

4. The US policy of 'containment' as a response to the spread of Communism, inevitably resulted in conflict on the Korean peninsula. Discuss.

Among the weaponry and man-power enlisted during the Cold War, one of the most effective tools used during this period was that of ideology. The Korean War, one of the very first 'Hot Wars' to emerge in the post-world war two period, epitomises this stance as the external hegemonic forces- The Soviet Union and the USA, imparted their respective ideologies upon the once unified nation. Despite the burden of responsibility of the Korean War being shared between these two superpowers, the United States' involvement particularly proved to be the catalyst in the conflict that erupted on the Korean peninsula between 1950 to 1953. The US' policy of 'containment' spearheaded by then President Harry Truman, provided the ideological backdrop for the US' involvement and the subsequent consequences of such on the Korean peninsula, leaving significant and lasting effects on North-South Korean relations to this day. The USA's Containment Policy during this period which sought to prevent Soviet expansionism. This policy created a stark anti-communist environment within South Korea, which proved to contribute significantly to the downfall of the reunification of Korea as well as encouraging violence, regression and oppression with South Korea.

Korea, like many other post-colonial countries, served as a spoil of war as its colonial master Japan was defeated at the end of World War Two in 1945. After decades of Japanese colonial rule, the nation, not permitted to seek self-determination and independence, was instead shared between the Soviet Union and the United States (Casey, 2010). With a line 'diplomatically' drawn across the 38th parallel, Korea was split in half, with North Korea being occupied by Soviet forces and South Korea by US forces. In this division, very little importance was attributed to the wants of the Korean people, as Korea was not approached as a country of people, but rather a strategic territory yielding the possibility of suppressing an opponent. It is in this acknowledgement that the key element of this argument emerges. The US' contribution to the Korean conflict was not exclusively resultant of its containment policy or military imposition, but rather the manner in which these bodies were imposed and how it co-existed with the overlooked Korean sentiments at the time.

The USA's ideological rationale behind its involvement in the Korean conflict is enshrined in its policy of Containment. As formulated by Foreign Service Officer George F. Kennan, the policy became the backbone of President Harry Truman's foreign policy during the Cold War. In 1947, Kennan described the policy in the Foreign Affairs journal,

"The main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies... To promote tendencies which must eventually find their outlet in either the break-up or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power." (United States Department of State, 2019)

The policy of Containment was explicitly evident in the US' involvement in Korea. As Japanese control was relinquished from the nation, Korea stood in many ways as a virgin state, which could serve as a meaningful anti-communist monument in the face of much Soviet success in Asia. As China successfully adopted Communism, the United States was at its pinnacle of 'containment' as they sought to stop the spread of the Soviet ideology to neighbouring Asian countries.

It is well documented that upon the end of the Second World War, the United States was relatively unprepared in relation to its plans in Korea (Shin, 2017). Initially, it was perceived merely as a colony of Japan, but as the threat of Soviet expansionism loomed, the US' occupation of Korea became increasingly important. As such, the US' involvement in Korea focused its strategy solely on the containment of communism and rarely much else. This manifested in several oversights in decision-making that highlighted the little preparation or care that was taken in the US' occupation of South Korea. For instance, in the local divisions of the US military-led government in South Korea, a large percentage remained pro-Japanese officials and elites, who were able to retain their positions of power under this new government (Shin, 2017). This came much to the displeasure of the South Korean public, who saw these colonial individuals as national traitors and whom they expected to be treated as such after Japanese colonialism had ended. It is in these careless acts by the USA that the effects of its containment policy become increasingly evident, as their main motivator for their involvement in South Korea was to prevent Soviet expansionism which often came at the dismissal of a whole nation's needs and hope for self-determination.

The year 1948 served as a key year in US-Korea relations, as many symptoms of its Containment policy began to surface through civil unrest in South Korea, as well as the incursion of political autonomy in the country which undermined reunification efforts. A month before South Korean elections were held, a communist uprising broke out on the Southern Korean island of Cheju-do, communist rebels attacked several police stations in an uprising that signified their displeasure with the US-led South Korean Interim Government. The uprising was eventually dispelled by military forces, but tensions remained throughout the country in its aftermath (Arnold, 2022). The first free general elections followed just one month later in August of 1948, at the recommendation of the United Nations. Initially, the UN's request stated that the national elections should be inclusive of both North and South Korea, allowing for the unification of the nation that its citizens demanded. However, the proposal was made at a time when the Soviet representative was boycotting the UN, as they were unconvinced that these elections would be truly fair and suspected it would favour Western ideals and values (Weems, 1948). As a result of their boycott, provisions were made instead to allow for elections in a divided Korea, subsequently solidifying the split of North and South Korea to the disappointment of those fighting for unification. Rather than attempting to work collaboratively with the Soviet Union and create terms that would allow for a unified Korean election, the divisive policy was enacted instead. This move was perceived by many as a rushed move to secure American anti-communism in South Korea, as the threat of a unified communist Korea became less prominent (Weems, 1948). This served as one of the major contributors to the Korean conflict, as despite their differing political

ideologies, there was a common goal between North and South Koreans to unify the nation. Despite this, American containment held precedence and thus overshadowed the importance of Korean unification, which led eventually to the internal tensions with South Korea and inevitably the Korean War.

In itself, the South Korean election proved to be problematic on several accounts. However, the most prominent issue was the unrepresentative nature of the electoral candidates. As a result of the divisive nature of the election, as it did not allow for a unified Korea, all left-wing politicians decided to boycott the elections as their participation would be in the encouragement of Korean division. The consequence of such being that only a majority of right-wing anti-communist individuals sought to be elected (Kim, 2017). In many ways, these left-wing activists who boycott the elections were unintentionally playing into the US' anti-communist interests, as the elections were carried out regardless. Naturally, the US' containment policy would not allow for or even encourage the inclusion of these left-wing politicians even at the risk of supporting an unrepresentative election that would be advertised as 'free and fair'.

The tensions within South Korea continued to rise even after the national elections, as many were still dissatisfied with the USA-supported regime and the results of the uprising that occurred in Cheju-do island. These brewing tensions finally erupted in the Yösu-Sunch'ön Rebellion which was one of such events that were indicative of the US' tumultuous involvement in Korean politics. It was confirmed that 439 civilians were killed in the rebellion that occurred in 1948, just a few months after the general elections. The uprising was communist in nature, and met as a great threat to the new anti-communist government within South Korea (Hwang, 2016). By means of containment, the rebellion was squashed and hundreds of civilians were massacred, all in the effort of upholding American anti-communism, at the expense of true South Korean sentiments.

At the core of the conflict within South Korea, the manner of Anti-Communism that existed proved to be most problematic. By the time of the Syngman government, Anti-Communism was more than a guiding ideology or political affiliation, it was the centrifugal force of the government and as a result, the country (Kim, 2017). This is evident in the treatment of the previously mentioned rebellions in the country, but also in the very fabric of the everyday proceedings of the government. Anti-communist propaganda was prevalent during this time and was evident in the vilification of North Korea. In 1949, Rhee was quoted saying,

'I feel strongly that now is the moment when we should take an aggressive measure to clean up them [the Communists] in Pyongyang. Our people in the North want us to do it now. I am sure we can all settle this question within a reasonably short time if we are only allowed to do it.' (Hong, 2000)

Admittedly, it is important to acknowledge the oppressive nature of North Korea at that time. Similar to its Southern counterpart, North Koreans faced harsh backlash for displaying any criticism of Communism and faced endangering their lives by associating with any form of

anti-communism. (Liberty in North Korea, 2018) The ideological indoctrination was prevalent on both sides, and the effects of such were shared between the people of North and South Korea.

In many ways, the creation of separate governments in North and South Korea made the Korean war an inevitable event. Both sides had expressed their determination for Korean unification since the 38th parallel was drawn to divide the country and the 1948 elections merely solidified that this reunification or at least the attempts of reunification were unlikely to emerge in a diplomatic manner. North Korea's Communist President Kim Il-Sung and South Korea's Anti-Communist President Syngman Rhee both sought to reunify Korea under their leadership. Truman's containment policy in South Korea supported intense military training with millions of dollars being funded to the South Korean defence and police departments (Casey, 2010). As a result, Syngman's anti-communist government was confident in their military capabilities and began enacting border clashes with North Korean forces, causing tensions to rise in the months preceding the official Korean war (Matray, 2022).

In his journal article, 'US Entry into the Korean War: Origins, Impact, and Lessons' Historian James Matray makes a case of the US' involvement in the Korean conflict, focusing on their reaction to the Korean War. In the article he details North Korea's motivations to militarily invade the South, noting that contrary to the US' perception, the Soviet Union and China were reluctant in supporting the military invasion. This diminishes the US' claim of Soviet expansionism as a continued theme of overlooked Korean sentiment emerges, proffering the possibility that Korean unification may have been the driving force behind the invasion (Park, 1983). Nevertheless, the article explores how the US' containment policy and their reluctance to be involved when the Korean war finally occurred. Matray wrote,

“Containment in Korea (and elsewhere in Asia with the exception of Japan) sought to counter the Soviet threat with a limited commitment of US power. Its central objective was to develop the political, economic, and military strength of the Republic of Korea so that it could defend itself.” (Matray, 2022)

The flaw of this approach, which has been examined throughout this argument, lies not just within the US' containment policy but in the lacklustre way in which it was approached. As quoted above, the containment policy claimed to 'develop' South Korea with the aim of preventing Soviet expansionism and its spread of communism. Yet the actions of the United States in their involvement in South Korea has only encouraged the instability and violence that perpetuated the Korean War. In the same half-hearted fashion, when the tensions that were brewing as a result of US involvement had finally surfaced in the face of the Korean war, the United States were apprehensive about getting too involved (Casey, 2010).

In conclusion, the US' policy of containment in Korea was a pre-emptive measure that sought to prevent Soviet expansionism. Regrettably for the Korean people, the move from being a Japanese colony to a 'free' but US-supported country in 1945 resulted in the creation of a very similar imperial power existing within their country. The US' containment policy

successfully contributed to a thus far permanent division of a once unified Korea, through the support of oppressive and unjust institutions and actions all for the aim of preventing the spread of Communism. The Korean conflict and the US' involvement in it is just one important example of a number of cases that highlight the intensity of the Cold War and how it was unjustly and unequally magnified on smaller underdeveloped states.

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