

1945 – 1953

Korean War Timeline

The Korean War was the first major military conflict of the Cold War, in which the United States and its allies fought to defend South Korea from a communist invasion — ending in a stalemate that divides Korea to this day.

1945

Korea Divided

After Japan's defeat in World War II, Korea is divided at the 38th parallel between Soviet-occupied North Korea and US-occupied South Korea.

> **Why it mattered:** *The division, meant to be temporary, hardened into two hostile states — communist North Korea and non-communist South Korea — with no agreement on how or whether to reunify.*

1948

Two Koreas Established

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North) and the Republic of Korea (South) are formally established as separate governments.

> **Why it mattered:** *With two rival governments each backed by an opposing superpower, the Korean peninsula became one of the most dangerous flashpoints of the Cold War.*

June 25, 1950

North Korea Invades

North Korean forces cross the 38th parallel and invade South Korea, rapidly overrunning most of the peninsula.

> **Why it mattered:** *The surprise invasion nearly succeeded — within weeks UN forces were pushed into a small corner of southern Korea around the port of Pusan, fighting for survival.*

September 1950

Inchon Landing

General Douglas MacArthur leads a bold amphibious landing at Inchon, behind North Korean lines, cutting off the invaders and turning the tide of the war.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Inchon landing was one of the most daring operations of the war — it cut North Korean supply lines and allowed UN forces to rapidly retake South Korea.*

Korean War Timeline *continued*

October 1950

China Enters the War

As UN forces approach the Chinese border, China sends hundreds of thousands of troops across the Yalu River, pushing UN forces back south in brutal winter fighting.

> **Why it mattered:** *China's intervention transformed the war — what had seemed like a near-victory became a grinding stalemate fought near the original dividing line.*

April 1951

MacArthur Fired

President Truman fires General MacArthur for publicly criticizing the administration's decision to limit the war and not attack China directly.

> **Why it mattered:** *MacArthur's firing reinforced the crucial democratic principle that military commanders are subordinate to civilian leadership — even in wartime.*

1951–53

Stalemate and Trench Warfare

The front stabilizes near the 38th parallel; both sides dig in for two years of grinding warfare while peace talks drag on.

> **Why it mattered:** *The stalemate was enormously costly — hundreds of thousands of soldiers died while negotiators argued over the precise location of the ceasefire line.*

1952

Eisenhower Elected

Dwight Eisenhower wins the presidential election largely by promising to visit Korea and end the war.

> **Why it mattered:** *Eisenhower's election shifted the political pressure to end the war, and hints that he might consider using nuclear weapons accelerated the peace negotiations.*

July 27, 1953

Armistice Signed

An armistice is signed at Panmunjom, ending the fighting; the boundary between North and South Korea is fixed near the 38th parallel.

> **Why it mattered:** *The armistice ended the shooting — but it was not a peace treaty. Technically, North and South Korea remain at war to this day.*

1953 onward

The Divided Peninsula

The Demilitarized Zone — a 2.5-mile-wide buffer strip across the peninsula — becomes one of the most heavily fortified borders on Earth.

> **Why it mattered:** *The Korean War ended exactly where it started — with a divided Korea. North Korea became a closed authoritarian state; South Korea eventually became a democracy and economic powerhouse.*