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IGCSE®

# Modern World History

Option B: The 20th century

# 5

## How effectively did the USA contain the spread of Communism?

### FOCUS POINTS

This key question will be explored through case studies of the following:

- the Korean War, 1950–53
- the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962
- US involvement in the Vietnam War

Although the USA was the world's most powerful nation, in 1950 it seemed to President Truman that events were not going America's way, particularly with regard to Communism.

- ♦ As you have seen in Chapter 4 most of eastern Europe had fallen under the influence of the Communist USSR 1945–48.
- ♦ China became Communist in 1949. The Americans had always regarded China as their strongest ally in the Far East. Between 1946 and 1949 they gave billions of dollars of aid to the Nationalist government in China, largely to prevent a Communist takeover. That had failed. Suddenly a massive new Communist state had appeared on the map.
- ♦ Also in 1949 the Soviet leader Stalin announced that the USSR had developed its own atomic bomb. The USA was no longer the world's only nuclear power.
- ♦ Furthermore American spies reported to President Truman that Stalin was using his network (Cominform) to help Communists win power in Malaya, Indonesia, Burma, the Philippines and Korea. The USA had visions of the Communists overrunning all of Asia, with country after country being toppled like a row of dominoes.

There was already a strong anti-Communist feeling in the USA. These developments made it stronger. There was no doubt in the minds of American leaders (indeed most American people) that this spread should be resisted. If they could have done, they would have liked to turn back the Communist advances but that was unrealistic. So from 1947 onwards the USA followed the policy of Containment – holding back Communism so it did not spread any further. But as the 1950s dawned this looked like a serious challenge.

In this chapter you will investigate:

- ♦ the different methods the USA used to try to contain the spread of Communism
- ♦ how successful these methods were during the Korean War, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War – using these case studies you will make up your own mind
- ♦ how successful the policy was in the years 1950–75: how effectively did the USA contain the spread of Communism?

◀ This is a cover of a comic book published in the United States in 1947.

- 1 What impression does this comic cover give you of:
  - a) the USA?
  - b) Communism?
- 2 What is the message of this picture?

# Case study 1: The Korean War

## Think!

The situation in Korea has sometimes been compared to the situation in Germany in 1945 (which you studied in Chapter 4). Explain:

- how these situations were similar
- how they were different.

### SOURCE 1

*The UN will render such assistance to the republic of Korea as may be necessary to restore international peace and security to the area.*

Resolution 84 passed by the United Nations in 1950.

### SOURCE 2

*Korea is a symbol to the watching world. If we allow Korea to fall within the Soviet orbit, the world will feel we have lost another round in our match with the Soviet Union, and our prestige and the hopes of those who place their faith in us will suffer accordingly.*

The US State Department, 1950.

### SOURCE 3

*If the UN is ever going to do anything, this is the time, and if the UN cannot bring the crisis in Korea to an end then we might as well just wash up the United Nations and forget it.*

American Senator Tom Connally speaking in 1950. He was a Republican and strongly anti-Communist.

## Background

Korea had been ruled by Japan until 1945. At the end of the Second World War the northern half was liberated by Soviet troops and the southern half by Americans. When the war ended:

- **The North** remained Communist-controlled, with a Communist leader who had been trained in the USSR, and with a Soviet-style one-party system.
- **The South** was anti-Communist. It was not very democratic, but the fact that it was anti-Communist was enough to win it the support of the USA.

There was bitter hostility between the North's Communist leader, Kim Il Sung, and Syngman Rhee, President of South Korea. Reunification did not seem likely. In 1950 this hostility spilled over into open warfare. North Korean troops overwhelmed the South's forces. By September 1950 all except a small corner of south-east Korea was under Communist control (see Source 5, map 1).

As you have already seen in Chapter 4, US President Truman was determined to contain Communism – to stop it spreading further. In his view, Korea was a glaring example of how Communism would spread if the USA did nothing (see Source 2). Remember that for Truman and for many Americans, containment was not so much a policy they wanted as a policy they had to make do with. If they could have done they would have liked to turn back the spread of Communism but that would have risked an all-out war with the USSR. So from the US point of view, it was not so much that they believed in containment, it was that they believed that they could not accept anything less.

## USA or United Nations?

President Truman immediately sent advisers, supplies and warships to the waters around Korea. But he was aware that if he was going to take action it would look better to the rest of the world if he had the support of other countries, especially if he had the support of the United Nations. In fact the ideal situation would be a UN intervention in Korea rather than an American one.

Truman put enormous pressure on the UN Security Council to condemn the actions of the North Koreans and to call on them to withdraw their troops. The USA was the single biggest contributor to the UN budget and was therefore in a powerful position to influence its decisions. However, this did not mean the USA always got its own way and it would probably have failed this time except for some unusual circumstances. In the Cold War atmosphere of 1950, each superpower always denounced and opposed the other. Normally in a dispute such as this, the Soviet Union would have used its right of veto to block the call for action by the UN. However, the USSR was boycotting the UN at this time over another issue (whether Communist China should be allowed to join the UN). So when the resolution was passed the USSR was not even at the meeting to use its veto. So Truman was able to claim that this was a UN-sponsored operation, even if Soviet newspapers and other media claimed that the decision was not valid.

Under the resolution (see Source 1) the UN committed itself to using its members' armies to drive North Korean troops out of South Korea. Eighteen states (including Britain) provided troops or support of some kind, mostly allies of the USA. However, the overwhelming part of the UN force that was sent to Korea was American. The commander, General MacArthur, was also an American.

## September 1950 – the UN force advances

United Nations forces stormed ashore at Inchon in September 1950 (see Source 5, map 1). At the same time, other UN forces and South Korean troops advanced from Pusan. The North Koreans were driven back beyond their original border (the 38th parallel) within weeks.

## Source Analysis ▶

Source 4 makes a comparison with earlier events you may have studied in this book – see Chapter 2. Use that knowledge to write a 100-word explanation of the message of this cartoon for someone who does not know anything about the League of Nations.

SOURCE 4



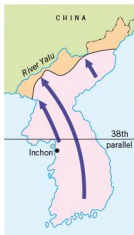
A cartoon by David Low, 1950.

SOURCE 5

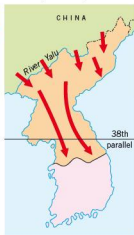
Map 1: September 1950



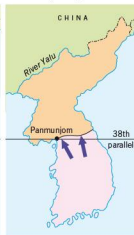
Map 2: October 1950



Map 3: January 1951



Map 4: July 1953



### Key

Land controlled by North Koreans and Chinese

Land controlled by South Koreans, Americans and UN forces

Communist advances

UN advances

The 38th parallel was the border between North and South Korea from 1945 to June 1950.

The Korean War, 1950–53

5 How effectively did the USA contain the spread of Communism?

## SOURCE 6

*Had they [the Chinese] intervened in the first or second months it would have been decisive, [but] we are no longer fearful of their intervention. Now that we have bases for our Air Force in Korea, there would be the greatest slaughter.*

General MacArthur speaking in October 1950.

## Profile

**General Douglas MacArthur (1880–1964)**



- Born 1880. His father was a successful army leader.
- Trained at West Point, the top American military academy.
- Fought in the First World War. Became the youngest commander in the American army in France. Received 13 medals for bravery.
- During the Second World War he was the commander of the war against the Japanese. He devised the 'island-hopping' strategy that allowed the Americans to defeat the Japanese.
- In 1945 he personally accepted the Japanese surrender, and from 1945 to 1951 he virtually controlled Japan, helping the shattered country get back on its feet.
- He was aged 70 when he was given command of the UN forces in Korea.
- He tried unsuccessfully to run for US President in 1952.

## Think!

Use the text to write some extra bullet points for the Profile describing:

- a) MacArthur's personality and beliefs
- b) his actions in Korea.

## October 1950 – the UN force presses on

MacArthur had quickly achieved the original UN aim of removing North Korean troops from South Korea. But the Americans did not stop. Despite warnings from China's leader, Mao Tse-tung, that if they pressed on China would join the war, the UN approved a plan to advance into North Korea. By October, US forces had reached the Yalu River and the border with China (see Source 5, map 2). The nature of the war had now changed. It was clear that MacArthur and Truman were after a bigger prize, one which went beyond containment. As the UN forces advanced and secured their positions (see Source 6), Truman and MacArthur saw an opportunity to remove Communism from Korea entirely. Even Mao's warnings were not going to put them off.

## November 1950 – the UN force retreats

MacArthur underestimated the power of the Chinese. Late in October 1950, 200,000 Chinese troops (calling themselves 'People's Volunteers') joined the North Koreans. They launched a blistering attack. They had soldiers who were strongly committed to Communism and had been taught by their leader to hate the Americans. They had modern tanks and planes supplied by the Soviet Union. The United Nations forces were pushed back into South Korea.

Conditions were some of the worst the American forces had known, with treacherous cold and blinding snowstorms in the winter of 1950–51. The Chinese forces were more familiar with fighting in the jagged mountains, forested ravines and treacherous swamps – as the landscape was similar to many areas of China.

## SOURCE 7

*Even the reports to the UN were censored by [American] state and defence departments. I had no connection with the United Nations whatsoever.*

From General MacArthur's memoirs.

## March 1951 – MacArthur is sacked

At this point, Truman and MacArthur fell out. MacArthur wanted to carry on the war. He was ready to invade China and even use nuclear weapons if necessary. Truman, on the other hand, felt that saving South Korea was good enough. His allies in the UN convinced Truman that the risks of attacking China and of starting a war that might bring in the USSR were too great, and so an attack on China was ruled out.

However, in March 1951 MacArthur blatantly ignored the UN instruction and openly threatened an attack on China. In April Truman removed MacArthur from his position as commander and brought him back home. He rejected MacArthur's aggressive policy towards Communism. Containment was underlined as the American policy. One of the American army leaders, General Omar Bradley, said that MacArthur's approach would have 'involved America in the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy'. Truman agreed with Bradley and was effectively returning to the policy of containment and accepting that he could not drive the Communists out of North Korea.

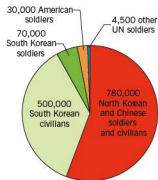
## June 1951 – peace talks begin

The fighting finally reached stalemate around the 38th parallel (see Source 5, map 3) in the middle of 1951. Peace talks between North and South Korea began in June 1951, although bitter fighting continued for two more years. The casualties on all sides were immense – but particularly among civilians (see Sources 8 and 9).

## July 1953 – armistice

In 1952 Truman was replaced by President Eisenhower, who wanted to end the war. Stalin's death in March 1953 made the Chinese and North Koreans less confident. An armistice was finally signed in July 1953. The border between North and South Korea was much the same as it had been before war started in 1950.

SOURCE 8



Total killed: 1.4 million

Civilian and military deaths in the Korean War. American military fatalities per year of conflict were actually higher than the Vietnam War.

SOURCE 9



Civilian casualty in the early stages of the Korean War as South Koreans fled from the advancing North Koreans.

## A success for containment?

In one sense the Korean War was a success for the USA. The cost and the casualties were high but it showed that the USA had the will and the means to contain Communism. South Korea remained out of Communist hands.

On the other hand it showed the limits of the policy. The USA had to accept that North Korea remained Communist. It also highlighted tensions among American leaders. Hardline anti-Communist politicians and military leaders wanted to go beyond containment – to push back Communism. They thought that Truman had shown weakness in not going for outright victory. More moderate politicians and commanders argued that this would not be worth the risk.

These tensions would affect US policy over the coming decades.

## Focus Task

### Was the Korean War a success for containment?

Draw up your own copy of this table. You will use it to compare the three case studies. At this stage, just focus on the Korean War. You are going to revisit this task at the end of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War as well. We have started it off for you. Your completed chart will be a useful revision tool.

Case study	Why were the Americans worried?	What methods did the Americans use to contain Communism?	What problems did they face?	What was the outcome?	Success or failure (out of 10) with reasons supported by evidence
Korea	Communist North Korea invaded capitalist South Korea				

## Methods of containment

There was no doubt at all in the minds of American leaders that Communism had to be resisted. The question was how to do it. The Korean War showed the Americans that they could not just send their soldiers to fight a war whenever they saw a problem. It was too expensive and it did not really work very well. Containment needed other methods.

### Alliances

The USA created a network of anti-Communist alliances around the world: SEATO in South East Asia and CENTO in central Asia and the Middle East. The USA gave money, advice and arms to these allies. In return, the leaders of these countries suppressed Communist influence in their own countries.

The USSR saw these alliances as aggressive. They accused the USA of trying to encircle the Communist world. In 1955 the Soviet Union set up the Warsaw Treaty Organisation, better known as the Warsaw Pact. This included the USSR and all the Communist east European countries except Yugoslavia.

### SOURCE 10

*We shall never have a secure peace and a happy world so long as Soviet Communism dominates one-third of all the world's people and is in the process of trying to extend its rule to many others. Therefore we must have in mind the liberation of these captive peoples. Now liberation does not mean war. Liberation can be achieved by processes short of war. A policy which only aims at containing Russia is an unsound policy ... If our only policy is to stay where we are, we will be driven back.*

JF Dulles, US Secretary of State, speaking on his appointment in 1952.

### Think!

Read Source 10. What methods do you think Dulles had in mind to 'liberate captive peoples' without a war?

### SOURCE 11



Membership of the organisations allied to the USA and USSR in 1955.

### Arms race

At the same time both the USSR and the USA were engaged in an 'arms race'.

The Americans had developed their first atomic bomb in 1945. They did not share the secret of their bomb with the USSR, even while they were still allies. When the USA dropped the first bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, 70,000 people were killed instantly. The awesome power of the explosions and the incredible destruction caused by the bombs made Japan surrender within a week. It was clear to both the USA and the USSR that atomic bombs were the weapons of the future.

Over the next decade the USA and USSR developed ever bigger, more deadly and more flexible weapons. They spent vast amounts

of money on new weapons. They spied on one another to steal technological secrets. The USSR tended to use spies such as Rudolf Abel. He worked in New York until he was arrested in 1957. The USA favoured hi-tech spying such as the U2 plane – a spy plane which flew so high it could not be shot down but took incredibly detailed photos of the ground. It could read a newspaper from 14 miles up in the sky!

Each side perfected nuclear bombs that could be launched from submarines or planes. The USA placed short-range nuclear weapons in Turkey (one of their CENTO allies). Both sides developed ICBMs, which could travel from continent to continent in half an hour.

## The impact of the arms race

The arms race was partly about **quality** – who had the most sophisticated weapons. The Soviets took the lead in technology in the 1950s, building on the achievements of their successful space programme. These technological advances by the USSR rocked public opinion in the USA. The Cold War was a propaganda war much more than a military war. You had to show that your system was superior; that your scientists were cleverer. To lose advantage to the Soviet Union was a blow to the USA.

However the arms race was also about **quantity**. The US public was alarmed to be told that the USSR had many more nuclear missiles than the USA. This so-called 'missile gap' was widely reported in the American media during the 1950s. We now know that the missile gap was a myth. The USA always had more missiles than the USSR. However:

- Khrushchev was not going to admit this because he would look foolish and it would aid his critics inside the USSR.
- At the same time, the American military commanders were happy to go along with the claims that there was a missile gap because it helped them to get funding from the government to pay for the development of new weapons systems.
- By the early 1960s Eisenhower also knew the missile gap was a myth because he had an important source in the Soviet military who had defected to the CIA. However, because this contact was still in the USSR, Eisenhower could not admit he knew how many missiles the Soviets actually had without revealing his source.

So, myth or not, the USA got ahead with its own missile production programme to 'narrow the missile gap'.

## Deterrence and MAD

The result was that by 1961, both of the superpowers had hundreds of missiles pointed at each other. The USA had more than the USSR, but the advantage did not really matter because both sides had enough to destroy each other many times over. On each side the theory was that such weapons made them more secure. The 'nuclear deterrent' meant the enemy would not dare attack first, because it knew that, if it did, the other would strike back before its bombs had even landed and it too would be destroyed. It would be suicidal. So having nuclear weapons deterred the other side from attacking first. This policy also became known as MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction). Surely no side would dare strike first when it knew the attack would destroy itself too.

### Think!

Create a diagram that shows how the following factors were connected:

- ◆ alliances
- ◆ nuclear arms race
- ◆ propaganda
- ◆ spying.

The author recommends a Venn diagram but you might prefer a spider diagram or some other format. Or try different formats and see which works well for you.

### Revision Tip

Make sure you can remember:

- ◆ one example of the USA creating an alliance to contain Communism
- ◆ one example of it using arms technology to contain Communism.

## Fear

Leaders might see their nuclear weapons as a deterrent, but others worried that the world was moving into a very dangerous time. For example, an American B-47 bomber crashed in Norfolk, England in 1957. The resulting fire came within minutes of setting off two nuclear bombs that would have devastated all of East Anglia. In 1962, a US radar station mistook one of its own satellites for an incoming Soviet missile and was minutes away from triggering a full nuclear 'response' attack on the USSR. Of course, governments did not tell their people about these incidents – both Soviet and US leaders were very secretive. But they could not hide the big issue – that the nuclear arms race seemed to have raised the stakes so high that one suicidal leader, one poor decision or (most worryingly of all) one small and innocent mistake could trigger a catastrophe that could destroy Europe, the USA and the Soviet Union within minutes.

Fear of 'the bomb' was a common feature of life in 1950s' and 1960s' America. The arms race was a topic of everyday conversation. Children were taught at school what to do if there was a nuclear attack. Some people protested against the arms race. Robert Oppenheimer, the man who led the team that developed the atom bomb, opposed the H-bomb. He felt it was wrong to develop a more powerful bomb in peacetime. Others protested at the vast amounts being spent on weapons. But the most common feelings were of helplessness and fear. People wondered whether this was the end. Were they the last generation to walk this planet? Would nuclear warfare signal the end of the world?

It was against the background of the nuclear arms race that Cuba became the next major flashpoint of the Cold War.