Cold War turns Hot in Asia

The superpowers did not confine their rivalry to Europe. Before long, Cold War conflicts erupted around the globe. Asia was one of the first affected regions. By the 1950s, both China and Korea had become arenas in the Cold War struggle.

The “Fall of China” to Communism During World War II, Chinese communists led by Mao Zedong and the Nationalists led by Chiang Kai-shek had joined forces to fight Japan. With Japan’s surrender in 1945, however, the two groups turned on each other and waged a civil war for control of China. The United States backed the Nationalists, even though Chiang was not a popular leader. At times, both allies and adversaries saw him as corrupt or ineffective. In 1949, the communists defeated the Nationalists. Chiang and his followers fled to Formosa, an island off the coast of China, which they renamed Taiwan. There, Chiang led a small Nationalist holdout against communism.

The fall of China to the communists ended U.S. hopes that the country would become a powerful, noncommunist ally in Asia. Some Americans reacted to the event with anger and looked for a scapegoat. In public speeches and on the floor of Congress, they asked bitterly, “Who lost China?” Some Republican leaders pointed accusing fingers at President Truman.

U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson denied that the administration held responsibility for China’s acceptance of communism. “Nothing this country did or could have done within the reasonable limits of its capabilities,” he said, “could have changed the result.” Many China scholars agreed, noting the unpopularity of Chiang and the broad public support for Mao Zedong.

Many U.S. leaders feared that China and the Soviet Union would form an alliance and pose an even greater threat to U.S. interests around the world. Most Americans viewed communist China as similar to the Soviet Union both in its attitude toward the West and its desire to spread communism around the world. Nevertheless, although China remained a key ally of the Soviet Union for years, it pursued its own interests and rejected Soviet control.

The communist takeover of China prompted the United States to seek a new ally in Asia, and Japan was the logical choice. The United States gradually lifted restrictions on industrial and economic growth imposed on Japan after World War II. Eventually, Japan became an economic powerhouse and a strong U.S. partner in the region.

Containment by Isolation: The U.S. Ends Relations with China Meanwhile, the United States adopted a stern policy toward China. When Mao formed the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the United States refused to recognize the new state. Instead, it continued to refer to the Nationalists in Taiwan as China’s legitimate government. The United States also cut off all trade with China and opposed its admission to the United Nations. The U.S. government meant for these steps to contain China by isolating it from the world community.

Many Americans felt that Mao and Stalin were equally reprehensible. Forging a better relationship with either one seemed unthinkable.
Containment by Armed Force: The Korean War Like China, Korea was freed from Japanese control when World War II ended. At that time, Soviet troops occupied the Korean Peninsula north of the 38th parallel, while U.S. troops held the area to the south. In the north, the Soviet Union put a pro-Soviet communist government in power. In the south, U.S. officials supported the existing anticommunist government. However, this arrangement masked deep tensions, which erupted in June 1950 in the Korean War. The war began when North Korean troops armed with Soviet weapons invaded South Korea. Their aim was to unite all of Korea under communist rule. Truman, viewing the invasion as a test of American will, ordered U.S. forces to help South Korea repel the invaders.

Truman turned to the United Nations for support. A UN resolution condemned the North Korean invasion and called on member states to aid South Korea. Troops from 15 nations joined the UN force, with the vast majority of the soldiers coming from the United States. According to another UN resolution, the purpose of this joint force was to create a “unified, independent and democratic Korea.” Officials selected American general Douglas MacArthur to lead the troops. Under his command, the army invaded North Korea and fought its way northward, nearly reaching the Chinese border along the Yalu River. Alarmed by the approach of UN forces, China sent tens of thousands of soldiers streaming over the border into North Korea. An army of more than 400,000 Chinese and North Korean troops forced the UN army back to the 38th parallel. MacArthur then called for an expansion of the conflict. He wanted to blockade China’s ports and bomb major Chinese industrial centers.

President Truman rejected MacArthur’s plan, however. In fact, once China entered the conflict, the president began looking for a way out of it. He feared the onset of another global war. But MacArthur would not back down. In an angry letter to a friend, he wrote, “I believe we should defend every place from communism . . . I don’t admit that we can’t hold communism wherever it shows its head.” When MacArthur publicly questioned the president’s decision, Truman fired him.

The final two years of the war became a stalemate, with most of the fighting taking place near the 38th parallel. Finally, in 1953 the two sides signed an armistice ending hostilities. The agreement left the Korean Peninsula divided along the 38th parallel and created a buffer zone, called the demilitarized zone (DMZ), between the two countries. No military forces from either North Korea or South Korea were allowed to enter the DMZ. The war left all of Korea ailing. It destroyed homes, factories, roads, hospitals, and schools throughout the peninsula. About 3.5 million North Korean and South Korean soldiers died or suffered injuries. As many as 2 million Korean civilians may have lost their lives. More than 54,000 American soldiers also died in the war.

After the war’s end, North Korea turned inward, becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of the world. South Korea, in contrast, continued to develop strong economic and political ties with the United States. In time, South Korea’s economy flourished. As the economic gap between the two Koreas widened, hopes for a “unified, independent and democratic Korea” faded away.