Canada-US Relations During the Korean War 1950-53

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## Introduction

When one thinks of Canada and the United States one might think of two neighbours, similar, maybe even the same with some minor differences. We get the picture that these two countries get along quite well, based on the aforementioned premise, share the same worldviews and goals towards global politics etc, etc… but, however similar they may look in all of these things, Canada and the United States still differ in many ways. Though it is tempting to view their relations in the past through the lens of today, that would be a grievous mistake for in the past these two neighbours were not as close as one would like to think, allies yes, but still, each with their own unique outtake especially on the stage of world politics. Though Canada applauded some of America’s decisions such as taking the initiative in Korea, they often times took a contrarian and warry approach to their policies and sought to limit what they saw as America’s belligerent approach. To that end they pursued a diplomacy of constraint, which due to Canada’s not so big influence had to be done through the aegis of the United Nations.

There are several instances where the Canadians had ideological differences with the Americans and sought to curtail and derail Washington’s policy making, albeit at times with little success, but at other times with enough success as to assure a desired outcome. These ideological differences arose in the issues of the usage of nuclear weaponry; how to deal with China; and the cease-fire talks for the Korean War, amongst others. It is worthy to mention that both countries also had different views as to the importance of that remote place in the Pacific. Even before the war broke out, the Canadians had no real interest in dealing with Korea. To them at best “Korea was an obscure place on the western side of the Pacific, a place of indeterminate status, best known because the people were known to wear strange hats.” [[1]](#footnote-1) Being a North Atlantic country rather than a Pacific one, it held mostly Eurocentric views and its economic and political interests laid predominantly in Europe, “where the principal cold war threat remained the Soviet Union.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Even the Americans on several occasions assured the Canadians that Korea is outside of their vital defence interest. However, the US initiated a swift response to North Korea’s invasion which took the Canadians by surprise.

## Main Part

Beginnings of Divergence

The moment the US decided to directly intervene, is the moment when the differences in policy between them and Canada begin to emerge, resulting in Canada’s diplomacy of constraint. US’s status as a World Power, who emerged as such in the post WW2 world explains their subsequent actions in the Korean War, actions which Canada sought to restrain, through the United Nations. Due to Canada’s position as a medium power, the Canadians had no choice but to rely on the world organisation and its likeminded allies to exercise influence over the more powerful United States, influence which may seem superficial at a glance, but integral none the less in the developments of the War. Canada’s role with the diplomacy of constraint was pivotal in the managing of U.S’ ‘do it alone’ policy. Ever since the beginning of the war, the government in Washington had adopted all too known by now ‘gung-ho’ attitude where they always take the lead and call the shots, with the rest expected to follow. Firstly, the US administration under Truman had decided to take military action in Korea, without consulting the United Nations first. The issue was brought to the attention of the UN only after they had started their intervention[[3]](#footnote-3). This was done to lend credence to their involvement because the cause would look more just, and in the name of collective security as opposed to national interests if done under UN auspices.

Regardless of America’s true intentions, the Canadians felt that this put Canada into a more advantageous position because now it could exercise its influence on US policy more efficiently if backed by other members. But the US was the only country which was equipped with sufficient military strength to intervene in Korea and therefore was giving the most output in the war. Given their advantageous position, and due to constitutional reasons, the US wanted to put the military forces of the UN under American command, and this was done by asking the Council to adopt a resolution for this purpose. Not liking how this was worded, Lester Pearson, the Canadian secretary of state for external affairs, sought to minimalize the usage of ‘American’ and put more emphasis on United Nations forces and Commander, but he was overruled by Washington and London, and the resolution was passed, out of fear that such phrases might give Moscow a voice in the Korean operation.[[4]](#footnote-4) In other words, had the UN character been strengthened the Russians would have a say in the matter as they were part of the Security Council, and as such could impede the military decision making. Military command was given to the US general Douglas MacArthur, a famous veteran from the previous world war.

Atomic threat

Now with Canada’s military entanglement in the war “it had become very much a part of the national interest to limit as fully as possible the intensity, duration, and territorial scope of the hostilities.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

The first thing that fuelled the fear of this war growing in its intensity and territorial scope, was the tasteless comment given by United States president Harry Truman that “Washington would not require United Nations authorization to initiate an atomic attack.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The transcripts got to the foreign embassies in Washington, through the media, and this set immediate alarm bells ringing. The Canadian government was swift in its action, despatching a letter to Washington with strong opposition to the usage of atomic weapons, and petitioned British Prime Minister Clement Attlee to discuss this. As a result, both governments, US and UK one issued a joined communique which emphasised a “. . . strong allied cohesion in Korea to prevent any possible Soviet aggression in the east.”[[7]](#footnote-7) However as time passed the Americans adopted a more ‘standalone’ and hard-headed attitude when it came to the use of atomic weaponry. American officials were convinced that it was the Russians who stood behind the North Korean invasion on South Korea. According to Lee, “[t]he possibility of Soviet aggression in peripheral areas had been foreseen in the policy paper NSC 68, and the North Korean attack was interpreted as a Soviet-inspired move . . .”[[8]](#footnote-8) The Americans saw these areas as a *casus belli* which could prompt the use of atomic weapons, which was revealed in a series of bilateral consultations on their use, between the United States and Canada. Canadian views differed greatly on the criteria for usage of such weapons and the *casus belli* for a general war therefore they were intent on using “ . . . the process of consultation as opportunities . . . to constrain the United States from engaging in unnecessary atomic warfare.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The consultations turned out to be shaky at best with the USA acting like the hegemon that they are, oftentimes being dismissive towards Canada. Throughout this whole ordeal it would seem that the USA was desperate to use an atomic bomb, and crush the USSR with a general war, making the Canadians look like they were quite literally trying to diffuse a ticking, atomic time bomb. Luckily, it never came to the use of these weapons.

Breaking Over China

Another thing which added to the fear of a general war breaking out was the island of Formosa, or present-day Taiwan. Pearson and other Canadian officials were concerned that the USA will somehow entangle the issue of defending Formosa against China’s mainland, with the issue in Korea. General MacArthur’s visit to Formosa, which was run by Chinese nationalists, and his remarks about how the US was willing to back anyone fighting communism, greatly alarmed the Canadians. They did not want to do anything with Formosa, and Pearson went to great lengths to emphasise that the defence of the island should not be part of the UN intervention in Korea, as to maintain the integrity and nature of the intervention there. He did so in a public address saying, “ . . . that the United Nations, in its recent decisions, is concerned only in defeating aggression in Korea, and is not concerned, for instance, with the re-conquest by the National Chinese Government in Formosa of the mainland of China.” Luckily the Truman administration shared this view but even they had a hard time restraining their enthusiastic general, who in the end had no choice but to obey the wishes of the president, though reluctantly. This was a part of the larger agenda of Canada to limit the conflict to the Korean Peninsula, in line with another set of agendas including: b) keep China out; and c) to arrange for a cease-fire as soon as possible.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Americans made the fulfilling of these difficult, especially points b and c.

With the beating back of the Communist North the issue arose whether the 38th parallel, which constituted the border with North Korea should be crossed. The Canadians were against crossing, unless the Koreans continued to wage the war, or the need for all-Korean elections arose. Canadian officials pressed Pearson not to support an American initiative into the North. Nevertheless, the passing of the 38th was realised. From this point on, it was impossible to hope to keep the Chinese out. Pearson lamented that due to Canada not having any ground troops, they had no pull in influence to the point of withholding their voice. When MacArthur pressed his advance further north, against the wishes of Washington, a small number of Chinese troops were found out which caused great panic in Ottawa, prompting Pearson in seeking assurances from Washington that the Chinese will not be given a cause to intervene. He did not like the American tactics of intimidation during a debate on a resolution to stop China from aiding North Korea, fearing that the atmosphere of heightened emotion might lead to a war with China. In order to calm down the situation and prevent an escalation he suggested a buffer zone to be built at the Yalu River near the border with Manchuria: he was overruled. MacArthur and the Americans continued to give him headaches, especially MacArthur who had been hard to contain even from his own government. His belligerency and determination to see his mission through “produced among the allies of the United States an even greater determination than before to wield influence and impose restraints upon the conduct of American policy.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The United Nations members who had field units on the ground, including the Canadians, unanimously overruled a dangerous proposal of MacArthur to go in hot-pursuit of enemy aircrafts into Manchuria and bomb their bases, and set restrictions upon which such conditions would be met. This shows that the UN had some persuasive power in restraining on field policies. From all of this I agree with historian Steven Lee who concludes that “[i]n certain cases, allied efforts to contain American enthusiasm for bringing the war to China *did* play an important role in influencing American decisions.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Nevertheless, MacArthur’s self-willingness and gung-ho attitude prompted a full-on counterattack on 26th of November, beating back the UN forces behind the 38th parallel. After this event, things started to get heated.

The Americans hastened to brand China as an aggressor, something which Pearson was strongly against. This is also where Truman began mussing about the possibility of an atomic bomb and “[s]uddenly, the spectre of a general war pitting China and the Soviet Union (because it was believed that China was acting on an incentive by Moscow)against the West seemed imminent.”[[13]](#footnote-13) This prompted the search for a cease-fire and here the two countries’ points of view greatly diverge as well. It was not easy finding common ground. The USA wanted to pressure the Chinese with sanctions while Pearson maintained that that would make them even more hard to bargain with. He was also opposed to US tactics of intimidation by threating to use military force in order to force the Chinese to submit. On more than one occasion he had brought into question the US wisdom into handling the crisis and was growing extremely weary of their belligerent tactics. But perhaps the place where Canada and the US found themselves at odds the most was the issue about the POWs. The crux of the problem lied in two points: a) how to deal with their repatriation; and b) what to what to do with those ‘hard-core’ POWs who refused to go back to their communist homelands. Canada supported a revised Indian resolution that adhered to Chinese demands, but asked for the abandonment on physical force, and for the hard-core POWs to be released in UN care should an armistice be signed, as a compromise for the US’ demand of unconditional release. China refused the condition and India sided with the West ideologically. Despite the failure, this was a big win for Canada because now the only true democracy in Asia was allied with the West and now “Canada and its allies had a helpful instrument to resist the temptation in Washington to look for an easy solution to the Korean deadlock through escalation.”[[14]](#footnote-14) However at one point Washington had brazenly acted on its own by handing over to the Chinese and North Korean sides their own set of proposals “with an additional provision that all Korean POWs should be released rather than repatriated.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This action greatly infuriated Pearson who grew fearful that this will surely break down any chance for an armistice and instructed Ambassador Hume Wrong to make it clear to the Americans that they will not be followed in the abandonment of an already adopted UN resolution. This proved effectful, as other allied members echoed this sentiment forcing Washington to propose other more reasonable resolutions, whom they termed as being final. Pearson again was sure to provide a decisive stance of opposition to the Americans proclaiming that “. . . we cannot, at this stage, accept being pinned down to agreement to them as a "final position" or to support any moves to break off negotiations if these proposals are not accepted."[[16]](#footnote-16) Following heated back and forth proposals between both sides the war was finally put to an end by an agreement signed on 27th July 1953.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that the relations between the two countries have been tested throughout the era of the Korean War. Though looking with approval to some of US’s decisive actions, albeit with great reluctance and apprehension, Canada most of the time adopted a contrarian attitude towards US policies which were the cause of panic and alarm due to their belligerent nature. In the pursuit of influence the Canadians adopted the diplomacy of constraint, but because of their weak standing on the power scale they were in a precarious situation. How Canadian officials acted and felt during this war reflects Prime Minister King’s feeling that “. . . the correct role for Canada in world affairs was grounded in pragmatism, realism, and caution.”[[17]](#footnote-17) In order to exert their influence to its full extent they had to rely on “working with like-minded countries in the United Nations and the British Commonwealth.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Canada also had to be very careful with how they approach this diplomacy as to not permanently damage their relation to the US who after all were still their allies and neighbours. Due to these positions their approach was often timid and less aggressive as they would wish it to be, which causes some critics to question the effect their influence had on the issue, or whether there was any real benefit of it. But despite everything, and how it may seem, Canada did play an important role in shaping the course of the war.

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Word Count: 2740.

1. Prince, “Limits of Constraint”*,* 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Donaghy, “Pacific Diplomacy”, in *Canada and Korea: Perspectives,* 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Prince, 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Donaghy, “Pacific Diplomacy”, 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Stairs, *Diplomacy of Constraint,* 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sayle, “A Pattern of Constraint”*,* 690. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Sayle, 691. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lee, *Outposts of Empire,* 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sayle, 694. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stairs, 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stairs, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lee, *Outposts,* emphasis mine 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Donaghy, parenthesis mine, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Donaghy, “Blessed Are the Peacemakers”, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Donaghy, “Peacemakers”, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Pearson qtd in Donaghy, “Peacemakers”, 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. McKenzie “Canadian-American Relations”, 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. McKenzie, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)