

## War in Korea

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 U.S. and the Soviet Union, however, the U.S. in 1947 asked the newly formed United Nations (UN) 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.

### **Hostilities Begin**

The elections of 1948 in South Korea led to the formation of a democratic government for a new nation called the Republic of Korea. Centered in Seoul, the South Korean people elected Syngman Rhee president. Meanwhile, the communists countered by creating the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, led by Kim Il Sung and based in Pyongyang, North Korea. Each government claimed rights to rule the entire nation, and each established a military presence along the 38th parallel. However, the UN refused to recognize the government of North Korea, designating the South Korean government as the only lawful government.

During 1948–1950, troops from both nations locked horns periodically without any significant result. When the U.S. withdrew its troops in mid-1949, however, civil war seemed imminent. In addition to withdrawing its troops, the U.S. also stated publicly that Korea fell outside its area of Asian concern. Although the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from the north in December 1948, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin continued to provide military assistance and equipment to the northern communists.

North Korean communists invaded South Korea in June 1950. Supported by both Stalin and the China's Mao Zedong, the North Korean military had a clear advantage. The Soviets provided the North Koreans with tanks, trucks, aircrafts, and automatic weapons, while China released and delivered seasoned soldiers, who were Korean nationals that had fought against Japan in the Chinese Civil War. On the other hand, as a primarily agricultural country whose troops were far less trained than those of North Korea, South Korea struggled to defend itself. Seoul fell to the North Koreans on June 28, 1950.

### **International and U.S. Involvement**

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 attack, called the Inchon landing. Initially, the goal of foreign intervention was to maintain the existence of two nations on the Korean peninsula. The UN forces succeeded in pushing the North Korean troops back across the 38th parallel in September 1950.

On October 1, South Korean troops crossed the border into North Korea, taking on the offensive position. Although the UN forces remained apprehensive about crossing into North Korean territory, the South Korean troops forged ahead and the UN General Assembly passed a new

resolution stipulating the reunification of the two Korean states under a democratic government. With this new resolution in place, MacArthur and the UN forces crossed into North Korea on October 9 with the intention of destroying the North Korean army. Ten days later South Korean and UN forces captured the North Korean capital of Pyongyang.

At this point in the conflict, China joined the North Korean side, although unofficially. China sent in more than a million soldiers from the Chinese People's Volunteer Army to aid North Korea. The Chinese military forced South Korean and UN troops back across the 38th parallel into South Korea. The UN forfeited its goal of attempting to unify the Korean peninsula under one democratic government. Battle lines once again took shape around the 38th parallel, where they stagnated as truce talks began in July 1951.

### **Armistice**

However, armed conflict continued amidst these peace talks, including the Battle of Bloody Ridge, which turned into the Battle of Heartbreak Ridge. It took two years to hammer out an armistice to end the war, which was reached in July 1953. In April 1951, Truman removed MacArthur from command and replaced him with Gen. Matthew Ridgway. In November 1952, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower became president of the U.S. and called for the end of the war. Later in March, Stalin's death further facilitated the peace talks. The two Koreas entered the 21st century without a lasting agreement, and their civil war cemented the division between North and South.

Furthermore, the devastation of the Korean War is apparent in the number of people killed in the conflict. Approximately 34,000 Americans were killed in action, while the number of South Koreans killed in action numbered 70,000. On the other side, more than one million Chinese soldiers died and around 500,000 North Koreans. The number of Korean civilians killed in the conflict fell close to three million.

### **Lasting Impacts**

The Korean War also impacted the U.S. and the United Nations. The United Nations took its place as an international arbiter in its first of many military interventions. The U.S. 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. Although both the U.S. and the Soviet Union interfered on opposite sides, both countries attempted to administer aid covertly, seeking to avoid a full-blown war. However, the struggle between democratic capitalism and communism played out using North Korea and South Korea as proxies and served to illustrate the Cold War tensions that developed between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

This confrontation led to MacArthur's dismissal in April 1951 because he advocated greater aggression and a wider military aim than Truman, who feared a third global war. It also led to an emerging containment policy, in which the U.S. 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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