

### A Brash and Dangerous Ally: Canadian Views of MacArthur during the Korean War

On April 10, 1951, Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson spoke to an audience in Toronto on the state of Canada-U.S. relations. On this evening, he proclaimed to the surprise of many in Canada and the United States, “the days of relatively easy and automatic political relations with our neighbours are, I think, over.”<sup>1</sup> For a week, officials in Washington and the American embassy in Ottawa were buzzing with commentary, for although the two allies certainly had their share of minor differences during the last nine months of the Korean War, they did not see justification for these remarks, calling the speech “ill-timed and ill advised.”<sup>2</sup> Pearson’s address was critical of U.S. foreign policy in general, but was inspired largely by the actions of General Douglas MacArthur, Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command in Korea. In fact, by spring 1951, Canada’s foreign policy mandarins characterized MacArthur as an immediate threat to their nation’s twin foreign policy aims of collective security and international stability. Two complementary views of the general held by officials in the Department of External Affairs support this claim. First, they considered MacArthur to be too fully engrossed in the military aspects of the conflict, ignoring the larger political picture of his actions and disrupting Canadian plans for a limited war and peace settlement. Second, Lester Pearson in particular abhorred the general’s flamboyant politics, such as his relations with the Nationalist Chinese government on Formosa, which threatened to widen the war and drag Canadian forces deeper into the Asian quagmire.<sup>3</sup>

The Canadian government had no direct contact with General MacArthur until 1950. And, aside from a brief encounter in Tokyo that January, Lester Pearson had never met him. His

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<sup>1</sup> Statements and Speeches, “Canadian Foreign Policy in Two-Power World,” Department of External Affairs, 51/14

<sup>2</sup> Bliss to Woodward, 4/17/1951, State Department Files, Decimal Series, 1950-1954, 611.42

<sup>3</sup> Denis Stairs, *The Diplomacy of Constraint: Canada, the Korean War, and the United States*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1974); Robert Prince, “The Limits of Constraint: Canadian-American Relations and the Korean War,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1992-1993), pp. 129-152

role as Japanese proconsul in the post-war years barely registered with Canada's officials until June of that year, when the Canadian government was surprised by the quick reaction of American authorities to aggression in Korea since its defence had thus far been of negligible importance to the Truman administration. MacArthur was the only choice of American authorities for command as no other officer with the capacity to counter the North Korean's rapid advance. Pearson and Canadian Ambassador to the United States Hume Wrong pledged their support for the U.S. effort in the United Nations to bring peace to Asia.<sup>4</sup>

However, Canada would only really support the mission if it was a true exhibition of collective security and not America's individual crusade against the "Communist imperialism."<sup>5</sup> In a sense, Pearson was more concerned with style than substance. He instructed his delegate at the UN on June 30, before MacArthur had been provided a mandate by the general assembly, to "*make clear to [the Secretary General] the great importance which the Canadian government attaches to the necessity of clothing General MacArthur with the mantle of the United Nations.*"<sup>6</sup> President Truman had proclaimed his commitment to the UN and collective action, but according to a message sent to Ambassador Wrong, he was concerned that MacArthur might use forces afforded to him by allied nations for the defence of Formosa which the Chinese Nationalist government occupied the previous year. Pearson stated bluntly that it was possible MacArthur might use Canadian ships to blockade the straits separating the island from mainland China and iterated that "*we do not wish to become involved in the defence of Formosa.*"<sup>7</sup> Although Pearson was speaking generally about the situation, he was aware that MacArthur had strong views on Formosa that often contradicted those of the Truman administration. Twice in July 1950,

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<sup>4</sup> Documents in Canadian External Relations (DCER), 1950, vol. 16, ed. Greg Donaghy, (Ottawa: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1996), pp. 40-42

<sup>5</sup> DCER, 1950, pp. 22-23

<sup>6</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 43

<sup>7</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 56

MacArthur contradicted Truman's neutrality towards the island, contending publically, "*that if we defend Formosa we alienate continental Asia.*" Instead, MacArthur wanted to bring the Chinese Nationalist Troops to Korea as part of the UN force and he offered them what amounted to a defensive military alliance.<sup>8</sup>

This action resulted in a public reprimand by Truman and a loss of face for the general, but it was cause for concern in Ottawa as officials had a difficult time distinguishing between official and unofficial policy. Pearson wrote privately to U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Pearson in mid-August, and claimed that recent action by MacArthur had increased the danger of war with the People's Republic of China, which would be the worst case scenario. He asked his counterpart to put to rest "*the fears of other countries that Korea and Formosa are part of a single American policy.*" In his response, Acheson reiterated official policy that the U.S. would not become involved in Formosa but skirted the issue of MacArthur entirely.<sup>9</sup>

Although appeased, Pearson's scepticism of U.S. foreign policy did not vanish. Canadian officials lamented the emotional and excitable nature of U.S. public opinion and criticized MacArthur for acting as a catalyst for right-wing Republican attacks on the Truman administration.<sup>10</sup> Pearson was especially concerned with MacArthur's evocative communiqués, which he distributed through the press as opposed to the UN in effort to boost his own image with the media, the American public and Congress.<sup>11</sup> Observers were rightly concerned that the president would be increasingly susceptible to public pressure as he desperately sought a victory

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<sup>8</sup> Cited in Douglas MacArthur, *A Solider Speaks: Public Papers and Speeches of the General of the Army Douglas MacArthur*, (New York: Praeger, 1965): 221; Schaller, p. 197

<sup>9</sup> Pearson to Acheson, 8/15/1950. Formosa File, Classified General Records - 1950-1961, U.S. Embassy, Ottawa, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the United States, NARA; Acheson to Pearson, 9/5/1950. Formosa File, Classified General Records - 1950-1961, U.S. Embassy, Ottawa, Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the United States, NARA

<sup>10</sup> Denis Stairs, *Diplomacy of Constraint*, pp. 107-109; Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 82-87

<sup>11</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 220

in the upcoming mid-term election in November.<sup>12</sup> However, by early fall, it became clearer to Canada that there was a distinction between the initiatives of the U.S. executive and the volatile personalities who troubled the DEA.<sup>13</sup>

“The real Korean crisis,” cited Lester Pearson in his memoirs, came after September 15, 1950, when MacArthur successfully pulled off an amphibious assault at Inchon, behind enemy lines.<sup>14</sup> This attack precipitated the collapse of the North Korean army and set in motion a chain of events that would bring UN forces very close to the Chinese border at the Yalu River. Like the Americans, the Canadian government was most concerned that any action North of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel would bring either the People’s Republic of China (PRC) or the USSR into the conflict and made it a priority to use only Korean troops near the Chinese border and to push for a cease fire as soon as possible.<sup>15</sup> MacArthur had no fears of a wider war and, in most cases, appeared to welcome the challenge. At the infamous meeting between Truman and MacArthur at Wake Island that occurred in mid-October, at the height of American battlefield successes, the general downplayed Chinese military capabilities. Ironically, he stated that “if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter.”<sup>16</sup>

Throughout October and November, the Canadian government anxiously watched MacArthur head straight for the Yalu River with the entire UN force. Although he had hoped the U.S. would be “*very prudent*” in the implementation of their policy to unite Korea, Pearson remarked that the general did not understand the consequences of his actions and “*appear[ed] to be regarding his assignment from a limited military point of view.*” He blamed MacArthur for obsessing with the what he believed was the imprudent idea of total victory, that all allied

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<sup>12</sup> Casey, pp. 111-113

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum of Conversation, 9/7/1950, State Department Files, Decimal Series, 1950-1954, 611.42/9-750

<sup>14</sup> Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 158

<sup>15</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 220-221; Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 200-202

<sup>16</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS), 1950, Vol. 7 (Washington), p. 953

resources should be committed to the destruction of enemy forces regardless of political consequences. Additionally, he noted that MacArthur seemed poised to attack the Chinese in Manchuria.<sup>17</sup> Such actions would not lead to peace, but further instability in an already precarious situation. Therefore, by November, the DEA considered MacArthur to be concurrently politically imprudent in his attempts bludgeon the communists with force as well as politically ambitious, using the media to self-promote and advocate new and unwelcome policy options, particularly his desire to employ Chinese Nationalists in Korea or discuss issues privately with reporters, bypassing entirely the United Nations. Yet this interpretations are not necessarily at odds with one another; according to Pearson, in each instance, his actions limited the chance of a peaceful settlement to the conflict and threatened only to exacerbate political tensions. The DEA complained to the U.S. State Department but, in an effort to bolster respect of the president's authority, Acheson's Department defended the general, claiming that while his language was archaic, the American government did not intend to provoke the Chinese and official policy remained unchanged. Pearson could still not shake the feeling that MacArthur's public statements, the rapid advance of UN troops would only widen the hostilities.<sup>18</sup>

Such suspicions were confirmed on November 25 when over two hundred thousand Chinese communist troops were encountered near the Yalu River by the sharp end of U.S. Army creeping up along the Eastern coast of the peninsula. According to Ambassador Woodward, the Canadian cabinet suggested that MacArthur should be relieved of his command for dragging the UN into conflict with Communist Chinese.<sup>19</sup> The cabinet conclusions from the same date acknowledged that there was some deceit on the part of the general, who had, until that point,

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<sup>17</sup> DCER, 1950, pp. 219-223

<sup>18</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 228

<sup>19</sup> Telegram from Woodward to Acheson, 11/30/1950, RG 84 - Embassy Files, Korea - 1950, NARA

argued that his offensive was only a “*mopping up operation*.”<sup>20</sup> Pearson intensified his efforts in the UN for a ceasefire and peace settlement before the situation deteriorated further.<sup>21</sup> But decisions were being made now on the battlefield, not in the General Assembly. Here, the U.S. Joint Chiefs urged restraint, yet MacArthur proclaimed that the “[we] faced an entirely new war” and abandoned completely the prospect of a limited engagement.<sup>22</sup> MacArthur pleaded with the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington once again to allow him to use Chinese Nationalist troops as part of the UN force and continued to lobby the chiefs for permission to bomb military “sanctuaries” and to pursue enemy planes in Manchuria, moves all opposed by Pearson.<sup>23</sup> To be fair, even though MacArthur was essentially the antithesis of all the St. Laurent’s government believed, the Truman administration was also responsible for adding to allied anxieties. Not only did Truman afford MacArthur more authority than most considered necessary, the President erred in stating in a press conference on November 30 that the MacArthur could possibly employ nuclear weapons in Asia at his discretion. As well, the State Department was also unwilling to make any concessions to the PRC to bring about a ceasefire. This interpretation of events was supported publically by the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and major editorials in newspapers such as the *Ottawa Citizen*, whose comments the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa considered of significant influence to report to the State Department.<sup>24</sup>

Pearson’s memoirs portray a diplomat with a clear sense that MacArthur acted outside of his authority, but a lengthy dispatch to Ambassador Wrong in February 1951 reveals that at the time the boundaries between official and unofficial U.S. foreign policy were eroding. Pearson

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<sup>20</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 242

<sup>21</sup> DCER, 1950, p. 228

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Dennis Wainstock, *Truman, MacArthur and the Korean War*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), p. 93

<sup>23</sup> Summary of Telegrams, 11/16/1950, Office of the Secretary of State, Naval Aide to the President Files, Box 23, Papers of Harry S Truman

<sup>24</sup> “Critical Comments on American Policy in the Far East,” 12/6/1950, State Department Files, Decimal Series, 1950-1954, 611.42/12-650

admitted that “some aspects of recent US policy have seemed to us erratic and confused. At times, it has been difficult for the Canadian government to discover exactly what the current United States policy is.” He blamed the state of affairs not only on MacArthur, but also on other high-ranking officials in the State Department, several of which were extreme anti-communists who advocated a belligerent policy against the PRC. In addition, “the absence of any clear-cut sense of direction,” troubled the Department of External Affairs.<sup>25</sup> The difference between MacArthur and others mentioned by Pearson was that MacArthur had a clear-cut sense of what he wished to accomplish in Korea, he had the ability to affect change in international relations and commanded Canadian forces in the area.

Scholars such as Steven Hugh Lee and Robert Prince have argued that Ottawa’s desire to maintain a close and “special relationship” with the United States kept Pearson from protesting too strongly about the conduct of American leadership during the Korean crisis.<sup>26</sup> If that is the case, it did not stop Canada’s top diplomat from vocalizing his discontent with the state of Canada-U.S. relations. In March 1951 he spoke to the Canadian Bar Association “with MacArthur in mind.” He underscored that one of the present dangers to allied unity in the struggle against communism arose “when those who have been charged by the United Nations with military responsibility make controversial pronouncements which go far beyond that responsibility, and create confusion, disquiet and discord.”<sup>27</sup> He spoke again in April in the wake of further transgressions by MacArthur which reflected poorly on the Truman administration. To an audience in Toronto, Pearson was critical of MacArthur and condemned the current state of “collective security” influenced by ambitious and careless individuals who manipulated the concept for dubious purposes: “[we must guarantee] that the United Nations remains the

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<sup>25</sup> DCER, 1951, p. 105

<sup>26</sup> Steven Hugh Lee, *Outposts of Empire: Korea, Vietnam, and the Origins of the Cold War in Asia: 1949-1954*, (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), pp. 72-113; Prince, pp. 129-130

<sup>27</sup> Pearson, *Mike*, vol. 2 p. 180

instrument of collective policy of all its members...and does not become too much the instrument of one country.” Canada had the right, he continued, to concern itself with those, such as generals, whose actions impact Canadian national security. And it was at this point that Pearson proclaimed the end of easy relations between the two allies.<sup>28</sup> In a letter to Hume Wrong written only days later, he admitted that as he made the speech, he had been consumed with worry that MacArthur would begin bombing targets on mainland China, which would have forced Canada to officially withdraw from the Korean mission.<sup>29</sup> Pearson needed not to worry too much. Within hours of the speech, MacArthur was relieved of his command for insubordination.

The speech received considerable attention for its critical nationalist tone not only in Canada, but also in the United States. The difference was that in the U.S., the response was negative.<sup>30</sup> After the fact, it became known to the Americans that the speech was a collaborative effort at various levels of the Department of External Affairs.<sup>31</sup> The critical speech must then be seen as a reaction to MacArthur’s provocative action and the U.S. government’s failure to constrain him.

No other individual elicited the negative reaction from Canadian authorities during the Korean War as General MacArthur. And for good reason: he jeopardized basic Canadian security interests, peace and collective security. Officials acknowledged that MacArthur had personally expanded the war in November and hindered any chance of peace foreign policy aims, heightened the chances of general war and inhibited negotiations.<sup>32</sup> Much of Canada’s apprehensions derived from its approach to international relations. Pearson advocated a cool, intellectual response to crises and feared, primarily as a result of MacArthur’s actions, that

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<sup>28</sup> Statements and Speeches, “Canadian Foreign Policy in Two-Power World,” Department of External Affairs, 51/14

<sup>29</sup> Pearson, *Mike*, vol. 2, p. 182

<sup>30</sup> Bliss to Woodward, 4/17/1951, State Department Files, Decimal Series, 1950-1954, 611.42

<sup>31</sup> Memorandum from Bliss to Woodward, 4/13/1951, Classified General Records, U.S. Embassy in Ottawa

<sup>32</sup> DCER, 1951, p. 135

intemperance might prevail in U.S. domestic politics. As the image of MacArthur as a brash and dangerous ally emerged, Pearson increased his “diplomacy of constraint” but such initiatives were only met with “marginal success.”<sup>33</sup> This interpretation of the general is different from that which is found in U.S. sources and scholarship, which frames the debate in terms of a personal struggle between Truman and MacArthur.<sup>34</sup> Fundamentally, the Canadian experience highlights the international dimension of MacArthur’s actions in those capitals working with the United States in Korea. Therefore, the question should not be whether or not MacArthur had the right to challenge presidential authority, but how this challenge was detrimental to international security more generally and North Atlantic relations specifically.

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<sup>33</sup> Dennis Stairs, *Diplomacy of Constraint*, vi

<sup>34</sup> Stanley Weintraub, *MacArthur’s War: The Undoing of an American Hero*, (New York: Free Press, 2000); Wainstock, *Truman, MacArthur and the Korean War*; John Spainer, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Belkemp Press, 1959)