The Korean war lasted a little over three years, from June 1950 to July 1953. It was the most significant conflict to occur during the Cold War and it helped to determine the course of the Cold War. The Korean struggle was simultaneously a civil war and an international war; Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung represented the passionate desire of left and right to see their country reunited, after the arbitrary decision to divide Korea at the 38th parallel, implemented in August-September 1945. At the same time the great powers pursued their rivalries in the context of Korea, as in other parts of the globe. The Soviet Union encouraged the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to attack the Republic of Korea (ROK) in June 1950 and the United States decided not only to intervene but to ensure that the United Nations [UN] acted. The aim of this volume is to explore how the Korean war occurred; to examine the principal characteristics and nature of the war; and to consider the consequences of the war. This introduction discusses briefly certain of the most interesting issues and personalities with the intention of setting the scene for the more detailed consideration to follow.

For the DPRK (North Korea) the war connoted a bold, if reckless, attempt to secure unification swiftly through force of arms. If the advance had succeeded, Korea would have been unified with a combination of communism and nationalism prevailing, as interpreted by Kim Il Sung. For the ROK (South Korea) the war comprised a dire threat to its existence, followed by the enticing prospect of securing unification through the liquidation of the DPRK, as UN (mostly American) forces moved north, in conjunction with the ROK army, towards the Yalu river. Both Korean states experienced analogous feelings of exhilaration and despair in the first four months of war. Thereafter, each was compelled to appreciate that unification was impossible to achieve and that a
compromise settlement would be unavoidable. For the Soviet Union the war constituted the failure of one of Stalin’s few great gambles in the international sphere; however, the war also underlined the role of fundamental importance played by Russia in coordinating the reactions of communist states and in helping to determine that the DPRK would survive. American and British leaders acknowledged on key occasions that the war could only be brought to an end through enlisting the cooperation of the Soviet Union. For the United States the war represented a qualified achievement in preventing the forcible elimination of a state pledged to resist communism: the achievement was qualified because the endeavour of the UN (controlled effectively by the United States at this time) to inflict decisive defeat on the DPRK and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) failed, to the chagrin of the Americans.

For the UN the war demonstrated that the young organisation was capable of acting with greater resolution than its ill-fated predecessor, the League of Nations, but only because of the ineptitude shown by the Soviet Union at the start of the war in not moving to block the American decision to mobilise the UN. However, the reality was that the UN was dominated by the United States, and the sixteen states contributing forces under the UN flag were compelled to recognise that the best they could hope to achieve was to exert marginal influence on the direction of American policy. As an organisation, the UN was weakened rather than strengthened through its role in Korea before and during the war. For China the war conned a calculated gamble which largely, but not entirely, succeeded. China demonstrated unequivocally that it was a major force to be reckoned with and that it could not be marginalised by its principal opponent or its principal ally; the United States and the Soviet Union came to accept that China was now a prominent actor on the Asian stage.

The Korean war is intriguing for reminding us once more of the impact of personality upon historical processes. Syngman Rhee and Kim II Sung were deeply committed nationalists, each inspired (as was Mao Tse-tung in China) by the bitterness and passion engendered by foreign subjugation: lasting hatred of Japan, as the recent colonial master of Korea, was accompanied by resentment that each Korean state had to rely on the aid of outside powers, yet the humiliation was softened by the belief that the powers could be manipulated to help in securing the wider objectives of the ROK and the DPRK. Both Rhee and Kim revealed much guile and tenacity in exploiting the major powers. Rhee obtained massive American military assistance between 1950 and 1953, followed by a permanent military alliance and large-scale economic aid. Kim obtained substantial Russian help, including covert Soviet air intervention and the involvement of vast Chinese armies. After 1953 Kim proved more successful than Rhee and Rhee’s successors in escaping from foreign influence, as he skilfully played the Soviet Union and China off against one another. On the other hand, the ROK gained more in the long term through strengthening its economy as a result of cooperation with the United States. Stalin took the most fateful decision of any individual leader when he decided to encourage Kim II Sung in the latter’s endeavour to fulfil his ardent ambition to unite Korea. Stalin thus set in motion a chain of events that led inexorably to the localised eruption of the Cold War into a hot war. The failure of his gamble meant that Stalin drew back from subsequent direct action in Korea: his later initiatives were designed to protect the DPRK without involving the Soviet Union in developments that could mark escalation into a third world war. Stalin urged Mao to commit Chinese forces on a large scale to Korea but the Soviet role was confined mostly to the air where it was easier to conceal the extent of the Soviet contribution.

Harry Truman (President of the United States, April 1945–January 1953) was a staunch opponent of communism and a political leader of courage and obstinacy. He did not exercise the degree of control over policy evinced by Stalin: Dean Acheson, the American secretary of state, was responsible for defining the chief characteristics of American foreign policy at the end of the 1940s and it was Acheson who handled the immediate reactions in Washington, DC, following the outbreak of the war. But Truman both approved the actions decided by Acheson and personally took the vital decisions committing American forces to action in the Korean peninsula on his return from Independence, Missouri, to Washington. During the later turgiditations, as the military pendulum swung back and forth, Truman stood firm on the vital features as he discerned them—there would be no evacuation of the peninsula and there would be no betrayal (as he saw it) of prisoners of war (POWs) who had no wish to return to the states for which they had fought. Truman’s decision on the latter issue contributed significantly to the prolongation of the war and to the extent of the defeat suffered by the Democratic party in the presidential election.
of 1952. The American commitment to mobilise resources fully for a possible third world war later in the 1950s gained momentum powerfully under the Truman administration. General Eisenhower, who was elected to the presidency in November 1952, viewed matters in a broadly similar way to Truman: they had worked quite closely together until Eisenhower decided to support the Republican party. However, Eisenhower was adamant that the Korean war must be terminated instead of dragging on interminably. A widespread weariness among most of the participants was probably more important than Eisenhower’s impatience in achieving the signing of an armistice in July 1953 (even then Syngman Rhee remained strongly opposed to an armistice and refused to sign it).

Mao Tse-tung took the most important decision after those taken by Stalin, Kim Il Sung and Truman in 1950. Mao concluded in October 1950 that the PRC must intervene militarily in the Korean struggle in order to assert China’s rediscovered pride and confidence after a century of humiliation and subjugation to foreign powers. Vital Chinese interests were at stake in Manchuria, in addition to which Mao was deeply affronted by American intervention to prevent the PRC from assuming control of the island of Taiwan, the last stronghold of Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist) forces led by Chiang Kai-shek. Mao was under no illusions concerning the magnitude of the decision he was taking. A number of his senior colleagues argued that it was not wise for the recently established PRC to fight the strongest power in the world, but Mao saw the war in Korea as an opportunity to demonstrate to the United States, the UN and the Soviet Union that China was an important player in Asian affairs in a far more meaningful sense than had been the case a decade earlier when Chiang Kai-shek postured as a leader in exchanges with Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. Mao succeeded in establishing China’s importance but at a cost greater than he envisaged in October 1950.

Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill were minor figures in the context of the Korean war in comparison to the leaders considered above. Great Britain was the next most important participant in UN military operations after the United States but the scale of British military commitment came a long way behind the American contribution. Attlee’s principal impact lay in his dramatic visit to Washington to meet President Truman in December 1950, at a time when it was feared that the United States might deploy nuclear weapons in Korea. Attlee conveyed the depth of concern in Britain and in western Europe as well as in the Commonwealth and emphasised the necessity for consultation between allies. This occurred during a traumatic phase of much uncertainty regarding the future direction of American policy. Churchill’s contribution was heroic and original, yet this related to more general anxiety over the Cold War rather than Korea itself. After the death of Stalin, in March 1953, Churchill was enthused with the newly opening opportunity to diminish the dangers of the Cold War leading to another world war and he acted with tenacity to foster exchanges with the new Soviet leaders. Part of this process involved securing an armistice in Korea. At a time when Syngman Rhee was causing much embarrassment in seeking to block conclusion of an armistice agreement, Churchill communicated with Moscow and stressed that Rhee’s shrill protests must be disregarded in pursuance of the more profound issues involved. Churchill’s zeal for détente annoyed Eisenhower but arguably was important for convincing the Soviet Union that the UN wanted the Korean war brought to a conclusion.

Events in Korea revealed the extent of miscalculation and error by each state involved in the more fundamental decisions that led to the conflict and its escalation. But it also showed a maturity of judgement in appreciating the dangers of allowing matters to go too far. The Korean conflict was the most dangerous war to occur since 1945 and, with the exception of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, contained the most perilous occasions for propelling the world into a global conflagration. This is why, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war, it is worth examining again the nature and course of the savage struggles that so divided and devastated this remote peninsula in East Asia between 1950 and 1953.