weapons capable of stopping tanks. General Chae gave confused orders, and the Han River bridge was blown up without warning, trapping tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians. The ROK army lost 80% of its troops and 70% of its equipment in just three days. By early July, the NKPA had taken almost all of South Korea.

The first US troops – Task Force Smith – arrived with poor equipment and no real preparation. They too were routed by the NKPA. More US units followed, but the story repeated: the Americans were disorganised, under-equipped, and shocked by how well the NKPA fought. By August 1950, the US and ROK forces had been pushed back to a small corner of southeast Korea around the port of Pusan. There, they held out behind a defence line.

In September 1950, the US launched a bold counterattack. General MacArthur ordered a surprise amphibious landing at Inchon, behind enemy lines. It was risky but brilliant. The US Air Force dropped napalm to clear the way, and on 15 September, US troops landed. They retook Seoul and cut off NKPA supply lines. At the same time, US forces broke out from the Pusan Perimeter. The NKPA was trapped and destroyed: 200,000 casualties, 135,000 captured, and most of its heavy weapons lost.

Now the war changed. With the NKPA defeated, UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded North Korea. Truman had warned MacArthur not to provoke China, but MacArthur insisted China wouldn't intervene. By late October 1950, UN troops had captured Pyongyang and were approaching the Yalu River, the border with China.

China had warned that it would not tolerate UN troops on its border. On 25 October 1950, the Chinese 'People's Volunteer Army' (PVA) launched a surprise attack... then disappeared. The UN advance paused, then resumed. Then, on 25 November 1950, the Chinese returned in force: 380,000 men, highly disciplined, using guerrilla tactics, fighting in freezing conditions. UN troops were driven back in a series of offensives. Seoul fell again (January 1951).

The End of the Korean War

Re-grouping, the US forces again drove back the PVA. Seoul was recaptured a second time in March 1951. MacArthur invaded North Korea again. He wanted to use nuclear weapons. Truman refused and sacked him in April.

The war had become a stalemate. Both sides were dug in around the 38th Parallel. There were massive battles – Bloody Ridge, Heartbreak Ridge, Pork Chop Hill – but the front line barely moved. Shelling, raids, and air strikes killed thousands, but nothing changed. The US realised it couldn't win without massive loss of life. The Chinese couldn't break through either. It was time to talk.

Ceasefire talks had started as early as July 1951 but kept breaking down. The communists used them to buy time, and UN negotiators found themselves bogged down in propaganda. Eventually, in November 1951, both sides agreed on a 4-mile-wide Demilitarised Zone (DMZ) along the current front line. But one major issue remained: prisoners of war. About 45,000 Communist POWs refused to go home. The UN refused to send them back by force, and the Communists refused to accept that. Talks halted again.

By 1953, the pressure to end the war was intense on all sides. The Chinese had suffered over 400,000 deaths. There were food shortages in China, military tensions at home, and the risk that the US might use new battlefield nuclear weapons. Stalin's death in March 1953 also weakened Communist resistance to peace. When General Eisenhower became US President, he hinted he would escalate if talks didn't succeed.

A breakthrough came in April 1953 with Operation Little Switch, a small POW exchange. Then in June, a full exchange (the 'Big Switch') was agreed: prisoners would be given time to decide and India (a neutral country) would oversee the process.

The final problem was Syngman Rhee. He had not changed – he refused to agree to the ceasefire, still hoping to unify Korea by force. In June 1953, he released 27,000 anti-communist POWs in protest. In the end, the US persuaded him not to obstruct the peace by promising military aid, economic help, and long-term support.

The ceasefire was signed on 27 July 1953. But it was only an armistice, not a peace treaty. The Korean War has never formally ended.

Consequences of the Korean War

The war left Korea devastated. North Korea lost up to 1 million people and most of its working-age population. Everything had been bombed – factories, roads, cities. Even today, North Korea remains poor, militarised, and ruled by a dictatorship founded by Kim Il Sung. After the war, communist countries gave some help – trains, roads, hospitals – but far less than the US gave to South Korea.

South Korea also suffered huge losses – 1.2 million dead or missing – and had to rebuild under military occupation. The war kept the US deeply involved in Korean politics and military affairs. But over time, South Korea developed. By the 1960s it began an 'economic miracle' that became one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

The war also had global consequences, turning the Cold War into a global conflict, not just a European one. The US greatly increased defence spending, developed new nuclear weapons, and rearmed West Germany. It also formed new alliances like SEATO in Asia. The USSR responded by building up its army and forming the Warsaw Pact.

For China, the war brought both pride and problems. It had stood up to the United States and become a world power. But the cost in lives and money was huge. Relations between China and the USSR were damaged – China felt it had not been properly supported.

The United Nations had mixed results. Its prestige rose: it had acted to stop an aggressor. But from 1953, the USSR returned to the UN and used its veto constantly. Secretary-General Trygve Lie resigned, accused by the USSR of siding with the Americans.

There were atrocities on both sides. The NKPA and Chinese tortured and murdered POWs. The ROK army killed thousands of civilians, including 30,000 members of the Bodo League. Atrocities by US forces, like the massacre at No Gun Ri, were covered up or denied, but have since been investigated. The war was brutal on every front.

In the end, the Korean War solved nothing. Korea remained divided, and tensions continued. But it showed the world that the Cold War could turn hot – and that neither side was prepared to back down.