

Introduction

On 25 June 1950, the army of the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea stormed across the 38th parallel and invaded the Republic of (South) Korea. North Korea's Communist leader, Kim Il Sung, intended to destroy the rival government and abolish the division of Korea that resulted from international tensions after World War II. Kim launched the attack because he, and the Communist leaders in Moscow and Beijing, believed that the United States would not protect South Korea. They had made a critical mistake, however, because President Harry S. Truman roundly condemned this blatant act of aggression and persuaded the United Nations (UN) to resist the invasion. Truman also ordered U.S. ground, air and naval forces into combat in Korea. Thus began the Cold War's first major armed conflict.

Weakened by the drastic cutbacks in defense spending after World War II, the U.S. armed forces were hard pressed to delay much less stop the onrushing North Korean People's Army (NKPA). Only a small number of Navy carrier and Air Force planes were on hand to strike enemy front-line units and supply convoys. A hastily

gathered and deployed Army unit made a brave, but futile stand in central South Korea. By early August, the hard-charging NKPA armored and infantry forces had pushed the U.S. Eighth Army and Republic of Korea (ROK) troops into an ever-tightening pocket around the port of Pusan on the southeastern tip of South Korea. Barring a dramatic turn of events, it looked like the U.S. and the ROK troops would be forced to evacuate the Pusan perimeter under fire, much as the British and French had done at Dunkirk in World War II.

The effort to rescue South Korea, however, was underway. General of the Army Douglas A. MacArthur, the U.S. Commander in Chief, Far East, and Commander in Chief, United Nations Command (CINCUNC), persuaded his superiors in Washington to approve an amphibious assault at **Inchon**, a major port 110 miles behind enemy lines on South Korea's west coast. Because of the port's treacherous waterways, he reasoned that the North Koreans would not expect an attack there, so it would be relatively poorly defended. The UN force could advance rapidly from Inchon and capture the nearby key air base

at Kimpo and then mount an attack on Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea. Seoul was also the key link in the NKPA's line of communications and once taken would then serve as an anvil on which an Eighth Army offensive from Pusan would hammer the enemy army. The hoped-for result of this coordinated action was the complete destruction of the NKPA and the recovery of all of South Korea.

Inchon was a classic demonstration of how naval forces can be decisive in regional wars and littoral operations. During July, August and early September 1950, fleet units in the Far East established superiority in the Yellow Sea and in the air over it. The presence there of surface ships, submarines, carrier aircraft and shore-based patrol planes served to deter or, if necessary, warn the CINCUNC of Chinese or Soviet intervention in the war. Control of the sea and the air also blinded the North Koreans about UN military movements. This enabled the 230 ships of Vice Admiral Arthur D. Struble's Joint Task Force 7, which steamed toward the west coast of Korea in mid-September, to achieve a clear advantage over their foe through strategic surprise.

On 13 September 1950, Struble's forces began their assault from the sea against Inchon. Carrier-based aircraft squadrons, as well as cruisers and destroyers, devastated enemy fortifications, coastal artillery batteries and supply points for two days. Then, on the 15th, landing ships and transports began disembarking the 1st Marine Division, which quickly seized Inchon. By the 19th, the Marines captured Kimpo air base, into which flowed Marine close air support aircraft

and Air Force supply transports. U.S. Army troops also pushed out from the beachhead and on the 27th linked up with their comrades advancing north from the Pusan perimeter. UN casualties were light, especially when compared to the thousands of dead, wounded and captured North Korean soldiers.

Provisioned by the Navy's transport and cargo ships, Marine, Army and South Korean troops captured Seoul on 28 September. Only

a battered remnant of the NKPA was able to flee South Korea and the closing UN trap. Because of Chinese intervention in October 1950, the struggle in Korea would drag on for almost three more bloody and inconclusive years. *Inchon*, however, was a strategic masterstroke that clearly turned the tide of battle in the opening phase of the war.

Korea: The “Cockpit of Asia”

Korea has long been an Asian battleground. The mighty Genghis Khan and his Mongol horde swept into Korea in the 13th century. For the next 600 years, the Mongols and their successors to the throne of China dominated the diminutive Kingdom of Korea. Every year, the Korean king pledged his fealty to the emperor in Beijing, but aside from this connection with the outside world, the Koreans jealously guarded their isolation. In fact, the Korean monarchs banned overseas trade and discouraged contact between their subjects and foreigners. The ruggedness of the coastline and the perilous seas around the Korean peninsula helped enforce their royal edicts. Outsiders appropriately referred to Korea as the “Hermit Kingdom.”

In the latter half of the 19th century, Americans learned just how serious the Koreans were about their desire to be left alone. In 1866, the Koreans massacred the crew of American merchant schooner *General Sherman*, which had run aground in the Taedong River near Pyongyang. The Navy dispatched Commander Robert W. Shufeldt, commanding officer of the screw sloop of war *Wachusett*, to discuss the incident with the King of Korea. The monarch refused to deal with him.

Despite this rebuff, U.S. naval leaders in the Far East convinced Washington that



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Commodore Robert Shufeldt circa 1880. As a commander, Shufeldt investigated the 1866 massacre of the crew of the American schooner *General Sherman* in Korea's Taedong River. In 1882, as a diplomatic representative of the United States, he negotiated a treaty of friendship with the King of Korea.

Korea could be “opened” for trade and diplomatic relations. The visits of Commodore Matthew C. Perry and his “black ships” to Japan in the 1850s, which stimulated the Japanese to cultivate contacts with the Western world, clearly influenced these officers. In 1871, Rear Admiral John Rodgers led five U.S. Navy warships up the Salee River until they were under the guns of the Korean forts above Inchon. The Koreans, as they had done in the past, greeted the foreigners with gunfire. Rodgers's ships returned fire and put ashore a landing party of sailors and Marines, who seized the forts.



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U.S. sailors battle Korean troops during Commodore John Rodgers attack on the forts near Inchon in 1871. Artist unknown.

A map of Korea, 1952. The 38th parallel divides the peninsula in two, and after World War II, U.S. forces occupied the territory south of the line and the Soviet Union held the territory to the north.

LC Geography and Map Division

The admiral, however, did not have enough men to march on the Korean capital and impose a treaty on the king, so the Americans and their ships withdrew.

The Navy now enlisted the support of the Chinese, who encouraged the royal head of the subordinate kingdom to work with the Americans. Finally, on 22 May 1882, in sight of the U.S. screw sloop *Swatara*, Commodore Shufeldt and Korean officials signed a treaty that provided for peace, friendship and an exchange of diplomats. The agreement also granted the United States most-favored-nation treatment with special trading rights on the peninsula. The Koreans hoped this unique relationship with the United States would help fend off their more demanding neighbors, particularly the Japanese.

This proved an illusion, however, because the American interest in Korea faded even as the focus of the Chinese, Japanese and Russians sharpened. The Imperial Japanese Navy's sound thrashing of the Chinese fleet in the naval Battle of the Yalu in 1894, during the Sino-Japanese War, ended Beijing's domination of Korea. Russian designs on the kingdom met the same fate as a result of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. That conflict, fought partly on the Korean peninsula, was capped by the Japanese destruction of a Russian fleet in the Strait of Tsushima

