

The Korean War

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The Korean War was a seminal event of the early Cold War, both regionally and globally, and of Korean history. The conflict militarized international politics far beyond previous levels, but, in part due to the better-defined superpower commitments that emerged in Europe and Northeast Asia, it also produced a relatively stable military balance, making less likely a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the war solidified China's division, escalated American involvement in Indochina, and ensured the prolonged estrangement of the United States and the People's Republic of China. Those developments, in turn, increased the likelihood of future conflict in Southeast Asia. For the short term, the war tightened the Sino-Soviet alliance, but it also sowed the seeds of future animosity between the Communist giants. Finally, while the fighting during the war did not extend beyond Korea's boundaries, it led to massive destruction on the peninsula and deepened the country's division.

Origins

The war emerged from an array of Korean and international factors. During the century prior to the outbreak of war on 25 June 1950, Korea was rent by division and foreign encroachment. Contending indigenous groups usually derived their identity from a combination of internal forces and ties to foreign powers. When in the 1880s Korea opened its gates to the Western world, pro-Chinese, pro-Japanese, pro-Russian, and pro-American factions all emerged, each drawing on the ideas and/or maneuvers of the great powers. Internal turmoil joined with the ambitions of more powerful neighbors to produce two major regional conflicts between 1894 and 1905. Japan emerged victorious in both, annexing the peninsula in 1910. Korean activists seeking to end foreign rule looked to other nations for inspiration and support. With the rise of Marxism-Leninism in Russia in 1917 and the emergence of the struggle

between Nationalists and Communists in China in the 1920s, Korean exiles inevitably took sides, with traditionalists of a Confucian stripe looking to the Nationalist Chinese, liberals of a capitalist, democratic bent appealing to the United States, and radicals casting their eyes toward the Soviet Union and/or the Communist Chinese. Affiliations were also influenced by regional or family origin in Korea and a foreign power's or party's geographic proximity to the peninsula, or hopes of their assistance against the Japanese. Group commitments were not always rigid, and because before World War II no major power had openly challenged Japan in Korea, independence forces operated in a frustrating, disconnected world that encouraged factions. Adding to the mix were the vast majority of Koreans who remained in their own country during Japanese rule. A few actively sought to undermine Japan and were killed, jailed, driven underground, or exiled. The others, to degrees ranging from sullen acquiescence to active endorsement, participated in the prevailing power structure. The struggle in Korea that emerged after liberation from Japan in 1945 grew out of divisions among Koreans that had developed over the previous two generations and were often partly defined by the relationships of individuals to a foreign power or powers. If Korean nationalists often used past affiliations of some of their countrymen with the Japanese colonial regime as weapons in the internal struggle for power, they themselves usually depended to some degree on foreign support based on contacts made during previous periods of exile.

Despite a major uprising in 1919 and sporadic guerrilla activity in extreme northern Korea after that, Koreans proved unable to undermine Japanese rule. A Korean provisional government emerged in China in 1919, but it never bridged the gap between Right and Left, nor did it consistently pull together all groups even on the Right. During World War II, some Korean exiles served in Chinese Nationalist armies, some with the Chinese Communists, some with the Soviets, and a few with the United States; but more fought on the Japanese side. At the Cairo Conference in the fall of 1943, Allied leaders of the United States, China, and Britain agreed that, after the war, Korea should "in due course ... become free and independent."¹ Yet US president Franklin D. Roosevelt believed Korea incapable of governing itself without a period of tutelage. Divisions among Korean independence forces plus their inability to provide significant aid in the struggle against Japan left Roosevelt and his advisers concerned primarily about preventing Korea from again becoming

1 US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Cairo and Teheran, 1943* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1961), 449.

a source of great power struggle. To Roosevelt this meant creating a multi-power trusteeship including the United States, the Soviet Union, China; and perhaps Britain.

At the end of the Pacific war in mid-August 1945, the United States and the Soviet Union alone sent troops to Korea, leaving the two great powers to determine events. The Grand Alliance against Germany and Japan was already showing cracks, as the victorious powers turned attention from their common enemies to their otherwise-divergent views and interests. Over Korea, Soviet and American aims were bound to clash, as Moscow sought traditional goals of defense in-depth of its Northeast Asian frontier and warm-water ports, while Washington feared uncontested Soviet expansion in the vacuum created by Japan's defeat and China's weakness. Soviet intervention in the war against Japan on August 8, 1945, which the United States had solicited, magnified such fears, as Soviet armed forces now thrust into Manchuria and Korea in the extreme northeast. American forces remained south of the Japanese main islands, several hundred miles from Korea, and immediate plans focused on occupying Japan. Soviet occupation of the entire peninsula seemed a prospect. Under the circumstances, US president Harry S. Truman proposed to his Soviet counterpart, Premier Iosif Stalin, that the thirty-eighth parallel, which split Korea roughly in half, be designated the demarcation line between Soviet and American occupation forces. Stalin agreed.

The Americans and the Soviets bypassed the Koreans in deciding to occupy their country and in choosing a boundary between their occupation forces, but they could not ignore them once on the peninsula. While Koreans celebrated Japan's demise and interpreted "in due course" as meaning early independence, they were far from united on the future of their country. In the days before Japan's surrender on August 15, Japanese authorities in Seoul, fearful of mass uprisings against their countrymen, sought out, as historian Allan R. Millett puts it, "a native elite with sufficient nationalist credentials to command popular obedience" until the new occupiers assumed control.² Yo Un-hyong, a leftist with contacts among Korean independence forces both at home and abroad, emerged to form the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence. This group established affiliates in cities and towns throughout Korea, but its demand for confiscation of Japanese property left

2 Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence, KS: Regents of Kansas Press, 2005), 43.

colonial officials and moderate Koreans worried that a social and economic revolution was on the horizon.

Such fears worsened on September 6, 1945 when some members declared establishment of the Korean People's Republic. Two days later, as American soldiers began to disembark at Inchon, the port for Seoul, conservative Koreans countered by forming the Korean Democratic Party. By this time hundreds of local people's committees had been established nationwide, sometimes in conjunction with the national preparatory committee, sometimes not. US occupation forces under Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, already wary of leftist groups and under orders not to recognize an indigenous regime, refused to work with the People's Republic, discouraged the people's committees, and favored contacts with members of the colonial apparatus or Korean conservatives. Led by Colonel Ivan M. Chistiakov, Soviet authorities north of the thirty-eighth parallel worked with the people's committees but did not recognize the People's Republic, despite the prominent role in its formation of Pak Hon-yong, the leading domestic Communist.

The Soviets treated their zone as a sphere of influence. With the national capital of Seoul and two-thirds of the population in the American zone, the Soviets set about consolidating their position in the north, which included maneuvering reliable native Koreans into positions of authority. Initially, the Soviets tried to include non-Communists, most notably Christian leader Cho Man-sik. But Cho proved too independent and in early 1946 was arrested and jailed. Meanwhile, a former guerrilla fighter in Manchuria, Kim Il Sung, had emerged as the Soviets' favorite. Born in 1912 near Pyongyang, Kim spent most of his early years in Manchuria, where in the 1930s he joined anti-Japanese partisans affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party. In 1941, he fled to the Soviet Union, enlisting in a brigade that included members of the Chinese, the Soviet, and the Kapsan factions of Korean Communists. Kim returned to Korea in a Soviet army uniform in September 1945 and early on sought establishment of a separate North Korean branch of the Communist Party. In December, he became the secretary-in-chief of that party; in February 1946, he became chairman of the new Korean Provisional People's Committee (NKPPC), in effect a provisional government under the Soviet occupation.

The occasion for creation of the NKPPC was a controversy over trusteeship. In December 1945, the United States and the Soviets agreed to create a joint commission between the occupation commands that would submit proposals to the governments at home for establishment of a provisional Korean government and later "a four-power trusteeship for a period of up to



20. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung.

five years.”³ Announcement of the agreement produced outrage among conservatives in the American zone, led by Kim Ku, formerly head of the provisional government in China, and Syngman Rhee, who prior to liberation had lived for decades in the United States. In response, the US occupation command suggested that trusteeship might be avoided, while the Soviets persuaded Communists to support the agreement. In February, virtually simultaneously with creation of the NKPPC, the Americans created the Representative Democratic Council dominated by the outspokenly anti-Soviet Rhee. Thus, in March 1946, the Joint Commission convened in Seoul in an acrimonious atmosphere. It adjourned in May without agreement.

³ US Department of State, *The Record of Korean Unification, 1943–1960: Narrative Summary with Principal Documents* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1960), 47–48.

By summer, politics in Korea had become polarized. The Soviets had turned toward consolidating Communist factions under Kim Il Sung's leadership rather than establishing a coalition that included non-Communist groups. The Americans strove for a coalition of Korean rightist and centrist forces while adopting repressive measures against the Communists. Whether from the perspective of relations between the occupying powers or those between indigenous political groups, the prospects for national cohesion were at best unpromising, at worst hopeless.

Meanwhile, economic conditions deteriorated in the US zone. From the start, the American occupation mishandled rice distribution and, unlike the Soviets in the North, it held back on implementing a broad land reform program. The influx since liberation of over a million Koreans into South Korea from the North, Manchuria, and Japan created shortages of food and housing just as the South's dependence on the North for electric power and coal produced shortfalls in heating, lighting, and transportation. Brutal acts of the national police, manned primarily by Koreans who had served under the Japanese, magnified resentments among the civilian population as did the insensitive behavior of American soldiers.

In the fall of 1946, strikes among railroad workers in Seoul, Pusan, and Taegu proved the beginning of what would become known as the Autumn Harvest Uprising. Mobs of industrial workers, farmers, students, and the unemployed appeared in cities throughout the zone. Disturbances lasted into November and were suppressed by the national police only with the assistance of US troops and a new South Korean constabulary. Deaths and casualties on both sides numbered well into the hundreds. Although the role of Communists from within or outside the American zone remains uncertain, the makeup, timing, and location of the riots suggest coordination rather than spontaneity.

American troops hoped that improvement of economic conditions and the building of a coalition of rightist and centrist forces in their zone would persuade the Soviets to return to the Joint Commission and accept unification on US terms. The fall disturbances indicated that the economy was a long way from becoming a source of strength, and simultaneous efforts at coalition-building showed limited success. In October, the occupation conducted elections for an Interim Legislative Assembly, and the Right emerged victorious in a process compromised by violence and other irregularities. In pursuing acceptance by centrists and moderates on the Left, General Hodge appointed many of them to the new body. Rhee, the most influential rightist, was furious and Yo, the leading figure on the moderate Left, still refused to serve in a body in which his allies remained a minority.

In early 1947, the Truman administration moved to reconvene the Joint Commission and develop a plan for economic assistance. The Joint Commission resumed meetings in May, but congressional opposition stymied expanded economic aid. In March, President Truman asked Congress for \$400 million in economic and military assistance to Greece and Turkey. In June, Secretary of State George C. Marshall proposed massive aid for the economic recovery of Europe. These initiatives reflected the emerging Cold War with the Soviet Union. Though sympathetic, Congress had limited tolerance for expensive foreign-aid programs. The legislature even cut military spending, making the Korean occupation more difficult to sustain. So the United States hobbled along in Korea with economic conditions worsening and agitation rising against the American occupation among Korean politicians, who continued to squabble bitterly among themselves.

The Soviet Union showed no interest in easing US discomfort. Unwilling to permit a unified government unless under Communist control, the Soviets were unaccommodating in the Joint Commission and finally proposed that the occupying powers withdraw to permit Koreans to resolve conflicts on their own. That was a recipe for civil war and eventual Communist control, as the North was more stable than the South and possessed a more substantial indigenous armed force. The United States was unwilling to depart without a final effort to establish a viable independent government, if not for the entire peninsula at least south of the thirty-eighth parallel. The chosen instrument for this effort was the US-dominated General Assembly of the United Nations.

The United States placed the Korean issue before that body in September 1947 and, two months later, pushed through a resolution calling for national elections on the peninsula, supervised by a United Nations commission and aimed at creating an independent government. The Soviets opposed the measure and threatened to block its implementation in the North. In 1948, they carried out this threat, but the United States persuaded the Interim Committee of the General Assembly to endorse supervision by the UN commission of elections in the south alone. Amidst considerable turmoil, including a widespread boycott, elections occurred on May 10, 1948. Right-wing forces led by Rhee, long a proponent of an independent government in the South, emerged victorious. A divided UN commission endorsed the outcome as "a valid expression of the free will of the electorate."⁴ The new legislative assembly drafted a constitution for the "Republic of Korea" (ROK)

4 US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1948* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1974), vol. VI, 1229–30.

and elected the 73-year-old Rhee its first president. Inauguration ceremonies took place in Seoul on August 15. The Soviets followed in their zone with creation of the “Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” (DPRK), with Kim Il Sung at its head. Korea was finally independent, but its division into hostile regimes augured ill for its peaceful development.

From the beginning, the ROK was unstable. To some historians the Korean War had already begun, with the April 1948 revolt of Communist-led partisans on Cheju-do, an island off the south coast of Korea.⁵ Sporadic partisan action on the mainland accompanied the uprising. Then, in October, a revolt occurred in a regiment of the ROK constabulary stationed at Yosu on the south coast. Action spread to the populace and soon rebels had seized both Yosu and Sunchon forty miles to the north. Loyal elements of the ROK police and constabulary took nine days to restore control and hundreds of the rebels fled to nearby mountains, where they organized guerrilla operations against authorities. From April 1948 through the spring of 1950, unconventional warfare waxed and waned throughout much of South Korea, with fatalities estimated at between 30,000 and 100,000. Reinforced by infiltrators from North Korea, the guerrillas garnered support from thousands of South Koreans discontented with the ROK government. ROK army and police campaigns of the winter of 1949/50 removed prospects for its early overthrow, setting the stage for the largely conventional and much more destructive conflict.

In March 1949, with Soviet troops having departed the previous December, Kim Il Sung proposed to Stalin a large-scale North Korean attack on the South to unite the country. Stalin demurred, as 7,500 American troops remained south of the thirty-eighth parallel and the North Korean army lacked a decisive advantage over that of South Korea. The Soviet dictator told Kim to increase his effort to undermine the ROK through infiltration of guerrillas and materiel to reinforce southern partisans. In September, with the American military presence reduced to 500 advisers to the ROK armed forces and after continued indecisive guerrilla operations in the South and conventional skirmishes along the thirty-eighth parallel, Kim again proposed an attack. Again, Stalin said no. He did not change his mind until late January 1950. Early the next month he approved a request to give North Korea the heavy arms necessary to equip three new army divisions.

By this time, the Communists in China had driven the Nationalists off the mainland to Taiwan and established the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

5 See, most recently, Millett, *War for Korea*, 2.

Communist leader Mao Zedong was in Moscow negotiating a treaty of alliance.⁶ US secretary of state Dean Acheson had recently defined the American defense perimeter in the Pacific as extending from the Aleutians to Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines, thus omitting South Korea and Taiwan. With the guerrilla war stalled in South Korea, Kim was impatient. Although much in debt to the Soviets, he suggested that, if Moscow refused to give the green light, he would turn to Beijing, which was in the process of returning to North Korea tens of thousands of Korean soldiers seasoned by years of combat on the Communist side in the Chinese Civil War.

Kim visited Moscow in late March, staying for nearly a month. Stalin explained to him that, for the reasons above plus the Soviet explosion of an atomic device, the international situation had improved. The time was ripe to initiate a military offensive to unite the peninsula, but with three qualifications: first, Mao must approve the venture; second, it must appear as a counter to a South Korean move north; third, Kim must recognize that, in case of trouble with the Americans, he would depend on China, not the Soviet Union, to send troops to save him.

Kim went to Beijing in mid-May and received Mao's reluctant approval. Although the Chinese leader would have preferred that his plans to attack Taiwan be given priority, he was in a weak position to resist given Stalin's approval of the venture, however conditional, and North Korea's past support for him in his own civil war. The Soviets went on to provide heavy artillery and T-34 tanks and assisted in drawing up an operational plan. At the last minute, Kim claimed that the ROK might have discovered the plan, so he requested permission from Moscow to speed up the main attack, which Stalin gave, thereby reducing the plausibility of the claim that it was a counter to ROK action. When North Korea moved across the thirty-eighth parallel before daylight on June 25, it achieved virtually total surprise.

North Korean forces advanced rapidly, capturing Seoul in three days. On June 29, General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of US forces in the Far East, visited the battlefield south of Seoul. The next day he proposed to Washington dispatch of a US army regimental combat team to Korea. The United States was already providing air support for ROK troops and bombing and strafing north of the thirty-eighth parallel. At American behest, and with the Soviet delegate absent, the UN Security Council had passed two resolutions, the second calling on members "to furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to

6 See Niu Jun's chapter in this volume.



21. President Syngman Rhee of South Korea and US general Douglas MacArthur.

restore international peace and security in the area.”⁷ President Truman had announced that the US Seventh Fleet would prevent attacks from mainland China on Taiwan and vice versa, plus an increase in US aid to the Philippines and the French in Indochina. Now, he approved MacArthur’s recommendation to send American ground forces into combat in Korea. The United States was committed to the defense of the ROK.

Why did the United States fail to take greater action prior to June 25, 1950, to deter a North Korean attack? In the face of such an attack, why did the United States commit its armed forces to repulse it? The answer to the first question rests, on the one hand, in the interaction of public opinion, executive-legislative relations, and maneuvering between the State Department and the Pentagon in Washington and, on the other, in the ambivalent feelings of American officials toward the Rhee regime in Korea. Korea lacked a powerful constituency in the United States and, among the four American occupations,

7 United Nations Document S/1508, Rev. 1, June 27, 1950.

was the least desirable place for US soldiers to be stationed. With military spending in decline, the service chiefs sought to reduce the US presence abroad. In September 1947, they determined that the United States had “no strategic interest” in maintaining troops in Korea and pressed for an early withdrawal from the peninsula. The State Department resisted, believing that, because of the confrontation there with the Soviet Union, US credibility was at stake. The diplomats finally acceded to Pentagon pressure in mid-1949. The internal situation in South Korea had improved somewhat since the previous fall, and intelligence reports indicated that North Korea would continue its efforts to subvert the ROK from within rather than through overt attack. Short of a dramatic incident, the State Department had too many irons in the fire elsewhere to persist in its resistance to the final troop withdrawal. Reinforcing the predisposition for withdrawal was the lack of enthusiasm in Washington for the volatile, autocratic Rhee, who threatened to mobilize his troops and march north.

The State Department believed that the United States had an important stake in the survival of the ROK, however, and North Korea’s attack focused attention on the peninsula as never before. American leaders regarded the attack as Soviet-inspired aggression. Once it became clear that ROK survival was in jeopardy and that no other attacks were in the works along the Soviet periphery, the commitment of US ground forces, readily available in occupied Japan, was virtually automatic. As Secretary of State Acheson put it, decisive action was necessary “as a symbol [of the] strength and determination of [the] west.” To do less would encourage “new aggressive action elsewhere” and demoralize “countries adjacent to [the] Soviet orbit.”⁸

Intervention of US troops under a UN umbrella prevented a quick North Korean victory and ensured broad international involvement in the struggle to come. Intervention in the Taiwan Strait by the United States, its stepped-up aid to the French in Indochina, and its use of Japan as a launching pad for operations in Korea added a critical regional dimension to the conflict. While the United States and the Soviet Union showed an inclination to avoid a direct military confrontation, heightened tension in East Asia had a clear impact on Europe, where a divided Germany and a divided Berlin within the Soviet zone possessed some similarities to Korea. The potential for escalation of the fighting beyond Korea was obvious to all.

8 D. Acheson to Ambassador Alan Kirk in Moscow, June 28, 1950, Record Group 84, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

Stages

The Korean War may be divided into four stages. The first constituted the period of North Korean offensive, which lasted from June 25, 1950, until the middle of September of the same year when the military balance on the peninsula changed dramatically. During this time, DPRK forces pushed southward to a perimeter around the southeastern port of Pusan, nearly driving units under General MacArthur's UN Command (UNC), established in early July, out of Korea. Yet, major uprisings within South Korea in support of North Korean troops failed to materialize as anticipated, and extended supply lines made them increasingly vulnerable to UNC airpower. Moreover, by early August, the North Koreans were outnumbered by the combined ground forces of the ROK and the United States.

Meanwhile, beyond Korea, governments made plans and took actions that set the stage for future developments locally, regionally, and globally. In China, Mao commenced a "hate America campaign," focused on US intervention in the Taiwan Strait and ordered a large-scale buildup of his armies in Manchuria in preparation for a possible move into Korea. At the beginning of August, the Soviet Union returned to the UN Security Council to block further US action in that body. In the United States, which had initially defined its objective in Korea as restoration of the thirty-eighth parallel, the Truman administration began considering the possibility of a military campaign to unite the peninsula under the ROK. It also commenced plans for a military buildup at home and in Europe that, pending approval by North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies, would include West German rearmament. In Japan, with US forces departing rapidly for service in Korea, MacArthur implemented plans for a 75,000-man National Police Reserve Force, in effect commencing rearmament of the enemy in the Pacific war. In Washington, officials resolved to move forward with negotiations for a peace treaty that would permit American forces to remain on Japanese territory. Finally, in New York, the United States succeeded in getting commitments from twenty-nine UN members for military, economic, or medical assistance for the Korean venture.

The second stage of the war constituted the period of UN counteroffensive, which began on September 15, with MacArthur's flanking operation at Inchon. By the end of the month, North Korean forces were in a disorganized retreat across the thirty-eighth parallel and UN troops had authorization from Washington to destroy them through operations north of the old boundary. The UN General Assembly endorsed a move to unite Korea on October 7. As

UN forces advanced rapidly northward, however, Mao, under pressure from the DPRK and the Soviet Union to save the day, fearing the threat posed by US forces poised on China's border, and sensing an opportunity to advance his developing revolution at home, sent nearly 300,000 Chinese troops across the Yalu River into Korea. In late November, as overextended UN troops commenced a reckless advance to clear the peninsula of enemy forces, Chinese armies launched a major counteroffensive of their own, thus bringing the war into its third and most dangerous stage.⁹

During the second stage, potential cracks in the Western alliance appeared, first over the US proposal for West German rearmament and then over the US decision to continue offensive operations in Korea after Chinese troops first made contact with their UN counterparts in late October and early November. Although NATO allies supported US intervention in Korea, they feared it would result in American overcommitment to Asia, a secondary theater in the Cold War, thereby increasing Western Europe's vulnerability to Soviet aggression. The Chinese counteroffensive in Korea magnified this concern, as pressure skyrocketed in the United States to expand the war beyond the peninsula. This pressure became particularly acute after China pushed its forces southward below the thirty-eighth parallel at the beginning of 1951. In the midst of a Soviet scare campaign to prevent West German rearmament, allied governments mobilized politically to restrain the United States.

The focal point for diplomatic action in late 1950 and early 1951 was the UN General Assembly in New York, where US allies joined with neutrals, led by India, to delay American pressure for sanctions against China. That pressure reached a peak in mid-January, by which time Chinese troops in Korea had captured Seoul and had advanced in some sectors as much as fifty miles further south. In early February, the General Assembly finally passed a resolution condemning China as an aggressor in Korea, but delayed sanctions. By this time, UN forces in Korea had regrouped and were engaged in limited offensives northward. With UN evacuation from the peninsula no longer an early prospect, pressure for expanding the war in the United States temporarily subsided.

That pressure escalated again in April, when on the eleventh Truman fired MacArthur from all his commands, and eleven days later, when the Chinese commenced the first of two spring offensives in Korea. After UN forces recaptured Seoul in mid-March and moved to positions for the most part

9 See also Niu Jun's chapter in this volume.

slightly north of the thirty-eighth parallel, Truman had wanted to explore the possibility of a ceasefire. Yet MacArthur had objected to any end to the fighting short of unification, and he took his case to the public. The president feared that the imperious general would unnecessarily expand the war by attacking Manchuria, where hundreds of Soviet airplanes positioned themselves for possible intervention in Korea, action that would threaten UNC domination of the air. While Truman's move against MacArthur set off a firestorm at home, the Communists did not challenge UNC control of the air and UN forces successfully repulsed enemy offensives, inflicting huge casualties. By early June, the battlefield had stabilized, the General Assembly had imposed limited economic sanctions on China, and the United States had sent signals to the Soviets and the Chinese of a willingness to negotiate an end to the fighting. The Soviet Union returned the signals later in the month and, on July 10, talks began between the military commands on both sides in Korea at Kaesong along the thirty-eighth parallel.

Thus began the fourth stage of the war, that of stalemate, which lasted until an armistice was finally signed on July 27, 1953. During this time neither side attempted a major alteration of the stalemate on the battlefield. Despite Kim Il Sung's initial desire to fight on in pursuit of unification, Chinese forces had taken enough of a pounding from superior UN airpower and heavy artillery to believe that, unless they could persuade Stalin to provide more air support and more modern equipment, the effort was not simply likely to be in vain but might actually lead to further loss of territory. Since the UNC had resisted the temptation in early June to mount a sustained counter-offensive against badly mauled Chinese units, Mao believed negotiations appropriate. Stalin agreed.

For their part, and against the urging of Syngman Rhee, the Americans had little stomach for another military effort to unify the peninsula. During the third stage of the war, the United States had made considerable progress in building the NATO alliance by creating a command structure in Europe under the leadership of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, by exercising flexibility on the timing of West German rearmament, by sending two more divisions to Europe, by championing the case for the admission of Turkey and Greece to the organization, and by negotiating with allies for the rational distribution of raw materials in the process of rearmament. The United States had also moved forward on a peace treaty and military alliance with Japan. The two parties had concluded preliminary agreements and the United States had gone far in persuading its allies, in the Pacific and Europe alike, to accept relatively generous terms for a settlement that did not include either China or the Soviet

Union. Just as important, the United States had done much to stimulate economic recovery in Japan through its military operations in Korea. Japanese firms in sectors from textiles to shipping, automobiles, communications, and chemicals received large contracts from the US government, initially for Korea but eventually for military aid programs to other countries in the western Pacific and Southeast Asia. To the Truman administration, a settlement in Korea that was close to the territorial division of Korea prior to June 25, 1950, represented an adequate outcome, as it would greatly reduce US expenditures in an area of peripheral strategic significance and remove a source of tension with allies as well as at home.

Why, with relative balance achieved on the battlefield and with both sides willing to accept an end to the fighting far short of total victory, did it take over two years to conclude an armistice? Part of the answer is that, since neither side was willing to invest the resources or take the risks required to alter the military balance fundamentally, no one had a compelling motive to make the concessions necessary for an early end to the fighting. Each side understood that the struggle in Korea represented but a small portion of the global Cold War; yet they also recognized that the conditions under which the shooting stopped on the peninsula had implications locally, regionally, and worldwide. With neither side having achieved total victory, each sought tactical advantage through the negotiating process.

Reinforcing these circumstances were a series of deep divisions separating the two sides, which magnified the normal feelings of distrust and hostility that exist between contestants in war. First, there was the ideological division between Marxist-Leninists intent on promoting world revolution and liberal capitalists determined to build international stability and order. Then came the material division, that between on the one side the United States, the richest, most powerful nation on earth, and on the other the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea, only one of which had industrialized and all three of which could barely imagine achieving the level of material comfort enjoyed by the enemy. Finally, there existed the historical divide between the Chinese and the Korean peoples just emerging from several generations of encroachment by other nations and the Americans, who had been among the encroachers. Among Americans, these last two differences bred a sense of superiority, even occasionally contempt; among the Communists, they produced extreme sensitivity to potential slights and a determination to hide any weakness, often with belligerent behavior. The opportunities for such behavior were increased by the setting of the talks, a neutral area surrounded by heavily armed units of the two sides.

Given the above circumstances, it should come as no surprise that it took four and a half months of acrimonious, intermittent talks to agree on an armistice line, namely the line of battle with a three-kilometer demilitarized zone separating the ground forces on both sides. Initially, the Communists had insisted on the thirty-eighth parallel, but since that line was indefensible and since the UNC held more territory north of the line than the other side occupied south of it, the United States demurred. In limited offensives during the fall, the UNC pushed its positions slightly farther north in the central and eastern sectors of the front, which persuaded the Communists to concede the point.

From December 1951 through March 1952, the two sides resolved the issues of postarmistice inspections and reinforcement of forces, leaving the return of prisoners of war (POWs) as the remaining stumbling block. With the UNC holding more than ten times the number of prisoners as the Communists, the United States insisted on the principle of no-forced-repatriation while the latter held to the traditional principle of an all-for-all exchange. The issue brought to the fore the ideological dimension of the Cold War, with the American position representing freedom of choice for the individual while the Communist stance reflected a statist approach. Since over 20,000 of the UNC-held prisoners were Chinese, the issue also had implications regarding the continuing conflict in China between the Communists and the Nationalists. In April, the UNC reported to the Communists that more than 15,000 of the Chinese prisoners intended to resist repatriation. Communist negotiators suspected that they had been coerced and, in any event, it took little imagination to realize that if the UNC had its way these prisoners would wind up in Taiwan. This result, in turn, would strike a serious blow to the PRC's claim to be the sole legitimate government of China. By this time, Kim Il Sung, having endured for nearly two years the brutal pounding of his territory by UNC bombers and seeing no chance for early unification, showed a willingness to compromise. With Stalin's encouragement, Mao decided otherwise. Since the agreement on an armistice line, the UNC had halted offensive operations on the ground. In addition, Mao's forces in Korea had been bolstered by an increased supply of heavy weapons from the Soviet Union and they had dug several layers of tunnels behind the battlefield to better protect themselves against UNC airpower and artillery. With no indication that the United States intended to escalate in Korea on a major scale, there was much reason to hold firm.

The stalemate showed no sign of ending until late March 1953. On the twenty-eighth, the Communists in Korea agreed to a UNC proposal for the

exchange of sick and wounded prisoners. Two days later, China wired the president of the UN General Assembly proposing that negotiations in Korea, which had been suspended since the previous October, resume immediately to expedite execution of the exchange and then to resolve the POW issue in its entirety. Stalin had died earlier in the month, and in subsequent meetings in Moscow, his successors and high-level Chinese officials attending the old dictator's funeral resolved to revise the Communist position on POWs so as to achieve an armistice. Even so, it took until April 26 to restart the talks in Korea, and it was not until June 4 that the Communists finally accepted the essentials of the US position on POWs.

The death of Stalin probably contributed to resolution of the issue, both because he had been one of the roadblocks to a settlement and because his passing created uncertainties in the Communist world that dictated a period of relative stability on the international front that could not be ensured without an end to the shooting in Korea. January 1953 had brought a changeover in Washington with Eisenhower replacing Truman in the White House, a shift that increased the prospect of military escalation on the peninsula and quite possibly beyond. By early March, the new president had announced that the United States would no longer prevent Nationalist forces in Taiwan from attacking the mainland and several other US officials had suggested that a more belligerent course in East Asia was on the horizon. In mid-May, after the Communists had advanced a new but still unacceptable proposal on POWs, the UNC began air attacks on several irrigation dams in North Korea, which previously had been among only a few targets in the DPRK that were off-limits. Two weeks later, the UNC presented its own proposal on POWs, noting that if it was not accepted the talks would be terminated and earlier agreements on neutral areas around the negotiating site would be voided. The pressure also appears to have included a threat to escalate the fighting beyond Korea and to use atomic weapons.

By the middle of June, details on the precise location of the armistice line had been resolved and an end of the fighting appeared to be only days away. On the eighteenth, though, Rhee created one final roadblock by releasing over 25,000 anti-Communist Korean POWs who were under the control of the ROK army. The Communists expressed outrage, but the reality was that they wanted an armistice. As for the ROK president, his dependence on US aid for survival put him in a weak position to defy Washington, which had already considered the possibility of a coup against him. During the weeks that followed, Chinese armies launched tactical offensives against ROK forces, now manning 70 percent of the UNC front lines, pushing them back as much

as six miles in some sectors. Meanwhile, the United States granted several face-saving concessions to Rhee, including the promise of a military security pact and huge amounts of military and economic aid over the next several years in return for assurances that he would not disrupt an armistice. The actions on both sides finally set the stage for the signing of the armistice on July 27.

Impact

After over three years of fighting and two years of on-and-off negotiations, the shooting finally stopped. Much of Korea lay in ruins. Koreans killed, wounded, or missing numbered approximately 3 million, a tenth of the population. Another 5 million became refugees and perhaps double that saw their families permanently divided. Although civil strife and guerrilla warfare never affected the overall balance, they combined with US air action to produce massive civilian casualties. Each side suffered destruction of over a half million homes and the bulk of their industrial plant. Yet the country remained divided and, despite the advance of plans for reunification on both sides, that division was bound to last indefinitely, a fact confirmed by the Geneva Conference on Korea in May 1954.

Nothing could compensate the Korean people for the death and destruction suffered, but by thrusting the peninsula into the limelight as never before in the Cold War, the war had its compensations. It ensured that the United States would never again let its guard down in Korea. In the war's aftermath, Washington quickly concluded a military defense pact with Seoul. It maintained in South Korea tens of thousands of its own troops as well as substantial air-power, and it provided massive aid for augmentation of the ROK Army. The ongoing American commitment to the ROK made unlikely the resumption of war by the Communists, and Washington's clear message to Rhee that support would end if he initiated a new conflict served to discourage adventurism by the ROK. A replay of June 25, 1950, by either side was a remote possibility.

Another compensation was greatly expanded economic assistance for reconstruction and development for both Korean governments. The ROK became the largest recipient of American largesse for the remainder of the 1950s and, as Charles K. Armstrong has recently written, the DPRK became "the most ambitious multilateral development project ever undertaken by the socialist countries during the Cold War."¹⁰ The Korean governments, though

¹⁰ Charles K. Armstrong, "'Fraternal Socialism': The International Reconstruction of North Korea, 1953–1962," *Cold War History*, 5 (May 2005), 161.

bitter enemies, held in common their dependence on outside powers, just as they had before the war and just as had exiled independence groups during the era of Japanese rule, but now the material benefits were far greater.

Although China did not become a scene of the fighting and thus avoided huge destruction to its property and civilian population, the Chinese People's Volunteers in Korea – the euphemism for PRC armies – suffered nearly 400,000 casualties, including over 148,000 dead. They fought tenaciously in Korea, but their inferiority to US forces in the air and in firepower and mechanization on the ground cost them dearly, eliminating any chance of decisive victory and leading eventually to Chinese concessions on the armistice line and POWs. The Soviets provided major materiel assistance, but it was slow in coming and air support was limited to areas near the Manchurian border. The experience could not help but whet Mao's appetite to develop nuclear weapons, the shortest route to closing the gap with the United States.

Closing that gap was important not only for defensive purposes. When Mao intervened in Korea, he had hoped to use success there to achieve a favorable settlement regarding Taiwan. Success had been limited, and by 1953 the United States was in no mood to bargain on the last stronghold of the Nationalists. Indeed, if in early 1950 the Communist government on the mainland stood an excellent chance of capturing Taiwan within the next year, by July 1953 the United States was all but committed to defending the Nationalist position there, a commitment that became formal less than two years later.

The PRC did derive positive advantages from its Korean venture. At home, Mao used the war to mobilize the people and solidify his and his party's position. The war forced postponement of a first five-year plan for economic development, but China built up credit with the Soviets that paid important dividends in financial and advisory assistance later on. Stalin's successors eventually assisted Mao in a nuclear-weapons program that led in 1964 to a successful test of an atomic bomb. Further, PRC success in fighting the United States to a stalemate in Korea greatly elevated China's stature abroad. Less than a year after the armistice, China played a critical role in mediating the end of the first Indochina war and in 1955 it emerged as the star player at the Bandung Conference of African and Asian states. Whereas prior to the war China had played a secondary role to the Soviet Union in North Korea, it now was all but a coequal there. After generations of humiliation, China had returned to major power status in East Asia.

China's accomplishments served immediate Soviet interests, as they removed any chance for Sino-American rapprochement, protected the DPRK, and kept the United States deeply engaged militarily in a country of limited

strategic interest and far distant from Europe. For the long term, however, the rise of the PRC gave Beijing the self-confidence to define its own revolutionary agenda, both at home and abroad, and set the stage for the Sino-Soviet split, which proved a huge strategic setback in the Soviet Union's struggle with the United States.

What is more, the Korean War added immeasurably to Moscow's international burdens, as both North Korea and China became greater drains on Soviet resources; so did the arms race with the United States, which quadrupled its defense expenditures and assisted in the rearmament of Western Europe, including eventually West Germany. The arms competition was also a burden to the United States, but the greater economic capacity of the West made it far more bearable. Indeed, Japan's economic recovery was advanced exponentially by the sudden demand for industrial goods needed to prosecute the war in Korea, while the economies of the United States and its West European allies all emerged stronger in 1953 than they had been three years earlier. In contrast, the war led Stalin to push harder than ever for the rapid industrialization of Eastern Europe, one result of which was a decline in consumer goods and, in the aftermath of his death, the first signs of widespread unrest in East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. The Soviet Union would have been better off had the war never occurred and perhaps even had Korea been united under the ROK in late 1950.

Although through much of the war the Western alliance seemed in crisis, at its end the United States had four more divisions in Europe than when it began, Greece and Turkey had joined NATO, the European Coal and Steel Community was under way – signaling a major advance in cooperation between West Germany and France – and the potentially acrimonious issue of distribution of raw materials had been contained. Much carping continued back and forth across the Atlantic, to be sure, but US flexibility on such issues as escalation in Korea, rearmament of West Germany, and economic issues related to the military buildup of NATO countries helped solidify the alliance, as did Soviet scare tactics.

The war was far from an unqualified victory for the United States. While it achieved its initial objective of saving the ROK, its reckless campaign in North Korea in the fall of 1950 led to embarrassing setbacks at the hands of the Chinese and tied down hundreds of thousands of US troops in a country that the Joint Chiefs of Staff had long considered of marginal significance. The crisis of late 1950 and early 1951 led to a rebellion against US leadership in the UN General Assembly that, for the short term, reduced risks of the expansion of war beyond Korea, but later on discouraged the Truman administration

from applying the kind of sustained if limited military pressure on the enemy that might have induced the Communists to accept an armistice at a much earlier date. During the third and fourth stages of the war, India emerged as a clear leader among Third World neutrals, who were increasingly assertive in staking out their own course in the General Assembly. With the United Nations about to explode in numbers as a result of the achievement of nationhood by former colonial territories, majorities for US positions in that body were bound to become more and more difficult to obtain.

Of course, South Korea was an emerging nation as well, but for the moment its survival in the war was as much a liability as an advantage to US diplomacy in the Third World. The war solidified Rhee's position at the head of the ROK and, due to the clear US commitment to the ROK's defense and economic reconstruction, increased his capacity to manipulate Washington. Outside the United States and South Korea, Rhee was a most unpopular figure and American support for him had its price, especially among Third World neutrals such as India and Indonesia. If the war helped solidify US leadership in Western Europe and Japan, it left the contest between Communism and liberal democracy up for grabs among the emerging nations of the underdeveloped world. In fact, by tying the United States more tightly than ever to the colonial powers and by alienating it from and empowering China, the war complicated Washington's task in adjusting to the tide of change in Asia and Africa.

The position of the United States regarding Japan is especially revealing of the difficulty in balancing interests between First World allies and Third World areas. The Korean War had smoothed the path toward peace and security treaties between the two powers, ratified in 1952, and provided a great stimulus to the Japanese economy. Yet despite the sharply increased production of materiel for use in Korea and American aid programs in Southeast Asia, Japan continued to have a sizable balance-of-payments deficit. A possible solution to the problem was to reestablish pre-1945 levels of trade with China, but Washington adamantly opposed this approach for fear that it would lure Tokyo into the Communist sphere. That left as options either increased Japanese exports to North America and Western Europe, which would create domestic controversies in the nations involved, not to mention animosity toward the United States among European allies for promoting the idea, or increased Japanese exports to Southeast Asia, a process well advanced by 1953.¹¹

11 For more on US-Japanese relations, see Sayuri Guthrie-Shimizu's chapter in this volume.

Two problems existed with this latter option, however: first, Southeast Asian markets were of limited size and alone were unlikely to enable Japan to erase its deficit; second, the region was highly unstable, especially given the ongoing French struggle against Communist-dominated nationalist forces in Indochina. Between 1950 and 1953, US support to the French had increased by leaps and bounds, in no small part because of concerns about Southeast Asia's perceived importance regarding Japan's economic well-being and diplomatic orientation and the view that if Indochina fell to the Communists, so would the rest of the region. Yet the French campaign showed no sign of success, largely because France proved unwilling to grant real power to anti-Communist nationalists. The Korean War did not create this problem, but the heightening of polarization between the United States and the Communist world that it ushered in served to compound Washington's difficulties in balancing the needs of leading allies with Third World realities.¹²

In the end, the Korean War was a clear-cut victory for no one, but it helped to stabilize the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States at a level below direct combat. The war sparked major rearmament in the United States, thus narrowing the gap in conventional forces between it and the Soviet Union, and solidified US commitments to and presence in Western Europe and Japan. These developments, in turn, made less likely than before a Soviet-initiated or -backed probe in a key area that would provoke an unanticipated American response and escalate into a global conflagration. Yet the war left a legacy that would exacerbate conflict in other areas. It may have helped avert a global bloodletting like that of 1914–18 or 1937–45, but its cost remained tragically high.

12 For a more detailed analysis of developments in the Third World, see Mark Philip Bradley's chapter in this volume.