

CHAPTER 8

CHRONOLOGY OF THE KOREAN WAR

1945:

- The Potsdam Conference is held in July and August where the United States and the USSR agree to free Korea from Japanese occupation and to divide Korea at the 38th parallel
- The Korean Peninsula is divided along the 38th parallel in August after WWII
- The United Nations (UN) is established in October

1948

- The Republic of Korea is established in South Korea in August
- The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is established in North Korea in September
- Soviet troops leave the Korean Peninsula in December.

1949

- US troops leave the Korean Peninsula in June
- South Korea initiates border clashes against North Korea, between June and August
- China becomes a Communist state in October.

1950

- Dean Acheson gives his "defensive perimeter" speech at the National Press Club in January.
- USSR and China sign the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in February.
- North Korean troops cross the 38th parallel in June and attack South Korea where they capture Seoul.
- The United Nations sends peacekeeping forces in July to help South Korea
- UN troops retake Seoul in September
- UN forces cross the 38th parallel in October, capturing Pyongyang and approaching the Yalu (Amnok) River (the border between China and North Korea)
- China joins North Korean forces in the war in October

1951

- Chinese and North Korean forces cross the 38th parallel in January and capture Seoul
- UN forces counterattack and recapture Seoul in March
- North and South Korea reach a stalemate in June

1953

- North and South Korea sign an armistice to end the fighting in July.
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CAUSES OF THE KOREAN WAR

CIVIL WAR:

> Kim Il Sung (NK) and Syngman Rhee (SK) desired to reunify Korea under their own leadership and ideology.

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Division of Korea (1945):

- After Japan's defeat in World War II, Korea was liberated from Japanese occupation but quickly divided along the 38th parallel. The North was occupied by Soviet forces, and the South by American forces. This division was supposed to be temporary, but it soon became permanent as both sides established their own governments with different ideologies. Both governments claimed to be the legitimate ruler of the entire Korean Peninsula, leading to rising tensions between the two regions.

The North adopted a communist system under Soviet influence, while the South established a capitalist, anti-communist regime under US support. This division led to internal conflicts:

- One example is the Jeju Uprising (1948-1949), where thousands of communist sympathisers in South Korea rebelled against the government, resulting in brutal crackdowns and tens of thousands of deaths. Similar internal unrest occurred in the North, where Kim Il-Sung consolidated power by purging opponents.
- Border clashes along the 38th Parallel took place between 1949 and 1950. E.g., in July 1949, South Korean warships attacked North Korea's military installations near Taedong River, sinking most of North Korea's west coast fleet. Between 1949 and early 1950, many border incidents occurred. These were not large-scale battles, but about both sides testing each other's military capabilities, with raids, ambushes, and cross-border attacks.

These skirmishes were also significant because they demonstrated that neither side was willing to back down. The constant border fighting deepened the animosity between North and South Korea, making a peaceful resolution increasingly unlikely.

On 25 June 1950, more than 90,000 North Korean forces crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea. This invasion marked the start of the Korean War.

Explanation:

- How did Kim and Rhee's actions escalate tensions between both Koreas?
- North Korea triggered the outbreak of the Korean War by invading South Korea... but, does this mean that North Korea was to blame entirely? What was the part of South Korea in this?

PROXY WAR:

> US was determined to contain the spread of Communism from North to South Korea. USSR was determined to keep North Korea Communist.

Instead of fighting each other directly and risking nuclear war, the US and USSR often supported smaller nations that aligned with their ideologies in conflicts around the world. These conflicts are known as proxy wars because the local actors (in this case, North and South Korea) were seen as "proxies" or stand-ins for the larger powers.

Soviet Actions: The Soviet Union helped create and train the Korean People's Army (KPA), which would become the backbone of North Korea's military efforts during the Korean War. The Soviet Union also supplied North Korea with weapons and military equipment, including rifles, artillery, and vehicles. This military support helped to create a well-armed and organised North Korean military that was far superior to the relatively weaker South Korean forces.

Kim Il-sung repeatedly pressed Soviet leader Joseph Stalin for permission to invade South Korea. **Initially, Stalin was hesitant, fearing a direct confrontation with the United States.** However, **by early 1950, Stalin agreed to support Kim's plan**, in part because of the changing global context – the USSR had the atomic bomb, the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the perception that the US might not intervene directly (x-refer to US Defense Perimeter Speech which excluded South Korea). Stalin's approval came with the condition that Kim would also secure Chinese support, which he did. This backing set the stage for the full-scale invasion of South Korea in June 1950.

American Actions: Unlike the Soviet Union, which provided substantial military aid to North Korea, US military support to South Korea before 1950 was limited. The US did not initially prioritise building up South Korea's military capabilities because it was focused on stabilising Europe after World War II and was reluctant to commit to another potential conflict in Asia. The US did provide some military training and equipment to South Korea, primarily through US military advisers sent to help organise and train the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA). However, this support was insufficient to match the growing military strength of North Korea.

It was a matter of time before the North Koreans used their military and strategic advantage over the South Korean forces to attempt to unify Korea under Communist rule!

Explanation:

- Why were the superpowers interested in Korea? What did they stand to gain from being involved?
- How did American and Soviet support embolden Kim and Rhee?
- How did superpower support start the Korean War in 1950?

Police Action

> The idea that the US and the United Nations had to intervene militarily because North Korea's invasion was a violation of international peace – South Korea was an independent country.

When North Korea invaded South Korea on 25 June 1950, the United Nations, particularly at the urging of the United States, quickly responded. The UN Security Council passed Resolution 82, condemning the North Korean invasion and calling for a withdrawal of forces. When North Korea ignored this, the UN passed Resolution 83, which authorised the formation of a military coalition to assist South Korea. On 7 July 1950, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 84, which established a unified command structure for the military forces from member states participating in the Korean conflict. The resolution placed this UN military force under the leadership of the United States, with General Douglas MacArthur appointed as the Commander of the UN forces. The UN Command (UNC) was tasked with coordinating the international military response to the North Korean aggression and leading the war effort on behalf of the UN.

US President **Harry Truman** deliberately referred to the US involvement as a "police action" under the banner of the United Nations. This allowed Truman to act swiftly and decisively without the lengthy process required for a formal war declaration. By using the term "police action," the US aimed to present the intervention as a limited operation with the goal of stopping aggression, rather than a broader war. It also avoided escalating tensions with the Soviet Union and China, which could have seen a formal war as a much larger threat.

Explanation:

- Why did the United Nations get involved in Korea?
- What was the ultimate aim of the United Nations?
- How would you determine if this Police Action was a success (hint: think back to the aim of the UN)?

QUESTIONS

- 1) What actions by Kim Il-Sung and Syngman Rhee escalated tensions between North and South Korea before 1950?
- 2) Was North Korea solely to blame for starting the Korean War? Explain your answer.
- 3) Why were the United States and the Soviet Union interested in Korea? How did superpower support embolden both North and South Korea?
- 4) What role did the United Nations play in the outbreak of the war, and why did it intervene?
- 5) What does the term 'Police Action' mean in the context of the UN's involvement in Korea?

TURNING POINTS IN THE KOREAN WAR

What were the turning points in the Korean War?

> Incheon Landing (15 September 1950)

What Happened:

In one of the most decisive military maneuvers of the war, General Douglas MacArthur led a bold amphibious landing at Incheon, a port city near Seoul. The surprise attack caught the North Korean forces off guard, and UN troops swiftly recaptured Seoul and began cutting off North Korean supply lines.

Significance:

The Incheon landing was a major turning point in the war. It reversed North Korea's earlier gains, forcing their army to retreat northward and restoring much of South Korea to UN control. It marked the beginning of a large-scale UN counteroffensive.

> UN Forces Cross the 38th Parallel (October 1950)

What Happened:

Following the success of the Incheon landing, UN forces pursued the retreating North Korean army beyond the 38th parallel, crossing into North Korean territory with the aim of reunifying Korea under a non-communist government. By late October, UN forces had advanced deep into North Korea, approaching the border with China.

Significance:

This decision to cross the 38th parallel escalated the conflict and led to Chinese intervention, as China viewed the approach of UN forces near its border as a threat to its security. It shifted the war from a defensive conflict to an attempt to reunify Korea by force, changing the scope of the war.

> Chinese Intervention (October – November 1950)

What Happened:

Fearing the presence of US and UN forces on its border, China intervened by sending hundreds of thousands of troops (the Chinese People's Volunteers) across the Yalu River into North Korea. Chinese forces launched a surprise counteroffensive that overwhelmed the UN troops and pushed them back south of the 38th parallel.

Significance:

The Chinese intervention was a major turning point, shifting the balance of power. It halted the UN advance into North Korea and forced a retreat, leading to a prolonged and bloody stalemate. It also broadened the war, turning it into a larger Cold War conflict involving China, the US, and the Soviet Union.

> Stalemate and Armistice Negotiations (1951–1953)

What Happened:

After early 1951, the war settled into a bloody stalemate around the 38th parallel. Both sides launched periodic offensives, but the front lines hardly shifted. Meanwhile, armistice negotiations began in mid-1951 and continued intermittently for two years.

Significance:

The stalemate represented a significant turning point because it showed that neither side could achieve a decisive victory. As the war dragged on, political and military leaders began seeking a way out of the conflict, realising that a military solution was unlikely.

> Dismissal of General MacArthur (April 1951)

What Happened:

General Douglas MacArthur, who had been leading UN forces in Korea, was relieved of his command by President Harry Truman. MacArthur had publicly disagreed with Truman's policy of limiting the war, especially regarding his desire to expand the war into China and use nuclear weapons if necessary.

Significance:

MacArthur's dismissal reflected the US government's desire to avoid further escalation of the war. Truman's decision reflected a shift in US strategy toward seeking a negotiated settlement and preventing the Korean conflict from spiraling into a larger, possibly nuclear, war.

> Signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement (27 July 1953)

What Happened:

After more than two years of back-and-forth negotiations, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed. This agreement established the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which still exists today, and effectively ended the fighting, though no formal peace treaty was ever signed.

Significance:

The signing of the armistice marked the end of active combat in the Korean War. It resulted in a ceasefire that has held to this day, though technically, North and South Korea are still at war since a peace treaty was never signed.

QUESTIONS

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Why was the Incheon Landing in September 1950 a turning point in the war?2) How did the decision to cross the 38th Parallel in October 1950 change the scope of the war?3) Why did China intervene in the Korean War, and what was the impact of its intervention?4) What does the stalemate from 1951–1953 reveal about the military and political situation at the time?5) Why was General MacArthur dismissed, and what does this decision tell us about US war aims?6) What were the outcomes of the Korean Armistice Agreement signed in July 1953? |
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IMPACT ON THE COLD WAR

> Militarisation of the Cold War

The Korean War was the first major military conflict of the Cold War, and it showed that the superpowers—particularly the United States and the Soviet Union—were willing to engage in indirect military confrontation through proxy wars. The war signaled that the Cold War would not just be a political and ideological battle but could also involve large-scale armed conflicts.

The US significantly increased its defence spending after the war, expanding its military presence worldwide. The US and its allies began establishing military bases in strategic locations, particularly in Asia and Europe, to counter future communist aggression. This led to a more militarised Cold War as both superpowers increased their military capabilities.

Expansion of US Containment Policy

The Korean War reinforced the US policy of containment, which aimed to prevent the spread of communism around the world. Prior to the war, the US had primarily focused on Europe as the main battleground of the Cold War, but the conflict in Korea expanded the geographical scope of this policy to include Asia.

After Korea, the US became much more committed to defending countries threatened by communist expansion in Asia. This shift in focus eventually led to deeper involvement in conflicts like the Vietnam War, as the US saw the need to contain communism not just in Europe but across the globe.

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The US strengthened its alliances in Asia through the formation of defence pacts like the ANZUS Treaty (with Australia and New Zealand) and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, designed to counter communist influence in the region. This expansion of US alliances helped institutionalise the Cold War as a global confrontation.

> Strengthening of the US-Soviet Rivalry

Strengthening of NATO: The US saw the need to ensure that NATO was capable of responding to any future Soviet aggression in Europe, especially in light of what had happened in Korea.

The US increased its military presence in Europe. This included more US troops stationed in Europe and a greater commitment to European defense. Before the war, NATO had been more of a diplomatic and political alliance; after the Korean War, it became a fully militarised collective security arrangement.

In 1955, West Germany officially joined NATO and began to rearm. The Korean War accelerated this process, as Western nations saw the importance of having a well-equipped European front to counter the Soviet threat.

Creation of the Warsaw Pact (1955)

- The Korean War played a role in pushing the Soviet Union to formalise its control over Eastern Europe through a military alliance similar to NATO. While the Warsaw Pact was not formed until 1955 (five years after the Korean War began), the war made it clear to the Soviets that they needed to solidify their defense strategy in Europe.
- The creation of West Germany's military and its inclusion in NATO in 1955 was a direct trigger for the creation of the Warsaw Pact.

> The Division of Korea and Long-Term Tensions

The division of Korea along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) became a symbol of the Cold War, representing the ideological division between communism and capitalism.

The war solidified the division of Korea into two separate states, one communist (North Korea) and one capitalist (South Korea). This division has persisted to this day and remains a source of ongoing tension. The Korean Peninsula became one of the most militarised regions in the world, with the US maintaining a significant military presence in South Korea as a deterrent to future North Korean aggression.

QUESTIONS

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) How did the Korean War represent the first 'proxy war' of the Cold War?2) In what ways did the Korean War change the nature of the Cold War?3) How did the war lead to the militarisation of the Cold War?4) How did the Korean War lead to an expansion of US containment policy beyond Europe?5) What were the long-term consequences of the Korean War on US alliances in Asia?6) How did the Korean War lead to a strengthening of NATO and US military presence in Europe?7) What link is there between the Korean War and the formation of the Warsaw Pact in 1955?8) How did the division of Korea after the war reflect wider Cold War tensions?9) Why is the Korean Peninsula still considered a flashpoint in international relations today? |
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