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The Korean War (1953)

Historical Security Council

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Introduction

The Korean War (1950-1953) stands as one of the most significant conflicts of the Cold War, showing the ideological battle between communism and democracy that defined mid-20th-century geopolitics. Beginning with North Korea's invasion of South Korea in June 1950, the war quickly escalated into a proxy conflict involving major global powers, including the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. Despite the signing of an armistice in 1953, the Korean peninsula remains divided, with hostilities between North and South Korea persisting to this day. This unresolved conflict highlights the enduring challenges of Cold War diplomacy and regional instability.

The roots of the war lay in the division of Korea along the 38th parallel after World War II, which created two ideologically opposed states. The North, under Kim Il-sung, sought to unify Korea under a communist regime, while the South, led by Syngman Rhee, was supported by Western democracies, particularly the United States. The invasion in 1950 prompted a swift military response from a United Nations coalition led by the United States. China entered the war to support the North, significantly altering the course of the conflict. The subsequent three years of brutal fighting resulted in millions of casualties and a devastated peninsula, but no definitive winner.

The war demanded complex military strategies, international negotiations, and diplomatic manoeuvring as the superpowers sought to avoid a larger global conflict. Despite the armistice agreement, the Korean War left a lasting mark on international relations, with its unresolved status continuing to shape security dynamics in Northeast Asia.

Key Terms

Cold War: The global power struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States, which shapes the political context of the Korean War

38th Parallel: The pre-war boundary and subsequent dividing line between North Korea and South Korea.

Containment Policy: The U.S. strategy to prevent the spread of Communism

Domino Theory: The belief that the fall of one country to communism could trigger others to follow, motivating global intervention.

Demilitarised Zones (DMZ): A heavily fortified buffer zone between North and South Korea, symbolising the ongoing division.

UNSC Resolution 82: On June 25, 1950, the UNSC condemned North Korea's invasion of South Korea

UNSC Resolution 83: Signed on June 27, 1950, the UNSC recommended that member states provide assistance to repel the attack.

Kim Il-Sung: Supreme Leader of North Korea, responsible for initiating the invasion of South Korea.

Syngman Rhee: “Democratically elected” president of South Korea, whose anti-communist stance made him a key U.S. ally. Syngman Rhee was a committed nationalist keen on ruling a unified, independent Korea.

Douglas C. MacArthur: General who commanded the Allies in the Southwest Pacific during World War II, oversaw Japan's post-war occupation, and commanded the UN forces during the first phases of the Korean War. It was MacArthur who engineered the amphibious assault on Incheon. As he got older, MacArthur became increasingly egotistical, and he began countermanding Truman's order in Korea. With the backing of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Truman relieved MacArthur of his command on April 11th 1951.

United States of America: Played a dominant role in military operations under the UN Command.

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR): Supported North Korea with military supplies and strategic guidance but avoided direct confrontation.

North Korean People's Army (NKPA): The Official army of North Korea.

Pusan: Located on the southeast tip of the Korean peninsula, it was one of Korea's greatest ports. After the initial North Korean invasion in 1950, ROK forces were pushed back to Pusan.

X Corps: MacArthur's Marines, responsible for the Incheon Invasion.

General Overview

The Korean War (1950-1953) was one of the major conflicts of the Cold War, highlighting the deep ideological divisions between communism and capitalism on the global stage. The war emerged from the division of Korea along the 38th parallel following World War II, with the Soviet Union occupying the North and the United States overseeing the South. This division set the stage for competing regimes: the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Kim Il-Sung in the North and the capitalist Republic of Korea (ROK) under Syngman Rhee in the South.

Origins of the Conflict

The roots of the Korean War lie in escalating geopolitical tensions fueled by the Cold War rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States. Following World War II, the two powers divided Korea along the 38th parallel, creating two governments, each claiming sovereignty over the entire peninsula. The North, under communist leader Kim Il-sung and backed by the Soviet Union, sought to unify Korea under its control, while the South, led by Syngman Rhee and supported by the U.S., aimed to do the same.

Tensions erupted on June 25, 1950, when North Korean forces, equipped and supported by the Soviet Union, launched a surprise invasion of South Korea. The attack swiftly overran much of the South, including Seoul, escalating the conflict into open warfare. North Korea's actions were later bolstered by Chinese military support, further intensifying the situation.

The invasion drew swift international condemnation and prompted the United Nations to intervene, condemning the attack as an act of aggression. This led to a multinational coalition under U.S. leadership, marking the beginning of a major international military response aimed at repelling the invasion and restoring peace on the peninsula.

Major Parties Involved

The Republic of Korea (South Korea)

The Republic of Korea played a central role as the primary target of the North Korean invasion. Established in 1948 under the leadership of Syngman Rhee, South Korea was founded with strong anti-communist policies and aimed to establish a stable, capitalist state. Despite these aspirations, South Korea was ill-prepared for military conflict at the onset of the Korean War. Its military forces were underdeveloped, poorly equipped, and lacking in training compared to North Korea.

South Korea faced immense devastation during the initial stages of the war, with its capital, Seoul, quickly falling to North Korean forces. The early defeats underscored the South's dependence on external support for survival. The United States and the United Nations quickly became South Korea's principal allies, providing critical reinforcements, supplies, and military leadership. Throughout the war, South Korea also experienced massive displacement and loss of life among civilians, solidifying the war's impact as a national tragedy and shaping its post-war identity.

The Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (North Korea)

North Korea, officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), was the instigator of the conflict, launching an all-out invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950. Led by Kim Il-sung, North Korea was strongly supported by the Soviet Union, which helped establish its communist regime after World War II. Kim's government promoted a vision of reunifying the Korean Peninsula under communist rule, a goal that defined the DPRK's foreign and domestic policy. The Soviet Union's backing enabled North Korea to develop a well-trained and well-equipped military, including tanks, artillery, and air support.

The DPRK began the war with remarkable success, capturing Seoul within days and pushing South Korean and UN forces back to the Pusan Perimeter, a small defensive area in the southeastern corner of the peninsula. As the war continued, North Korea relied on extensive Soviet material support and Chinese military intervention to sustain its war effort. Despite their initial gains, North Korean forces faced significant setbacks when UN forces counterattacked. The war ended with North Korea failing to achieve reunification but securing its communist regime in the northern half of the peninsula, entrenched as a militarized state and major player in Cold War geopolitics.

The United States of America

The United States was the principal leader of the international coalition that intervened in the Korean War under the United Nations' mandate. Viewing the North Korean invasion as a direct challenge to its policy of containment and a potential precursor to broader communist expansion, the U.S. acted swiftly to organize a military response. President Harry S. Truman framed the conflict not merely as a regional dispute but as a pivotal battleground in the global fight between democracy and communism.

American forces accounted for the majority of the United Nations Command (UNC), providing more than 90% of the troops, airpower, and naval support. General Douglas MacArthur was appointed as the commanding officer, leading a series of campaigns that shifted the momentum of the war, including the daring Incheon Landing, which pushed North Korean forces back beyond the 38th parallel. However, U.S. involvement came with challenges, including a prolonged stalemate after Chinese intervention and domestic debates over the war's scope and costs. The war also strained U.S. military resources and intensified the arms race with the Soviet Union, influencing broader Cold War strategies.

The United Nations

The United Nations played a pivotal role in responding to North Korea's aggression, marking its first significant test as an international peacekeeping body. On June 25, 1950, the UN Security Council convened an emergency session and passed Resolution 82, condemning the invasion and demanding North Korea's withdrawal. Days later, with the Soviet Union absent due to its boycott over China's representation, the Security Council passed Resolution 84, authorizing the formation of a multinational military force under UN auspices.

This force, known as the United Nations Command (UNC), consisted of contributions from 16 member states, including military forces from countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Turkey, Australia, and the Philippines. Other nations provided medical and logistical support. The UN's involvement symbolized an unprecedented level of international cooperation, but it also highlighted Cold War tensions, as decisions often reflected the interests of Western bloc nations under U.S. leadership. The Korean War solidified the UN's role as a platform for

collective security, although its ability to act was contingent on the absence of vetoes from major powers.

The Soviet Union

The Soviet Union played a critical, albeit indirect, role in the Korean War, backing North Korea both strategically and materially. Under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union had a direct hand in establishing Kim Il-sung's government after World War II and remained a key supporter of North Korea's military capabilities. The Soviet Union provided weapons, advisors, and training, enabling North Korea to build an army capable of launching its invasion of the South.

While the Soviet Union refrained from direct combat involvement to avoid a broader war with the United States, Soviet advisors assisted with military planning, and Soviet-made equipment—including T-34 tanks—gave North Korean forces a significant initial advantage. Furthermore, Soviet pilots covertly flew combat missions for the North, operating under Chinese or Korean cover. The Korean War became a proxy conflict for the Cold War, allowing the Soviet Union to challenge U.S. influence without confrontation, but it also deepened global divisions and escalated the arms race.

The People's Republic of China

China's involvement in the Korean War was transformative and marked its emergence as a significant player in Cold War geopolitics. Led by Mao Zedong, China viewed the conflict as a direct threat to its national security, particularly after UN forces pushed North Korean troops back toward the Yalu River, which bordered China. Concerned about the prospect of American forces near its borders, China intervened in October 1950, deploying the People's Volunteer Army (PVA) under General Peng Dehuai.

Chinese troops played a decisive role in reversing UN gains, forcing a retreat and creating a prolonged stalemate along the frontlines. The intervention demonstrated China's military capability and commitment to supporting communist allies. While costly in terms of lives and resources, China's involvement solidified its influence in East Asia, bolstered its alliance with North Korea, and deepened its rivalry with the United States. The war also contributed to the isolation of China from the Western bloc, as U.S. policy shifted to contain both Soviet and Chinese communism.

Timeline of Key Events(C)

2 September 1945 - Japan signs a surrender document, ending the Pacific Theater of WW2 and kick-starting the split of Korea into two sides, North and South, the removal of Japanese troops overseen by the US and USSR respectively

20 July 1948 - Syngman Rhee is elected as the first president of South Korea

15 August 1948 - North and South Korea are officially divided and declared independent nations under the international trusteeship of the allied powers until it's deemed fit to become independent. A demilitarized zone is established along the 38th parallel, the Korean Peninsula.

9 September 1948 - In retaliation, the USSR establishes North Korea as an official nation with the leader, Kim Il-sung

25 June 1950 - The Korean People's Army (KPA), with the support of the USSR, launches an invasion of the South. The UN denounces the attack.

14 September 1950 - The North Koreans push far into South territory, having taken over Seoul and closing in on Pusan, the last South-controlled part.

7 July 1950 - The Security Council held their 476th meeting and passed Resolution 84, calling for the formation of the United Nations Command to provide military support for South Korea. The member states of the USSR (boycotting) and the Republic of China(not recognised) were not present.

10-19 September 1950 - The Amphibious UN Task Force, comprised of 16 nations entered Korea from the Shores of Inchon, followed by a surprise attack on the North Korean Army (Korean People's Army), quickly securing Inchon.

27th September 1950 - Seoul is recaptured and the Korean People's Army (KPA) is partially severed from their supply chains in South Korea. These offensives were led by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur of the United States.

1st - 9th October 1950 - Republic of Korea (ROK) forces, with the aid of the UN task force, started to cross the 38th Parallel to turn their offensive towards the North Korean capital, P'yongyang.

10th October 1950 - ROK captures a large portion of Wonsan.

19th October 1950 - ROK and US forces capture the Capital, P'yongyang.

1-2 November 1950 - UN forces moved far North, towards the Yalu River where the meted out by counter-offensive, aided by the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF), their first battle taking place near Unsan.

5th December 1950 - The NPK with the aid of the CCF drove the US forces back, resulting in a fallback out of P'yongyang

5th January 1951 - A new CCF offensive starts, forcing the UN forces to retreat, Seoul falls and the Port of Inchon is abandoned.

15th March 1951 - After several territorial battles with little movement along the 38th parallel, the UN troops were finally able to re-enter Seoul.

11th April 1951 - General Douglas MacArthur is dishonorably discharged by President Truman who believed MacArthur had overstepped his authority and was contradicting the current administration's interests to end the war. He is replaced by General Ridgeway

23 June - 23 August 1951 - The Soviet Union calls for an armistice, to which the UN agrees, leading to peace talks being held at Kaesong which are eventually broken off by the Soviets

1952 - The war continues throughout 1952

30th January 1953 - Harry S. Truman is succeeded by Dwight D. Eisenhower who instantly planned to re-attempt peace talks and eventually an Armistice.

26th April 1953 - Armistice talks begin again.

27th July 1953 - The Armistice Agreement was signed at 10:00, leading to all fighting to stop twelve hours later, both sides had three days to withdraw kilometres from the cease-fire line.

The war ends

UN Involvement

The United Nations, under the leadership of the United States, swiftly responded to the outbreak of the Korean War with a series of decisive actions aimed at restoring peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. On June 25, 1950, the same day the war began, the Security Council convened an emergency session. It passed Resolution 82, which condemned the invasion by North Korean forces and called for their immediate withdrawal back to the 38th parallel. This resolution emphasised the principle of territorial sovereignty and the illegality of aggressive war under the UN Charter.

When North Korea disregarded the resolution, the Security Council took a further step by passing Resolution 84 on July 7, 1950, which authorized the formation of a United Nations Command (UNC) to assist South Korea in repelling the invasion. This resolution empowered member states to contribute troops, supplies, and support to a coordinated military effort led by the United States. President Harry S. Truman designated General Douglas MacArthur as the commander of the UNC, symbolizing the central role of the U.S. in leading the campaign.

Resolution 84 marked a pivotal moment in international relations and peacekeeping history as it represented the first major deployment of a multinational military force under the auspices of the United Nations. This coalition ultimately included contributions from 16 member nations, with the majority of forces provided by the United States. Troops from countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Turkey, and the Philippines played significant roles, while others offered medical, logistical, and advisory support. The operation showcased the global community's collective determination to counter aggression, but also highlighted the influence of Cold War alliances on the Security Council, as the Soviet Union boycotted the vote, ensuring its passage without veto.

The deployment under UN authority underscored the organization's evolving role as an arbiter of international peace, signalling the emergence of peace enforcement actions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. However, the intervention also sparked debates over sovereignty, the legality of collective security actions, and the UN's impartiality, themes that have persisted in international discourse to this day.

The Security Council was composed of China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States (permanent Members) and Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Norway and Yugoslavia. Of these members, the Soviet Union and China were absent. 7 voted in favour, none against and 3 abstained.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

The Creation of the 84th Resolution at the 467th Meeting of the Security Council in 1950 to put together a task force comprised of several member nations to aid the South Korean Army to defend themselves from the North Korean army and take back their land.

Another attempt to resolve the conflict was peace talks initiated by the Soviet Union in 1951. These were accepted and were discussed for a month in Kaesong until the Communist Side broke off the negotiations. There were some major clash points between the diplomats of each side. One of these was the return of Prisoners. The UN wanted to give the prisoners the option to choose if they wanted to return whilst the communist side wanted all prisoners to be returned, regardless of their choices. "Communism is a system that has no regard for human dignity or human freedom, and no right-thinking government can give its consent to the forcible return to such a system of men or women who would rather remain free." Truman wrote.

Another was that the South Korean President, Syngman Rhee, wanted the UN forces to help South Korea take over the entire peninsula or at least have some more advantageous territory against the North. Korea

Furthermore, the North Koreans wanted their government to be officially recognised by the UN, allowing them to work towards having a say on the international stage. However, the UN only recognised the South as the official government. The Soviets also demanded the removal of UN or US military presence in South Korea which, to the UN, was not up for debate

Finally, the ending solution was new peace talks in 1953, initiated by US President Dwight Eisenhower. The final Armistice was signed by United States Army Lieutenant General William Harrison Jr. and General Mark W. Clark representing the United Nations Command (UNC), North Korean leader Kim Il Sung and General Nam Il representing the Korean People's Army (KPA), and Peng Dehuai representing the Chinese People's Volunteer Army (PVA). This agreement established the Korean Demilitarised Zone (DMZ), the return of the war prisoners and a ceasefire. The DMZ runs along the 38th Parallel. President Syngman Rhee did not sign, lying in the fact he could not accept the failure to unify Korea through force.

Possible Solutions

This is a guide for participating delegates in a situation in which it is unclear how to proceed in making clauses:

The creation of the UNC to aid South Korea

A possible solution for the Korean War could involve the creation of a multinational command structure, similar in concept to the later United Nations Command (UNC). This coalition would be authorized by the international community to unify military efforts in support of South Korea, ensuring efficient coordination among contributing nations. By pooling resources, including troops, medical aid, and logistics from multiple countries, such a command could bolster South Korea's defensive capabilities and deter further aggression. Leadership could rotate or be assigned to a neutral or prominent UN member state to ensure fair representation and cooperation among member nations.

This approach would aim to preserve South Korea's sovereignty and maintain regional peace while demonstrating a firm international stance against acts of aggression. Additionally, the command could prioritize minimizing civilian casualties, engaging in targeted operations, and facilitating diplomacy alongside military actions to prevent prolonged conflict. By fostering collective security and leveraging the resources and expertise of member states, this unified response would also reinforce the authority and effectiveness of international peacekeeping frameworks.

The creation of a task force to aid civilians and reduce casualties

A potential solution to address the humanitarian crisis during the Korean War could involve establishing a dedicated international task force focused on aiding civilians and reducing casualties. This task force, operating under the auspices of the United Nations, would coordinate efforts to provide medical assistance, evacuate vulnerable populations, distribute essential supplies, and rebuild critical infrastructure affected by the conflict. Member states could contribute resources such as medical personnel, food, shelter, and logistics to ensure rapid and effective deployment in areas of need.

To ensure neutrality and protect non-combatants, the task force could work alongside both military and local authorities to create safe zones and corridors for civilians to escape combat areas. The initiative could also integrate conflict de-escalation efforts by promoting communication between warring parties to minimize attacks on civilian centres. This dual approach of immediate humanitarian support and conflict mitigation would aim to uphold international human rights, prevent further loss of life, and set a precedent for civilian protection in wartime scenarios.

The initiation for peace/armistice talks

A potential solution to end the Korean War could involve the initiation of peace or armistice talks, facilitated by an impartial third party or an international organization such as the United Nations. These negotiations would aim to secure a ceasefire, address key territorial disputes, and establish mechanisms for long-term stability on the Korean Peninsula. The talks could involve not only the primary combatants—North Korea, South Korea, and their respective allies—but also neutral mediators to ensure balanced discussions and build trust between the parties.

To foster progress, the process could include confidence-building measures such as prisoner exchanges, demilitarized buffer zones, or agreements to halt hostilities during negotiations. A neutral meeting location and phased negotiation agenda could help ensure fair participation and gradual resolution of complex issues. Ultimately, this initiative would seek to lay the groundwork for a sustainable peace treaty, reduce military tensions, and prioritize the safety and welfare of civilians on both sides of the conflict.

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