

Korean War and Context

What is the context of the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950?

Why does the USA intervene in the war?

Major Factors - regional and local:

*threat of communist victory in French Indochina War

*communist take-over in China

*situation in Korea

1. French Indochina War begun in late 1946 will lead to independence (decolonization) of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from France in 1954. Ho Chi Minh - leader of Vietminh (nationalist independence movement) is also a communist. Therefore, by 1950, USA starts giving financial support and military aid to France.

2. Chinese Communist revolution in 1949 under leadership of Mao Tse-tung (Zedong) creates People's Republic of China (PRC) defeating Nationalists Kuomintang under Chiang Kai-shek, an ally of the USA. Chiang sets up Republic of China (Taiwan). Both claim to be sole legitimate gov't of China.

1950 - Soviets and Chinese sign friendship pact - Soviets provide arms and economic aid.

Republicans in the US blame Truman for the "loss of China" to the communists and McCarthy's witch hunt looks for traitors inside the State Dept. (Alger Hiss) to prove that the Democrats are "soft on communism"

3. June 1950 - Korean War breaks out resulting in direct US military involvement; air, naval and ground troops are sent within 5 days of the North Korean attack against South Korea.

Background to Korean War: Why does North Korea invade the South?

1910 Korea annexed by Japan

End of WWII, Soviets and Americans share occupation of Korea dividing it along the 38th parallel. By 1949, USSR sets up communist gov't in the North under Kim Il-Sung, US sets up non-communist gov't in the South under Syngman Rhee. US and USSR withdraw. Division of country is meant to be temporary, but neither side will accept reunification under the leadership of the other.

May 1950, Rhee loses some support in elections; Soviet tanks are shipped to North Korea (perhaps in preparation for an invasion).

In June, gov't in North calls for general elections to reunify the country believing that Rhee is vulnerable and will lose. But, then North invades the South deciding on a military solution to achieve unification.

Civil War lasts 3 years with at least a million casualties.

Immediate Consequences:

United Nations condemns North's aggression against the South and authorizes a 'police action' to defend South Korea. (Soviets were absent from UN vote, hence no veto, protesting the US veto of UN recognition of the PRC, ironically).

US does not declare war, but most UN troops are from the US and under US Pacific fleet commander General MacArthur.

North pushes all the way south to Pusan before MacArthur counters with a landing at Inchon and pushes N. Korean army north of 38th parallel.

Truman asks and gets UN permission to invade North Korea and reunify country (goes beyond the policy of Containment to 'Rollback')

Nov. 1950 China enters the war sending 200,000 soldiers to assist the North.

MacArthur suggests using nuclear weapons to bomb China. Dismissed by Truman;

Next two years, war is at a stalemate fought along the 38th parallel.

Containment is successful (Rollback fails); Japan and Taiwan strengthen ties to the US.



Development of US Foreign Policy in the 1950s

- Containment
- Rollback
- Massive Retaliation

April 1950 - NSC-68 (National Security Council) policy statement (2 months before Korean War)

US determines that Soviets are attempting domination in Asia. US responds w/ Massive arms build-up with a tripling of US military budget
Development of the hydrogen bomb & rapid build-up of conventional weapons and no negotiations with the Soviets

1954 President Eisenhower announces the Domino Theory: communism is more likely to spread from one neighboring country to another, especially in weak and newly independent countries in Southeast Asia. Hence, the need for Containment.

Containment Policy Treaties:

1949 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)

1951 ANZUS

1954 SEATO (Southeast Asian Treaty Org.)

1955 CENTO (originally known as the Baghdad Pact)

