

History: The Cold War

Lesson 12 of 30

Worksheet:

How significant were events in Asia for superpower relations?



Context

Since 1945, tensions had been **increasing** between the USA and the USSR. As **Winston Churchill**, the former British Prime Minister, had argued in 1946, an 'Iron Curtain' of ideological division had been drawn across Europe.

The USA and the USSR were in fierce competition with each other and actively sought opportunities to demonstrate their strength and compete for world domination. So far, this conflict and rivalry had largely been focused on Europe. However, from the end of the 1940s, **events in Asia** also started to have a **significant impact** on the relationship and levels of tensions between the two superpowers.



Event 1: China became Communist, 1949

In October 1949, **China became Communist** under the leadership of **Mao Zedong**. This was a major concern to the West, and particularly to the USA, because it now looked as though Communism may begin to spread throughout Asia.

China's size and geographical position made this even more concerning. Not only did China have the highest population in the world but it was also **located next to the USSR**. This meant that Stalin now had a sizeable Communist neighbour and that Communism could spread more easily throughout Asia. In February 1950, the USSR and Communist China agreed they would support each other and signed the **Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance**.



Why was China becoming Communist significant for superpower relations?

The signing of the Treaty of Friendship with China meant that the **balance of power** had **shifted in favour of the USSR** and the USA began to fear that Communist powers would soon dominate Asia.

To increase tensions further, the **United Nations (UN)** refused to recognise the new Communist government of China. As a result, the USSR boycotted the UN in protest and refused to take part in any UN decisions. It was clear that events in Asia had **divided the USSR and the West** even further.



Event 2: The Korean War 1950-53

Tensions also began to increase because of events in **Korea**. Before the Second World War, Japan had controlled Korea. However, in 1945, the Japanese forces had surrendered to the USSR in the north of Korea and to American forces in the south. Korea became divided at the **38th Parallel**; this is a natural line of latitude that runs through the country and which became used as a border line to separate the north from the south.



Event 2: The Korean War 1950-53

Consequently, when the Second World War ended, two different ruling systems emerged: **North Korea** was controlled by a **Communist dictator** while **South Korea** was **anti-Communist**. Each country claimed to be in control of the whole of Korea. By 1950, tensions between the leaders of North and South Korea had reached their height and in June, **North Korea invaded South Korea**. North Korea's Communist allies, the USSR and China, supported this move while the West looked on in horror.



Event 2: The Korean War 1950-53

The South **appealed to the UN** for help and the Americans saw their chance to intervene. The USA approached the UN to gain support for troops to be sent to support South Korea. The USA believed that, if North Korean troops could be 'rolled back' north over the 38th parallel, Communism in Asia might be contained. As the USSR was refusing to take part in any meetings of the **UN Security Council**, there was **no opposition** within the UN to the USA's proposal: UN troops arrived in Korea in September 1950. The majority of the troops were American and the troops were led by the US Commander **General MacArthur**. To North Korea, China and the USSR, this felt like more than just defence of South Korea; it felt like an **attack on Communism itself**.



Why was the Korean War significant for superpower relations?

The Korean War lasted for three years and ended in **stalemate**. Although eighteen member countries of the UN had sent troops to North Korea, the **USA had taken a leading role in the war**. After successfully pushing back the North Korean troops into the north in the early months of the war, General MacArthur had continued to direct UN troops into North Korea.

This was seen by Communist countries as a **direct attempt to remove Communism** from Korea entirely and provoked China to enter the war in support of North Korea.



Why was the Korean War significant for superpower relations?

As the war continued, **divisions became increasingly entrenched** especially because Korea suffered enormous casualties, many of whom were civilians. By 1953, it was very clear to both sides the **extremes** to which the other would go to either protect or prevent the spread of Communism. Consequently, the USSR made sure that it never missed an important vote in the UN Security Council ever again so that the USA could not gain the upper hand.



Glossary

Balance of power – the distribution of military and economic power among governments

Security Council – the council of the United Nations that is responsible for maintaining international peace

Stalemate – deadlock; an unresolved situation where no-one seems able to win

United Nations (UN) – an organisation of many nations started in 1945 to promote world peace and understanding



Comprehension Questions

1. Why was the West concerned when China became Communist in 1949?
2. What were the consequences of the Treaty of Friendship?
3. Why did UN troops become involved in the Korean War?
4. How did the Korean War affect the relationship between the superpowers?
5. Challenge question: Why were events in Asia from 1949-1953 significant for superpower relations?

