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War in Korea (Overview)

After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union both occupied Korea after repelling Japanese invaders from that nation. The two occupying nations divided Korea into two regions along the 38th parallel, planning eventually to reunite the halves and withdraw their forces. As cold war tensions escalated between the United States and the Soviet Union, however, the United States in 1947 asked the newly formed United Nations to organize unification through national elections. The Soviets refused to allow elections in their zone, and the intended unification never took place. From these events arose a bloody civil war and a greatly expanded U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia.

Two Sides Emerge

The elections of 1948 in South Korea led to the formation of a democratic government for a new nation called the Republic of Korea. The Soviets countered with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (actually a communist government) in North Korea. Each government claimed rights to rule the entire nation, and each established a military presence along the 38th parallel. During 1948-1950, these troops locked horns periodically without any significant result. When the United States withdrew its troops in mid-1949, however, civil war seemed imminent.

Hostilities Begin

In addition to withdrawing its troops, the United States also stated publicly that Korea fell outside its area of Asian concern. North Korean communists—supported with Soviet supplies—seized this advantage and invaded South Korea in June 1950. A primarily agricultural country whose troops were far less trained than those of North Korea, South Korea struggled to defend itself.

The United Nations, which had been overseeing the region, condemned the attack and invited assistance from member nations. President Harry Truman committed U.S. troops and appointed Gen. Douglas MacArthur to lead them and multinational troops in defending South Korea. Heavy fighting continued for about a year, with the United Nations troops gaining ground through an innovative amphibious landing at Inchon. They later lost ground when the Chinese joined the North Korean side. Battle lines once again took shape around the 38th parallel, where they stagnated as truce talks began in July 1951.

It took two years to hammer out an armistice to end the war in July 1953, during which fighting erupted periodically. The two Koreas entered the 21st century without a lasting agreement, and their civil war changed little for the Korean people.

Lasting Impacts

Although the Korean War changed little inside Korea, it changed a lot for the United States and the United Nations. The United Nations took its place as an international arbiter in its first of many military interventions. The United States confronted its cold war policy head on and was forced to decide how much force and risk to take in a region where communist China loomed nearby and the Soviet Union clearly remained committed.

This confrontation led to Gen. MacArthur's dismissal in April 1951 because he advocated greater aggression and a wider military aim than President Truman, who feared a third global war. It also led to an emerging containment policy, in which the United States committed to intervene militarily if necessary to contain the spread of communism. From that policy and other actions evolved U.S. action just a decade later in nearby Vietnam.

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Harry Truman: UN Involvement in Korea speech (1950)

In his 1950 speech, President Harry Truman announces the military measures taken after North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Without obtaining a declaration of war from Congress, Truman ordered U.S. forces to the area before the United Nations voted to halt the aggression.

In Korea, the government forces, which were armed to prevent border raids and to preserve internal security, were attacked by invading forces from North Korea. The Security Council of the United Nations called upon the invading troops to cease hostilities and to withdraw to the 38th parallel. This they have not done, but, on the contrary, have pressed the attack. The Security Council called upon all members of the United Nations to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution. In these circumstances, I have ordered United States air and sea forces to give the Korean government troops cover and support.

The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. It has defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security. In these circumstances, the occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area.

Accordingly, I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action, I am calling upon the Chinese government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland. The Seventh Fleet will see that this is done. The determination of the future status of Formosa must await the restoration of security in the Pacific, a peace settlement with Japan, or consideration by the United Nations.

I have also directed that United States forces in the Philippines be strengthened and that military assistance to the Philippine government be accelerated.

I have similarly directed acceleration in the furnishing of military assistance to the forces of France and the Associated States in Indochina and the dispatch of a military mission to provide close working relations with those forces.

I know that all members of the United Nations will consider carefully the consequences of this latest aggression in Korea in defiance of the Charter of the United Nations. A return to the rule of force in international affairs would have far-reaching effects. The United States will continue to uphold the rule of law.

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ACTIVITY

Ranking Reasons for Military Action

In a 1950 speech, President Harry Truman announced the military measures taken after North Korea's invasion of South Korea. Review the transcript: Harry Truman: UN Involvement in Korea speech (1950), which can be found under the Reference tab in this Topic Exploration.

Think about the reasons President Truman gave to justify this military action. In your opinion, which is the most important? Which is the least important?

Now rank the following reasons in the order of importance. Put a "1" next to the reason you feel is the most important, a "2" next to the reason you feel is the second most important, etc.

_____ South Korean forces were attacked by invading forces from North Korea.

_____ North Korean forces disobeyed the United Nations Security Council's call to withdraw to the 38th parallel.

_____ North Korean forces continued to press their attack on South Korea.

_____ The attack upon South Korea made it plain that communism was using armed invasion and war to conquer independent nations.

_____ The occupation of Formosa (Taiwan) by communist forces was a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to U.S. forces performing their functions there.

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