

Relations between the two blocs

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At the start of the 1950s East-West relations were characterised by constant tension and distrust between the two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

In June 1950 the Cold War moved from Europe to south-east Asia as communist troops from the North invaded South Korea. The region became a bloody ideological battleground, pitting the West against the communist world. Indirectly this precipitated rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany. Only in July 1953 was a fragile peace restored along the 38th parallel with the signature of an armistice at Panmunjom. Although the Korean war was geographically limited, its international repercussions showed that the two great powers could not openly confront one another without running the risk of widespread conflict.

In the United States General Eisenhower won the 1952 presidential election, with a corresponding shift in American foreign policy on the Soviet Union. Though initially in favour of a policy of firmness towards communism, based on the 'rollback' doctrine, President Eisenhower nevertheless had to make allowance for the risk of escalation and the hazards of direct nuclear confrontation with the Soviets. In 1953 he opted for the so-called 'new look' strategy. This combined diplomacy with the threat of massive retaliation. To complicate matters further, the United States was no longer the only country with nuclear weapons. It had to come to terms with technological progress by the Soviet Union, which tested its first atomic weapon in 1949, with the first hydrogen bomb following in 1953.

East-West relations only began to improve after the death of Stalin on 5 March 1953, with Nikita Khrushchev emerging as the undisputed party leader of the Soviet Union in 1955.

On 15 May 1955 Austria and the four occupying powers (United States, United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union) signed the Austrian State Treaty, which ended occupation of the country and restored Austria as a neutral, independent, democratic nation, with the same borders as in 1938. On 5 November it enshrined the principle of neutrality in its Constitution: a change the international community promptly recognised. Austria immediately became a member of the Council of Europe, joining the United Nations Organisation on 14 November 1955.

Finally the heads of government of the four great powers (United States, United Kingdom, France and the Soviet Union) met in Geneva from 18 to 23 July 1955. Although the negotiations on European security, disarmament and East-West relations made little progress, the meeting ended on a note of détente between the various protagonists.

A few months later, in September 1955, the West German chancellor Konrad Adenauer visited Moscow for the first time, an encounter that led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Despite these encouraging signs the distrust and ideological opposition between the two blocs continued. When the Federal Republic of Germany joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in May 1955, the Soviet Union responded immediately. The same month it signed a treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance, known as the Warsaw Pact, with Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia.

In central and eastern Europe, with the death of Stalin and the start of de-Stalinisation launched by the new Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev, the populations of several satellite states attempted to cast off the Russian yoke. In Poland, despite several violent clashes in Poznan, Władysław Gomułka, the former general secretary of the Workers' Party, was rehabilitated after being arrested in 1951. In October 1956 he became the new First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. He managed *in extremis* to prevent a Soviet military intervention to put down riots by the workers and an attempted takeover in October 1956.

The situation in East Germany and Hungary was very different. The Soviet military intervened in both countries – in June 1953 and November 1956 respectively – Moscow being determined to crush the popular

uprising and reassert full control over satellite states. Following the invasion and the restoration of a regime loyal to the Soviet Union more than 200 000 Hungarians went into exile in the West.

During the 1950s East-West relations certainly evolved, moving towards peaceful coexistence, but the Cold War nevertheless continued, as did the ideological tensions between the two blocs.