

Korean War

Background - Korea in the Early 20th Century

- For much of its history, the Korean Peninsula was controlled by neighbouring countries like China and Japan, partly because of its strategic position in East Asia.
 - In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, aggressively extending its control over the region.
 - In 1905, Korea became a protectorate of Japan
 - In 1910, Japan annexed Korea
- The Japanese ruled Korea with an iron fist.
 - The police and military had total power and Koreans had very few rights.
 - Not surprisingly, there was a great deal of resentment towards the Japanese.
 - Though it was difficult and dangerous to oppose Japanese rule, some Koreans resisted.
 - Despite crushing resistance movements brutally, the Japanese continued to fight against them through the 1920s and 1930s. Still, it proved impossible to undermine Japanese control of Korea.
- Resistance to Japanese rule intensified with the outbreak of WWII.
 - Some of the resistance movements had the support of

communists in China and the USSR.

- The resistance groups were courageous and committed, but still failed to make much of an impact on Japanese rule.
 - With differing aims and ambitions for an independent Korea, the different groups were deeply divided.

Example

- One resistance group, led by Kim il Sung, was particularly important. Kim was a deeply committed communist who had been trained in political and military thinking in the USSR. His forces fought a tenacious guerilla war against the Japanese until they were forced to flee to communist-controlled areas in China in 1939.
 - This struggle proved to be important later as it helped Kim gain the support of the North Koreans after the war.

Korea in the Early 20th Century - Continued

- As WWII neared its end in 1945, the Japanese were facing defeat by the Allies.
- The leaders of the Allies met at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945. They agreed that Korea should eventually be given full independence.
 - However, they did not specify what form this independence would take.
- The Allies agreed that once the Japanese were defeated, Korea would be temporarily occupied until arrangements for a new governments could be put in place.

- US forces would govern the southern part of Korea while Soviet troops would govern the northern part of Korea.
- The dividing line would be the 38th parallel.

The Division of Korea into North and South

Aftermath of WW2

- Following the end of WW2, in towns and villages, locals formed political committees to maintain order and to replace the Japanese government and the Korean officials who had served the Japanese.
- It would have been very difficult to unite the country.
 - There was a lot of bitterness left over from the years when the country was occupied by the Japanese. In many areas, people sought to take revenge against those who had collaborated with the Japanese.
- The United States and the USSR met several times from 1946 to 1947 to determine a way of administering Korea after the war.
 - While they agreed that it should be unified under a provisional government, they differed on how to unite and administer it, as both were wary of each other.
 - In 1947, the United Nations called for free elections to be held in Korea to establish a government for a unified Korea.

North Korea and the USSR

- In the North, the Soviets were happy to allow **Kim Il Sung** to

establish control through the political committees and his loyal followers.

- He had been trained in the USSR and had fought alongside the Chinese communists against the Japanese.
- Keen to establish their political and economic influence over their zone of occupation, the USSR did not allow the elections to take place in it.
 - With the support of the USSR, the North Koreans established the **Democratic People's Republic of Korea (or North Korea)** on 9 September 1948, recognising Kim as the leader.
 - Additionally, the Soviet forces were to withdraw by the end of 1948.
- As the leader of North Korea, Kim:
 - Tapped on propaganda extensively to develop a cult of personality.
 - Promoting self-sufficiency, he isolated the country from the rest of the world to limit external influence and opposition.
 - Convinced that the whole of Korea should be united under one rule, Kim was also willing to resort to the use of force to achieve his aim.

South Korea and the United States

- In May 1948, 80 percent of the eligible population took part in a national election in the area south of the 38th parallel.
 - The United States backed **Syngman Rhee** for the position of president as Rhee had campaigned for Korean independence during the Japanese Occupation.
 - However, he had not lived in Korea for some time. The United States favoured Rhee primarily because he was deeply anti-communist, a fluent English speaker and a graduate from

prestigious universities in the United States.

- After gaining a majority of votes in the election, Rhee became the president of the newly founded **Republic of Korea (or South Korea)** in August 1948.
- Furthermore, the US forces were to withdraw from South Korea by June 1949.
- Over the years, Rhee grew increasingly authoritarian, arresting and even killing his political opponents, including suspected communists.
- Despite their disagreements with Rhee's policies, the United states continued to support Rhee and his government due to their anti-communist stance, so as to prevent the spread of communist influence from the North.
- Similar to Kim, Rhee also believed that Korea should be unified under his rule.

Tensions between North Korea and South Korea

- From 1945 to 1948, relations between North and South Korea were hostile but relatively quiet.
 - Kim and Rhee disliked each other intensely.

Kim

- Tried several times to persuade Stalin to support an attempt to reunify Korea.
- However, Stalin took little interest.
 - Soviet resources had been severely stretched during WWII. His overwhelming priority was to create a buffer zone of communist states in Eastern Europe to protect the USSR.
 - Stalin was not keen to stir up more conflict with the United States and further strain Soviet resources by arming and

supplying North Korea in a war.

Rhee

- Was also eager to force the issue of Korean reunification.
- While Rhee had the backing of the United States.
 - Truman refused to provide South Korea with large supplies of weapons for fear that they would be used to attack North Korea.
- Even so, he initiated border clashes to capture territories in the North.

Skirmishes in the lead-up to the Korean War

- In July 1949, South Korean warships attacked North Korea's military installations near Taedong River, sinking most of North Korea's west coast fleet.
- From 1949 onwards, fierce fighting broke out frequently around the 38th parallel.
- First half of 1950: Other border skirmishes and hundreds of small-scale assaults also occurred across the parallel
- These skirmishes resulted in heavy casualties on both sides.
- By the end of 1948, the Korean Peninsula was divided and became a place of great tension.
 - A civil war between North and South to reunify the country was a very real possibility.

US and Soviet Disinterest in Korea

- At that time, it seemed unlikely that Korea would play a significant role in the development of the Cold War.
 - The Americans had decided that Korea lay outside their

"defensive perimeter" in the Asia-Pacific

- **USA:** This defensive perimeter was a security policy announced by US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, in January 1950.
 - In his speech, Acheson emphasised the importance of Japan and the Philippines to the United States.
 - Japan was still under the occupation and rehabilitation of the Allies after WW2, while the Philippines was its former colony.
 - As a result, he made a clear commitment that US military forces would protect these areas.
 - **The Korean Peninsula, however, was noticeably absent from Acheson's speech.**
- **USSR:** Prior to 1949, Stalin was reluctant to support Kim in conquering South Korea as he did not want to risk direct military confrontation with the United States.
- The eventual exit of both the United States and the USSR indicated that the superpowers had no intention to be heavily involved in the matters in Korea.

Expansion of the Cold War into Asia

Expansion of Communism in China

- Following the end of WWII, the Chinese Civil War resumed as Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party (CCP) fought against Chiang Kai-Shek's GMD for control over China.
 - The CCP was victorious and China became a communist state in October 1949.
 - The United States was concerned about the implications of China turning communist.

Reasons for American Concerns

- It had made significant investments in the GMD
 - E.g. Between 1946 and 1949, it pumped US\$2 billion in aid into China largely to the GMD.
- However, by December 1949, the GMD government was defeated,
 - They established themselves on the island of Formosa (Taiwan), which is off the Chinese mainland.
 - With the victory of the CCP, there was now a massive new communist state on the map.
- The United States became fearful that communism might start spreading throughout Asia.
 - Hence, it refused to accept the legitimacy of the CCP government and continued to back the GMD government in Taiwan.
- **Soviet Response**
 - The Soviets were delighted with the communist victory in China.
 - They had supported Mao and his movement during the Chinese Civil War.
 - Now they had a powerful new ally against the United States.
 - In February 1950, the two communist powers signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance.
 - This came a month after Acheson's announcement of the US defensive perimeter.
- The Sino-Soviet Treaty set out various agreements about land and transport in East Asia.
 - It also involved a cumulative loan of \$300 million from the USSR to help China rebuild after years of war.

The USSR's Atomic Bomb

- In August 1949, the USSR successfully detonated its first atomic bomb.
- This meant that the United States no longer had the upper hand.
- Therefore by the late 1949 and early 1950, Stalin's decision to support Kim's request to invade South Korea became less difficult.

The US Response to Communism in Asia

- The US watched the communist victory in China and the Soviet's gaining the atom bomb with increasing anxiety
- These anxieties were intensified by US spies reporting that Stalin was using Cominform to help communists win power in Malaya, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines and Korea.
 - To Truman and the US spies, this suggested a conspiracy.
 - They feared that communist countries were acting together to spread communism and would overrun Asia.
- Truman and Acheson were convinced that Stalin was orchestrating a process of communist expansion worldwide.
- They were determined to stop him.

The US Shifts Its Position on Korea

- Due to their growing fears about the spread of communism, by April 1950, the US defensive perimeter was effectively expanding.
- The United States was changing its position to oppose any attempt to spread communism in Asia.
 - This was outlined by the US State Department in a top-secret

report known as National Security Council Paper No. 68 (NSC-68)

- It set out a more assertive and aggressive US foreign policy to deal with the communist threat.
- The NSC-68 would prove decisive for Korea
 - Its situation was becoming more dangerous with rising tensions and clashes between troops across the border.
- US policy before was to simply let North and South Korea fight it out if a war broke out between them.
 - With the drafting of NSC-68, Truman would have been inclined to intervene if a war broke out.
 - He could not risk the possibility of a victory by North Korea, which would be a triumph for communism and a humiliation for the United States.

Stalin Shifts His Position on Korea

- Before 1950, Stalin was not interested in helping Kim.
- However, this changed as both superpowers sought to expand their global influence, especially in the Asia-Pacific region.
 - Having control and influence over Korea would provide the USSR with a platform to spread communist ideology and also to counterbalance the United States' influence in Japan.
- When communist China emerged under Mao, Stalin had also gained a powerful ally which had a border with North Korea.
 - The signing of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance in February 1950 also reflected the USSR greater confidence in cooperating with China.
 - If there was conflict in Korea, then it seemed likely that Mao

would be responsible for supplying the troops and support for North Korea

- At the same time, it would be another problem for the United States to deal with.

Mao Shifts His Position on Korea

- Mao was keen to show that the new China was a force to be reckoned with on the world stage.
- Despite that, he was wary of getting involved in Korea.
 - However, with Soviet support, he was willing to intervene.

Kim Il Sung's Role in Convincing Stalin and Mao

- Stalin and Mao probably would not have acted in Korea without the actions of Kim.
 - Through determination and skill, Kim gained Stalin and Mao's support.
 - This can be seen from documents that emerged after the collapse of the USSR.
 - Documents from Russian archives show that between March and April 1950, Kim effectively changed Stalin's mind about supporting an invasion of South Korea.
 - Historians have pointed out that Stalin was not as keen to attack and matters might have turned out differently if not for Kim's persistent and determined advocacy for the invasion of the South.

- Kim was not a puppet of Stalin and Mao
 - Kim had a large army of well-trained and experienced troops. Many North Koreans had fought alongside Mao's communists in the war against Chiang's Nationalists. Troops that were eager to reunify Korea.

Development of the Korean War, 1950-1953

The War Begins

- On **25 June 1950**, North Korea invaded South Korea.

Truman's Response

- Truman immediately sent advisors, supplies and warships to the waters around Korea.
- At the same time, he put enormous pressure on the United Nations Security Council to condemn the North Koreans' actions and to call on them to withdraw their troops.

Truman would probably have intervened in Korea even without UN support, but he obtained it as circumstances favoured him.

- Like the United States, the USSR had the power to veto any decision made by the UN.
- However, it was boycotting the UN then as it was protesting the UN's refusal to grant membership to communist China after the Chinese Civil War.
- Thus, the USSR was not present to use its veto when the resolutions

on the situation in Korea were passed.

The War Begins - Continued

- The UN was now committed to using member forces to drive North Korean troops out of South Korea.
- The United States forces:
 - Were under the command of US General **Douglas MacArthur**.
 - The US was the largest contributor of troops to the UN forces.
 - The UN forces included troops from other countries, including Turkey, the Philippines, India and Thailand, and they fought alongside thousands of South Korean troops.
 - Some countries sent combat troops, whilst others provided medical services or transportation

The Course of the War

Phase 1: Rapid North Korean Advance - June-September 1950

- When the war began in **Jun 1950**, North Korean forces advanced rapidly.
 - They captured Seoul, the capital of South Korea, and were soon in command of most of South Korea.
- South Korean forces held on to a small area around the port of Busan, which allowed UN forces to reinforce them and hold back the North Korean advance.

Phase 2: Rapid UN Counteroffensive - September-Mid-October 1950

- In **September 1950**, UN forces landed at Incheon, near Seoul. At the same time, the UN forces in Busan drove the North Koreans back.
 - MacArthur quickly achieved the original UN objective of removing North Korean troops from South Korea
 - But they did not stop there, as MacArthur had wanted to take advantage of the retreating army to eradicate communism.
- The UN approved a plan to advance into North Korea.
 - However, Truman was wary of the involvement of the Soviets and the Chinese forces and cautioned MacArthur to limit operations north of the 38th parallel.
 - MacArthur continued to advance into North Korea despite China's warning that it would intervene to defend its border and launch a full-scale war if the Americans crossed the 38th parallel and advanced towards the Yalu River, which was the border between China and North Korea.
 - Mao did not want a unified Korea on his border which was non-communist and an ally to the United States. He also felt his personal prestige and China's prestige were at stake.

Phase 3: Chinese and North Korean Counteroffensive - Mid-October 1950-April-1950

- In **mid-October 1950**, Chinese forces began crossing into North Korea secretly.
- MacArthur defied direct orders from Truman and the UN, and continued advancing towards Yalu River, potentially advancing the scale of the war.
 - He was also ready to use the atomic bomb against China and North Korea.
- **Late in October 1950**, 200,000 Chinese troops (part of the

"People's Volunteer Army") joined the North Koreans.

- They were highly motivated and equipped with Soviet tanks and aircraft.
- From **December 1950 - January 1951**, the UN forces were pushed back into South Korea.
- In **April 1951**, MacArthur was dismissed by Truman and replaced by General Matthew Ridgeway.
- As the war was ongoing, the Americans also employed psychological warfare to convince the North Koreans to stop fighting for the communists.

Phase 4: Stalemate - July 1951 - July 1953

- **July 1951:** The UN troops then recovered and resumed their attacks towards the north. Armistice talks began at Panmunjom.
- **June 1951 - July 1953:** The fighting reached a stalemate and the armistice talks stalled due to disagreements over the terms.
- **April-July 1953:** The armistice talks resumed at Panmunjom and the armistice was signed later.

The Korean Armistice Agreement

- The war dragged on for another two years from 1951.
 - For this, some scholars blamed the Americans because they took a very hard line in the peace talks.
 - Others claim the war was dragged on by Mao and Stalin because they wanted to tie down US forces and Mao wanted to give its army combat experience.
- The negotiations during the armistice talks in July 1951 were not easy and the fighting persisted till 1953, when a ceasefire was agreed and **an armistice was signed in July 1953.**

Aftermath of the Korean War

Aftermath

- The war was devastating for Korea and its people
 - Examples
 - ~3-4 million casualties.
 - ~1.4 million dead.
 - Many cities, towns and villages were destroyed
 - Hundreds of thousands of people became refugees
 - North Korea was particularly devastated by US bombing raids.
- The economies of North and South Korea were shattered
 - Examples
 - Roads, bridges, railway lines, factories, power plants and many other facilities were destroyed.
 - Massive destruction of industries
 - 70% of the textile industry
 - 70% of the chemical industry
 - 51% of mining industry

Impact of the Korean War on Korea

- The armistice in July 1953 \neq official peace treaty
- There were two main issues influencing the talks

Prisoner of Wars

- 90,000 South Korean POWs and 8,000 UN POWs

- 100,000 North Korean POWs
- Many POWs died in captivity and it remains a sensitive subject to this day.
- A small number of UN and South Korean POWs opted to remain in North Korea or China, while a much larger proportion of North Korean troops tried to stay in South Korea.
- In theory, the issue of POWs was settled in the armistice talks.
 - However, there was suspicion on both sides about whether all POWs had been returned.
 - Many returning POWs also reported that they were treated with suspicion because of the fear that they had been brainwashed by the enemy and would act against their country.
- This disagreement of the Korean War POWs led to hostility between the two Koreas and the superpowers, thus contributing to tensions.

The Border Between North and South Korea

- The communists wanted the division of Korea to be at the 38th parallel.
- The United Nations and South Korea disagreed.
 - They wanted the division to be along the battle lines established between the two sides.
- To settle the issue of the border, **the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ)** was created between North and South Korea.
 - Both sides agreed to move their troops back about two kilometers from the border, now known as the Military Demarcation Line.
- Since then, there would have been many border skirmishes between the two sides, but war has not resumed. The DMZ still exists and the border between North and South Korea remains the most militarised in the world today.

- This tense border serves as a source of tensions between the Koreans and superpowers.

Impact of the Korean War on US Foreign Policy

- The Korean War was the 1st military conflict in the Cold War
 - Before this, Cold War confrontations had been fought through political methods, the media and propaganda (including the Berlin Blockade)

Proxy Wars

- Korea was the **first proxy war**
- Proxy wars are conflicts when the two superpowers - the United States and the USSR - but where they do not fight directly against each other.
 - Instead they provided arms, money and other support to the groups which shared their political views or were against their opponent's.
- The Korean War as a proxy war
 - Although the United States put troops in Korea, the USSR did not. And in theory, the Chinese troops were volunteers and not officially under the command of communist China.
- The Korean War was also an example of how a local dispute could escalate into a superpower conflict.
- This marked the beginnings of a new type of competition between the superpowers that served to escalate tensions.

Creation of Alliances and Escalation of Tensions

- The Korean War prompted the United States to become freshly determined to pursue its policy of containment in Asia.
 - South Korea, Japan and Taiwan became central to US policy in Asia.
 - The United States stationed troops and significant air power and naval ships in South Korea and in Japan.
- The United States also extended its network of alliances beyond NATO.
- In 1954, it set up a network of anti-communist alliances around the world
 - The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) in Southeast Asia
 - The Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) in Central Asia and the Middle East.
 - The United States gave money, advice and arms to these allies. In return, the leaders of these countries suppressed communist influence at home.
- The expansion of American alliances alarmed the USSR, escalating tensions.
- The USSR saw American alliances as aggressive.
- It accused the United States of trying to encircle the communist world.
 - To counter NATO, the USSR set up the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, better known as the Warsaw Pact, in 1955.
 - This included the USSR and all the communist Eastern Europe countries except Yugoslavia.
 - The formation of the Warsaw Pact in response to NATO and other American alliances, solidified the world into two competing blocs led by the superpowers led to an escalation of tensions.

Increase in Military Power

- As a result of the Korean War, the United States intensified its military power to enforce its policy of containment by military means, if necessary.
- **Increase in American Military Power**
 - __Before 1950, __the United States had been fighting the Cold War primarily through political activity and the media and thus was scaling down its forces.
 - But **by 1951**, US armed forces had doubled in size compared to the previous year.
 - The United States' NATO allies took a similar approach. European military power grew dramatically.
- **Increase in NATO Military Power**
 - When the Korean War began, NATO countries had only 14 army divisions and spent approximately 5.5 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on the military.
 - By the time the war ended, NATO had 15 divisions stationed in West Germany alone, and NATO countries were spending more than 12 percent of their GDP on defence.
- The increase of American military power alarmed the USSR, escalating tensions.

Conclusion

- The Korean War was one of the most destructive conflicts in the world
 - Millions of casualties and many major cities were destroyed.
- The Korean War was also one of the first instances of a military conflict in the Cold War
- It confirmed the status of communist China as an influential player

in the international arena

- The creation of anti-communist alliances and the Warsaw Pact as a result of the Korean War worsened relations and heightened tensions between the superpowers.
- The effects of the war are still evident today where families remain separated on either side of the 38th parallel, yearning for a reunion.
 - Even now, there has been no reunification of the Korean Peninsula.