

Brief History, before summer of 1950

Why are there two Koreas?

Korea is on the far eastern end of the Eurasian landmass, a peninsula jutting out into the seas separating China and Japan, with Mongolia and Russia to its north. Like a lot of countries around there, it had gone through a period of warring states, but finally the Cordial Dynasty unified the Korean Peninsula around 900AD. Cordio and the succeeding Chosan Dynasty, ruled Korea as an independent, unified polity for about a thousand years until Japan colonized Korea in 1910.

Korea's geographic and political position has put it at a crossroads in Asia, and what we would now call being caught in the middle of great power competition, particularly between China and Japan. Korea would continue to be caught in the middle as World War 2 came to an end. In the closing days of the war, the United States had isolated Japan and its Korean colony and was concentrating on how to invade their home islands. But several factors, including the dropping of 2 atomic bombs and the Soviet Union's attack into Manchuria, forced Japan to surrender, negating the need for an Allied invasion.

Now the U.S. faced a new problem: how to stop the Soviet forces that were moving into Korea.

The Americans proposed, and the Soviets agreed, to divide the country along the 38th parallel, an arbitrary line which cut Korea roughly in half and halted the Russian army's advance. In September 1945, U.S. occupation forces landed in the southern portion of the peninsula and began the process of returning the Korean Peninsula back to the Koreans, since the Allies had agreed in 1943 (at the November 1943 Cairo Conference) that Korea should be free and independent in due course. And this country seemed to have little strategic value. The Koreans were finally going to be left alone. But the road to independence was not as straightforward as it initially appeared and would eventually lead to war.

Why did North Korea attack South Korea?

Korea is unique in the fact that it's at a crossroads where it has influence from China, has an influence from the Soviet Union, but ultimately it has influence from the south, from the United States and Japan. It's at this unique strategic crossroads as we move into 1948, 49, and 50. Against that backdrop, you have the larger global Cold War that's evolving,



although the fixation is on Europe. So, China goes Communist, you have the Soviet Union detonating their first atomic bomb in 1949 as well, which is a shock to the United States. The U.S. did not think the Soviets would get the bomb until around 1955. The U.S. felt the need to check the Soviets and Communism everywhere, in this evolving Cold War environment.

The U.S. and the Soviet Union could not agree on what a unified Korea should look like. In 1948, the United States turned to the United Nations, hoping it could establish a central government. In August, elections were held in the South, and the UN recognized the Republic of Korea, or ROK. President Syngman Rhee became the head of this new government in Seoul and claimed control of the entire peninsula. But the Soviet Union refused to recognize the ROK government and formed their own: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea under Kim Il-sung who also claimed control of the entire peninsula. Unable to create a single state that was free and independent, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union withdrew their troops in 1948 and 1949, leaving the two Korean governments to figure it out on their own. Predictably, tensions rose between these two new countries as the two Koreas skirmished along their border. Two very different armies faced each other. North Korea had 135,000 troops and South Korea had 95,000 troops. By the summer of 1950, the Soviets had provided the much larger North Korean army with tanks, heavy artillery, and attack aircraft. The United States did not trust the South Korean government to not start a war.

With Syngman Rhee constantly calling for unification by war, the U.S. refused to give Seoul any offensive weapons, leaving Rhee's army as essentially a light infantry force, best suited to deal with internal conflict. Conversely, Kim Il-sung could reunite the peninsula by force, and it appeared that the U.S. might not come to the aid of the South Koreans. On January 12, 1950, Dean Acheson, the U.S. Secretary of State announced a Far East defensive perimeter, which omitted Korea and Formosa. Looking for support from Joseph Stalin, Kim convinced him that even if the U.S. did come to the aid of South Korea, they would not be able to react quickly enough.

Summer of 1950, combat begins

About 4am, the morning of June 25, 1950, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea attacked the Republic of Korea, spearheaded by T-34 tanks. This invasion by 10 North Korean army divisions was rapid. Harry S. Truman did not hesitate. "The future of civilization depends on what we do,"

The U.S. government quickly agreed to counter North Korean aggression with ground troops. The leaders of the free world had to draw a line to stop the spread of Communism, and it would be on the Korean peninsula.

How did the UN stop the Communist invasion?

A policy of "containment" was becoming the National Security strategy of the United States; the U.S. desired to check the expansion of Communism. As the United States deployed, it was able to gain support of the United Nations, which passed a resolution that denounced the invasion and eventually authorized troops to counter the North Korean aggression. The forces that moved to stop the North Koreans did so under the UN flag.

Seventeen countries provided naval, air, and ground forces, but it was the U.S. that provided the overwhelming majority for the UN effort and made most of the decisions that shaped the war. Certainly, the victors of WW2 would make short work of this small nation. Unfortunately, U.S. military effectiveness had significantly declined since the end of WW2.

America's atomic monopoly enabled the Truman Administration to enjoy bipartisan support for reducing defense expenditures from a high of \$82 billion in 1945 to just \$13 billion for fiscal year 1950. Now this drawdown was not well-managed, and the result was chaotic. From a high strength of 8 million soldiers and officers in 90 divisions in 1945, the U.S. Army could field just 10 regular Army divisions for all its global commitments in 1950. Moreover, all these formations were woefully under strength due to budget constraints, and despite the valiant efforts of leaders at every echelon, they were unevenly trained and incompletely equipped.

The most immediate troops available for deployment into the peninsula were the four occupation divisions of the U.S. Far East command, the U.S. Army's 7th, 24th, 25th Infantry Divisions and the 1st Cavalry division. These four divisions were all under the 8th Army. These troops were led by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur. On July 10, 1950, MacArthur was named the commander of all UN forces in Korea, but the U.S. forces in



Japan were not ready to face the North Korean onslaught. The Eighth Army had to improvise to stop the Communists first. The 7th Infantry Division had to be dismantled, and their troops distributed to other units in order to give the other three divisions enough combat strength to deploy. Then, the 24th Infantry Division was piecemealed to buy time and give the rest of the army a chance to establish a lodgment. The initial U.S. contact with the North Koreans was 50 miles south of Seoul, a small element of 540 soldiers known as Task Force Smith was quickly overwhelmed.

When larger units of the 24th Infantry Division were sent north, they expected a similar fate. This series of defeats were a blow to UN morale and cost the 24th 30% of its force, but it allowed the 8th Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Walton Walker, to build strength and establish a lodgment. By July 22, this became known as the Battle of the Pusan Perimeter. By the end of this battle, the 8th Army outnumbered and outgunned the North Koreans, who were at the end of a vulnerable supply line. These conditions allowed General MacArthur to implement a brilliant strategic plan.

Why did MacArthur attack at Inchon?

Regardless of their numerical strength, the 8th Army was still backed into the corner of the Pusan Perimeter, making MacArthur's options limited. During WW2, General MacArthur had great success in the Pacific executing amphibious operations that bypassed the enemy's strength and attacked into rear areas. MacArthur was adamant that his forces should again use this technique that had proven so successful in the islands of the Pacific. He chose the port of Incheon to conduct the amphibious operation.

Landing the Army's 7th Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division in Incheon would not be easy. Incheon posed several challenges to a successful amphibious landing. The single largest concern was the tides. Incheon experiences severe tidal variations, which exceed 25 feet and drastically limit the timing and location of any potential landing.

Geographically, the harbor possessed a single narrow entrance channel, dominated by a fortified island, Wolmi, which would need to be reduced before any assault could begin. There was no beach; the harbor was instead lined with a rock seawall with few exits. Moreover, the city itself boasted a population of more than a quarter million. Once ashore, soldiers and Marines would find themselves fighting in a dense and irregular urban terrain that favored the defenders. And finally, just getting to Incheon from staging ports in Japan would prove problematic since the typhoon season began in early September. Because of these challenges, most of the top Army and Navy leadership were opposed to this location.



Many would attempt to dissuade their Commander, but MacArthur would not budge from his conviction that this operation would work. MacArthur stated, “The very arguments you have made as to the impracticability involved will tend to ensure for me the element of surprise. For the enemy commander will reason that no one would be so brash as to make such an attempt.”

Surprise was to be the key to success. To accomplish this mission, MacArthur formed the 10th Corps, made up of the 1st Marine Division and the 7th Infantry Division. Instead of including Walker and the 8th Army in the chain of commands, the 10th Corps commander Major General Edward Almond would answer directly to MacArthur. Called Operation Chromite, the 10th Corps began landing at Incheon on September 15, 1950, where they encountered with little resistance or prepared defenses to oppose them. They moved rapidly inland to capture the South Korean capital, Seoul.

The 1st Marine Division, commanded by Major General O.P. Smith, was pushed hard. Gen Almond wanted to capture Seoul by the 3-month anniversary of the North Korean attack. Smith, who had a rocky relationship with Almond, told him that he couldn’t guarantee anything, “That is up to the enemy.” MacArthur also pushed for a rapid advance to the capital. With fighting still occurring in Seoul, the Supreme Commander conducted a very publicized ceremony at the capitol building on September 29. He announced that Syngman Rhee was once again in control of South Korea.

The North Korean army was in trouble, with the 10th Corps threatening to cut them off, and a now-superior 8th Army on the offensive. The North Korean army began to withdraw and eventually disintegrated.

Why did the UN attack into North Korea?

The Incheon Landing could be viewed as a catastrophic success, as the landing enabled the UN forces to retake Seoul, to bring the South Korean government back into power, and to cut off the North Korean lines. But it also presented a dilemma. While there was deliberation going on in Washington and among the UN coalition forces about what to do next, the UN forces had the initiative. So now a decision had to be made: do the UN forces go with their initiative and go north, or do they stop at the 38th parallel, recognizing that moving north could reunify under the Republic of Korea government but it could also trigger another world war by drawing in other world powers such as China and the Soviet Union into war?



One person not concerned with this dilemma was the commander of the UN forces, General MacArthur. Annihilation of the severely wounded North Korean army should be the new goal; there could be no substitute for victory. The U.S. Congress agreed. They pressured President Truman to shift from containment to unification, which, if successful, would satisfy the 1943 Allied agreement of a free and independent Korea. It was also evident that President Rhee had every intention of continuing north. The Soviets seemed to be backing away from the war, and MacArthur made assurances that the Chinese would not intervene. Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, and George Marshall agreed to expand the war. The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff gave MacArthur new orders: “Your military objective is the destruction of the North Korean Armed Forces. You are authorized to conduct military operations...north of the 38th Parallel in Korea, provided that at the time of such operations there has been no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcement of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily in North Korea.”

Fortunately for this U.S. led operation, the UN announced a resolution that called for a unified, independent, and democratic Korea, justifying the action on the world stage. On October 1st, 1950, MacArthur called for North Korea to surrender as South Korean soldiers began crossing the parallel. The North Koreans remained silent, so U.S. troops also crossed. By October 9th, the UN forces moved rapidly, and Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, fell on October 19. But MacArthur threw a wrench into the works. Instead of attaching the 10th Corps to the 8th Army as General Walker wanted, MacArthur kept control of the Corps and sent them around the peninsula to conduct yet another unpopular amphibious landing. This time, the target was Wonsan. The intention was to cut off retreating North Koreans. General Matthew Ridgeway would later state, “No one was questioning the judgement of the man who just worked a military miracle, but in the time it took the 1st Marine Division and the Army’s 7th Infantry Divisions to make the journey, the rest of the 8th Army had pursued the broken North Koreans overland and beat the 10th Corps to Wonsan.”

In the end, the two forces were divided by 30 to 80 km of mountainous terrain, while this gap was covered by ROK troops, they were no match for the large Chinese force that was about to enter the war. On October 15, President Truman had met General MacArthur on Wake Island to discuss the war. When Truman asked about the possibility of a Chinese intervention, MacArthur answered in the negative. He was confident the Chinese would



not become involved, and even if they did attempt to cross the Yalu River, UN air power would quickly stop them. However, the Chinese had other ideas.

Why did China enter the Korean War?

In 1949, one year before the outbreak of the Korean War, the Chinese Communist Party, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, had emerged victorious from the Chinese Civil War and declared the foundation of the People's Republic of China. In this state, it was unclear if China was ready for another war, but as Mao saw Americans flowing up the Korean Peninsula, he decided that it would be China who would determine the course of events in East Asia. Infiltrating across the Yalu River in October, an unexpected Chinese force of 300,000 soldiers appeared, ready to oppose the U.S. troops.

Determined to finish the war, MacArthur called for the advance of his forces towards the Chinese border, as well as the bombing of the Yalu bridges. Almond was ordered to push the 10th Corps rapidly and link up with the 8th Army. But this last attempt to end the war was met with disaster. The UN forces were piecemeal, allowing the Chinese to strike at the UN's greatest weakness: the gap between the 8th Army and 10th Corps. After destroying the ROK's Second Corps, they turned on the separated U.S. forces. Rugged terrain and cold weather made the already difficult situation almost unbearable for the troops involved. Trying to preserve combat power, the Americans became desperate in their attempts to withdraw from the Chinese onslaught. One example of this was Task Force Faith, where the 31st Regimental Combat Team was almost wiped out while attempting to escape. The other units that survived relied on firepower, air power, and sheer willpower.

Eventually the 10th Corps were evacuated by sea, from the Port of Hungnam. Hungnam had been held through combat by the Puerto Rican National Guard. General Walker was successful in withdrawing from the 8th Army to the 38th Parallel. However, Walker lost his life in a tragic jeep accident and was replaced by Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgeway, famous in WW2 for leading the 82nd Airborne Division and the 18th Airborne Corps. Ridgeway would infuse his fighting spirit, which the 8th Army desperately needed after their collapse and withdrawal back to South Korea. The 1st Marine Division G3 said that Ridgeway brought a new, fresh attitude, a new breath of life, to the whole 8th Army.



1951, The Second Year

How did the UN stop the Communist invasion again?

At this point in the war, Washington decided to abandon reunification. The U.S. returned to the original goal of maintaining a North and South Korea, with the border division returning to the 38th parallel. This mattered little to the Communists; they kept their goal of reunification and kept pushing south, capturing Seoul for a second time on January 4, 1951. It appeared that they might push the UN forces off the peninsula yet again. Unfortunately for their cause, while heavy in numbers, the Communists were light on logistics and firepower and could not sustain this offensive.

The Battle of Chip'yong-ni

On the night of February 11, 1951, 135,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) and North Korean People's Army launched a major offensive on the US and South Korean lines. Their targets included the key road junction in the town of Chip'yong-ni.

The Chinese had driven the US Army back for hundreds of miles since entering the war. Morale was low, and the Soldiers had begun to think of the Chinese as unstoppable. This new attack punched several holes in the UN lines, and the situation was grim. The American commander, General Matthew Ridgway, decided to make a stand at Chip'yong-ni to give the rest of the Army time to recover.

Chip'yong-ni was a small crossroads town half a mile long and several blocks wide, situated on a single-track railroad. Besides the railway station there were several other brick or frame buildings in the center of the town, but most of the buildings were constructed of the usual mud, sticks, and straw. At least half of the buildings were already reduced to rubble as the result of previous fighting.

The town was held by the 23rd Infantry Regiment of the 2nd Infantry Division, who had been there for ten days. They had used that time well. The infantry companies dug in and sent daily patrols into the surrounding countryside. The 23rd Infantry commander, Colonel Paul L. Freeman, made sure his artillery registered on all probable avenues of enemy approach, and that all units established good communications. The unit had the time and the



foresight to coordinate the infantry, artillery, and air support into an effective combat team. Air support was critical: air strikes forced the Chinese to attack at night, and once the 23rd was surrounded they could only be resupplied by air.

As Ridgway hoped, the 5,000 defenders of Chip'yong-ni quickly became the focus of Chinese attention. Throughout the night of February 13 three Chinese divisions, supported by artillery, probed the two-mile perimeter looking for weak points.

When the shooting started, PFC Herbert G. Ziebell woke his foxhole buddy PFC Roy F. Benoit and said: "There's some firing going on. Get up and get ready." Ziebell did not fire immediately because he could see nothing to shoot, and he was afraid the flash of his rifle would draw enemy fire. Along the line other men heard the firing and sat in the darkness waiting for the attack. The Americans could hear the Chinese out in the darkness, blowing horns and whistles to coordinate their attacks. At times the Chinese were able to advance right up to the barbed wire protecting individual American positions. The Americans fought off the attackers with extensive artillery support and automatic weapons fire from an antiaircraft artillery battalion.

Daylight brought a respite from the attacks, and the American's used the time to rebuild their defenses and prepare for another attack. Mop up from the battle continued during the day too. One American commander, seeing a house some 800 yards from the perimeter, called in white phosphorous artillery fire to destroy it so that the Chinese could not use it if they attacked again. After the third round hit the house, it began burning and about fifteen enemy soldiers ran out of it across open ground. Machine-gunners killed eight of them, the others escaped. During the day the 23rd also received 24 air drops of ammunition, and some of the Soldiers got hot meals.

The assaults continued the night of February 14. Again, the fighting was intense. The Chinese directed their attention to the section of perimeter guarded by the men of G Company led by Lieutenant Thomas Heath. The enemy attack continued without let-up, a persistent, gnawing assault that progressed from one foxhole to the next. The Chinese eventually dislodged G Company and drove Lieutenant Heath from his hilltop. The hours that followed were filled with fighting as intense and as frantic as any in which the infantrymen had ever participated.

The American's were in trouble: part of their perimeter had fallen to the enemy. Due to the fog of war, the American's were slow to realize that their foxholes had been captured,



giving the Chinese time to prepare for counterattack. If Lieutenant Heath and his men could not recapture their position the whole regiment could be lost.

Tracers from the enemy machine gun stretched along the hilltop like red beads. Flares popped overhead. The area was alternately dimly lit, and dark as if someone were turning streetlights on and off. When some Soldiers tried to find cover, Lieutenant Heath ran back and forth yelling and pulling at the men to persuade them to stand up and move. “You’ll die down here anyway”, he yelled, “You might as well go up on the hill and die there.” Heath led several counterattacks throughout the night. They all failed.

The U.S. troops experienced a feeling of relief when daylight came on 15 February, because the enemy soldiers usually withdrew then. This time, however, the Chinese did not withdraw. They conducted a determined defense against an attack by the 1st Ranger Company and Company B, 23rd Infantry, supported by air strikes, artillery, and tanks. By evening relief elements from the 5th Cavalry began to arrive, and the Chinese finally withdrew.

Ridgway’s plan worked. While the 23rd Infantry held on at Chip’yong-ni, he reinforced the battered UN lines. Rather than take advantage of the weakened front to the east, the Chinese had chosen to concentrate on eliminating the US forces at Chip’yong-ni first. But they had chosen poorly, and the respite allowed UN forces time to recover.

By February 18th the Communist offensive was spent, and enemy forces began withdrawing to the north rather than attempting to hold what they had taken. The Battle of Chip’yong-ni was a major factor in the defeat of the Chinese counteroffensive in February 1951 and a major boost to UN morale. US casualties at Chip’yong-ni totaled 404, including 52 Soldiers killed. Chinese losses were far greater. Captured documents later revealed that the enemy suffered at least 5,000 casualties.

By the end of February, Ridgway began a series of counterattacks with names like “Killer” and “Ripper”. The counterattacks were designed to return the UN forces to the 38th parallel and, more importantly, keep the Communists north of the border.

General MacArthur, however, still felt annihilation should be the UN goal: “Asia should be the main effort, the place to confront communism, not Europe,” as the President and the Joint Chiefs believed. “We’re not going to ignore the danger of aggression elsewhere. There is actual warfare in the Far East, but Europe and the rest of the world are also in very great danger. The same menace, the menace of communist aggression, threatens Europe



as well as Asia.” MacArthur blatantly contradicted the President on this and many other points, both verbally and in writing throughout the war. After making one too many insubordinate statements, Truman finally relieved MacArthur of his military duty on April 11th, 1951, and replaced him with Ridgeway. Lieutenant General James Van Fleet took the reins of the 8th Army and continued Ridgeway’s strategy of attrition. The goal was to make the war so painful and costly in human lives that the Communists would eventually negotiate for peace.

The Korean War: The Final Years (1952–1953)

The Korean War reached a critical juncture in its final years—1952 and 1953. These years were marked by fierce fighting, political shifts, and intensive diplomatic efforts that ultimately led to the armistice agreement. Understanding the events of 1952 and 1953 provides a deeper insight into how the war transitioned from a brutal stalemate to a tense but managed ceasefire that still shapes geopolitics today.

Military Stalemate and Intensified Combat (1952)

By 1952, the war had evolved into a deadly stalemate centered near the 38th parallel. The initial movement-heavy conflict of 1950–1951 had slowed, and both sides had dug in. Despite the lack of large territorial changes, 1952 was anything but quiet. Trench warfare reminiscent of World War I dominated the front lines, with continuous artillery exchanges, patrol skirmishes, and occasional offensive thrusts.

The U.S. military and its United Nations (UN) allies launched operations to secure strategic positions, such as hills and ridges that were tactically significant. These battles, including the bloody engagements at “Old Baldy” and “Triangle Hill”, were costly and underscored the futility of the ongoing stalemate.

During this year, President Harry S. Truman’s administration continued to seek a negotiated end to the war. However, the armistice talks that had begun in 1951 were repeatedly stalled, primarily over the issue of prisoner of war (POW) repatriation. The UN insisted on voluntary repatriation of prisoners, while China and North Korea demanded that all prisoners be returned, even against their will.

Political Changes and the End of the War (1953)

A turning point came in early 1953 with the inauguration of U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Campaigning on the promise to end the Korean War, Eisenhower brought a more assertive stance to negotiations. Though his administration maintained the position of voluntary repatriation, it also quietly hinted at the potential use of nuclear weapons if a settlement could not be reached—an idea that added pressure to the opposing side.

A key development occurred on March 5, 1953, with the death of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. His passing marked a shift in Soviet foreign policy and reduced support for continued Chinese and North Korean intransigence. The new Soviet leadership showed



greater willingness to end the war, which in turn influenced China's and North Korea's positions.

Negotiations soon gained momentum. By June, both sides had agreed to the terms of prisoner repatriation, including the establishment of a neutral commission to oversee the process. On July 27, 1953, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed at North Korean capital, Panmunjom, by all belligerents except South Korea. South Korea has never signed a cease fire agreement with North Korea. A demilitarized zone was established between the two Koreas, and uneasy peace has been observed by both countries ever since. The agreement ended active combat but did not result in a peace treaty, meaning that North and South Korea technically remain at war.

Conclusion

The years 1952 and 1953 were crucial in shaping the outcome of the Korean War. Although characterized by bloody and stagnant fighting, these final years also saw significant diplomatic efforts, leadership changes, and international shifts that culminated in the cessation of hostilities. The Korean Peninsula remained divided along the 38th parallel, with a heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas—a situation that persists to this day. These years not only brought an end to open warfare but also set the stage for the geopolitical dynamics of East Asia during the Cold War and beyond.

