

Background Essay on the United Nations and the Korean War



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The development of the United Nations came in response to the world's growing desperation for peace and prosperity after two world wars. An international body was first attempted in 1919 with the League of Nations. The League of Nations was to be an assembly where countries could meet and develop peaceful resolutions to world conflicts. The failure of the League, and yet another world war, motivated world leaders to once again attempt to organize an international forum.

The United Nations emerged from early coalitions of Allied forces during World War II. Three key meetings laid the groundwork for the future governing body, as the Allies signed declarations to join forces to end the rise and expansion of the Axis Powers. The Declaration of St. James' Palace (1941) was the first Inter-Allied declaration, and it joined the multiple European, Asian and African countries in the fight against Adolf Hitler's German forces and Emperor Hirohito's Japanese forces. Within the same year, Great Britain and the United States would sign the Atlantic Charter, which served as a joint declaration by Prime Minister Winston Churchill and President Franklin D. Roosevelt to work together in developing a better future. In January of 1942, 26 nations (including the United States) came together to sign the Declaration of United Nations, forming the coalition of countries that would defeat the Axis Powers. The three declarations would lay the founding principles of what would become the United Nations Charter.

As the war progressed, major world leaders recognized the need to develop an international organization that would provide a forum that would allow the monitoring and mediating of conflicts among nations. The organization would have multiple focuses, including humanitarian aid, education and security for its members from aggressive actions that threatened their way of life. The Moscow Declaration and Tehran Conference in 1943 provided the initial plans to bring an end to the war and provide the forum to preserve peace. The structure of the United Nations was formally outlined the following year in Washington D.C., when leaders from China, the U.S.S.R., United Kingdom and the United States drafted the model for the United Nations.

As the war in Europe came to the end, leaders from 50 countries, representing 80% of the world population, met in San Francisco, California, to organize and approve a formal charter for the United Nations. Throughout the two months, leaders discussed the focus and organizational model that would define the international organization. The United Nations structure would include the International Court of Justice, Security Council and the General Assembly, along with minor assemblies that answer to the larger body. The newly formed assembly would be tasked with the preservation of peace and the development of a better world. On June 26th, 1945, 50 countries unanimously approved the United Nations Charter.

The end of World War II resulted in the rise of two new superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Both nations sought to expand their influence and protect their interests around the world. The Cold War was not a war in the traditional sense; instead, it was fought with propaganda, a nuclear arms race, space race, covert operations and proxy wars. President Harry S. Truman developed the policy of “containment” in which the United States pledged military, economic and political assistance to any nation threatened by Soviet supported communist movements.

The United Nations had been created in a critical period in history where its mission of peacekeeping and international cooperation had the potential to keep the Cold War from going “hot.” The United Nations first stepped onto the world stage with notable successes such as the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the negotiation of the cease-fire between the new state of Israel and Arab states. However, the first true test of the strength and effectiveness of the UN was the Korean War.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union and the United States both occupied half of Korea and accepted the surrender of the Japanese in that region, effectively splitting the country into two along the 38th parallel. Under the influence of the Soviet Union, a communist government was put in place in North Korea. South Korea, led by Syngman Rhee, maintained close ties to the United States.

On June 25th, 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea by crossing over the 38th parallel with the support of the Soviet Union. The United States immediately pressed for the United Nations to act. On June 25th and June 27th, the United Nations passed directives urging for a ceasefire and for all member nations to provide assistance to the South Koreans. The UN Security Council was able to pass these measures because the Soviet Union had recently boycotted the Security Council and chose not to participate. President Harry S Truman did not press for a Congressional declaration of war. Instead, he classified the Korean conflict as UN led “police action.” President Truman wanted to keep Korea a limited war, avoiding a nuclear World War III at all costs.

