Canada and the Korean War
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Introduction

Andrew Burtch and Tim Cook

Major (Ret’d) Donavan “Reg” Redknap, a veteran of the Korean War, was a volunteer at the Canadian War Museum in 2005. The new museum, in Ottawa, had just opened to the public. Wearing a blazer bedecked with medals, the aged veteran freely shared his wartime experiences with visitors. In conversations with staff, he lamented that few of the people coming through the galleries knew about the Korean War, what Canadians did during the conflict, or even much about the region.

Over the following years, the museum’s displays would help introduce the war and its history to millions of visitors. Reg was indefatigable in his desire for younger people to understand the war, particularly the complexity and importance of gunnery that his unit, the Royal Canadian Artillery’s 81st Field Regiment, provided in support of soldiers such as his friend Ed Hollyer. On the night of 2–3 May 1953, as a superior Chinese force raided the platoon position defended by Canadian and South Korean soldiers, Lieutenant Hollyer’s 3rd Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment, ordered a request for Reg’s guns to rain fire onto his own lines to drive off the attack. After confirming the order, Reg complied, and by the morning of 3 May, the seventy-two guns of the Commonwealth Division had poured eight thousand shells onto the attacking force.

Ed survived the raid and the barrage and was later awarded the Military Cross. When the museum’s Korean War displays opened, a photograph of Reg and Ed was displayed to help explain the importance of firepower in defending UN lines. In the fall of 2022, after sharing his knowledge with so many visitors to the museum, Reg passed away, joining most veterans from the Korean War, including his old friend Ed, who had died in July 2013, shortly before the sixtieth anniversary of the Korean War armistice. Both men’s stories live on through the museum’s displays.

Reg’s comments on the public’s lack of knowledge about the Korean War might well be extended to most wars and conflicts in Canadian military history,
Map 1  The Korean Peninsula, 1950–53
save, perhaps, for the world wars, which dominate the historiographical and commemorative landscape. The Korean War has had few historical, cultural, or public affairs champions, and it holds little place in the collective imagination of Canadians. This is notwithstanding detailed scholarly works that document Canada’s involvement in the war such as David Bercuson’s *Blood on the Hills*, Brent Byron Watson’s critical examination in *Far Eastern Tour*, and William Johnston’s signature volume, *A War of Patrols*, to name a few.¹

However, most of these works tend to focus either on the performance of a particular arm of the Canadian military or on the war’s implications for areas of greater national interest, such as managing the Canada–United States relationship in the early Cold War, or Canada’s involvement with the budding North Atlantic Alliance.² In the United States, which has a far greater body of historical study on the Korean War, the war has sometimes been painted as a disappointment when set against the record of unconditional victory in 1945. General Omar Bradley’s caution against escalating the war and risking a global conflict has often been mistakenly summarized as standing for the entire war: “The wrong war, at the wrong place, in the wrong time, against the wrong enemy.”³ Bradley’s (and, by extension, the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s) warning was not to lose sight of the real priority – preparing for and deterring conflict in Europe.

Yet Bradley’s evocative phrase has also provided fodder for historians to interpret Korea – and some of the American missteps before, during, and after the war there – as a prelude to Vietnam and its controversies.⁴ In much of Canadian and international historiography, the Korean War tends to be a weigh station employed to shape or sharpen other early Cold War events, whether as a foreign-policy orientation, lessons for urgent budgetary allocations, military reforms, or deployments elsewhere in the world. Korea, in terms of Canadian military and foreign-policy historiography, is generally used to help illustrate other Cold War trends.⁵

As Masuda Hajimu points out in *Cold War Crucible*, however, the spectre of unsettled outcomes of the Second World War led many in the West to view the Korean War as a possible global war. “World War II was not simply an event in the past,” wrote Masuda Hajimu, “it was an image of the future.”⁶ Much of the world was living with the legacy of the Second World War. Refugee crises and independence movements, countries divided by the war, and the rise of new superpowers were but a few of the war’s key legacies. With its 60 million dead, the Second World War was very much a spectre that continued to haunt the survivors of the remade world.

In East Asia, the years leading up to the Korean War were not setting the table for the forthcoming Cold War. The cultural and, in some cases, violent purges of “counterrevolutionaries” in Eastern Europe, China, and North Korea; the
concurrent Red Scares in western Europe, Canada, and the United States; the rebuilding of nations, such as a destroyed Japan, or in fending off Communist aggressions in West Berlin or South Korea – these were all, to some extent, a settling of accounts from the recent world war, undertaken to produce a promised stability, with long-term and often unforeseen consequences.

In turn, Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s unified China, and Kim Il Sung’s North Korea were all seeking to make or remake the divided world that had emerged from the great trauma of 1945. In victory over fascism, a new ideological war was born, pitting, in broad terms, the Western democracies and their allies against the emerging Communist Bloc. Korea was where these tensions came to an abrupt and costly head.

The Korean War gave rise to many of the defining themes of the Cold War, including domestic anti-Communist campaigns, increased defence spending, and a general sense of urgency that spread to almost every aspect of foreign policy and domestic politics. The Korean War was the catalyst that fired the Cold War, in East Asia and elsewhere. While many of these streams of thought can be seen in earlier crises, such as in responses to the Berlin Blockade or the Czechoslovakia coup, it was during the Korean War that ideological, diplomatic, and actual battle lines hardened in ways that had far-reaching consequences.7

Scholarship during the Cold War routinely depicted the North Korean invasion of the South as a local satellite acting under orders from the Soviet Union, if not Stalin himself. And while more recent scholarship drawn from previously shuttered archives clearly reveals that Stalin gave Kim his tacit approval, it also confirms that the Korean War was firstly a local affair fought between nationalists who leveraged their sponsoring states for support.8 Historian Bruce Cumings’ studies, some of the first to make use of Korean sources, did much to illustrate the domestic political circumstances that contributed to the outbreak of the Korean War.9 Kim Il Sung wanted to reunite the divided Korean peninsula; he saw discontent over the continued American presence in South Korea as an opportunity. Kim’s counterpart, Syngman Rhee’s government, seemed at times at war with its own people, waging a vicious internal conflict against left-leaning militants and northern infiltrators, with security forces often unable to discriminate between militants and innocents caught in the middle.10 Until recently, American scholarship has tended to cast the United States as a relative bystander in Rhee’s internal war, though critical studies have revealed the extent to which American foreign policy empowered or facilitated Rhee’s excesses.11 The end product was the same: the South appeared as though it would be an easy target. For Kim, the invasion of 25 June 1950 was the right war, in the right place, at the right time, and against the right enemy. Were it not for the stiff resistance offered by South Korea’s defenders, he might well have been correct.
With a green light from the Soviet Union and a restless neighbour, Kim envisaged a rapid war where his soldiers would be greeted as liberators and uniters of the divided country. The continuous internecine fighting in South Korea accounted, to some extent, for South Koreans’ lax response to the North’s invasion on 25 June 1950. When the war was announced, it did not immediately precipitate widespread panic. News of the invasion did not even disrupt a baseball game being played in Seoul, but the capital city soon fell to a rapidly moving column of North Koreans. These invaders, who spoke the same language, if in a rougher Northern dialect, were welcomed by some who saw them as brothers rather than as an alien force that characterized the Japanese imperial presence.

These delusions were put to rest, first by North Korean brutality towards captured military personnel and political elites and then by the vicious fighting that destroyed the capital city before it could be recaptured – and captured again by Chinese forces, and then recaptured by the UN forces – in the fall of 1950. But the poorly organized South Korean defenders recovered from the initial blow. Backed by American garrison units, which arrived first from Japan, and then by more combat-effective formations from the United States, they made a successful but costly stand in the southeast of the country. The history of the subsequent long, grinding land campaign is recounted in this book, as is the context for the war and its many stages of combat on land, at sea, and in the air from 1950 to 1953. When the armistice was finally struck on 27 July 1953, the war’s impact did not end there. Its legacy continued to shape the Korean peninsula and reverberate around the world.

With the seventieth anniversary of the Korean Armistice Agreement behind us, an anniversary that passed with little recognition outside of the Koreas, we sought to present some of the newest research and writing about the Korean War. Part of this effort was to synthesize in a single volume a reference point for future scholars aiming to learn more about Canadian attitudes towards the Korean War, and the operational history of the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army, and Royal Canadian Air Force. Recognizing that Canada was but one of sixteen countries to contribute to the UN’s war effort in Korea, and that Canadian warships, aircraft, and soldiers all operated with or within Commonwealth and American formations, we felt it was important to draw together scholarship that illustrated the scope and nature of Allied commitment. These international operations fundamentally shaped the nature of Canada’s wartime experience in Korea and were often, in turn, affected by Canadian martial efforts. The books and articles written about the Cold War, though dwarfed by studies of the world wars, is nonetheless vast. Yet this literature is divided between national studies of individual contributions, on the one hand, and
experiences of the multinational war, on the other, notwithstanding trends to create more “global studies” of the war by scholars such as William Stueck, Hajimu, and others. The contributors to this volume synthesize the applicable historiographies and situate their work among national and international streams of Korean War scholarship.

To build on the foundation of Canadian and allied military historical study, we also include studies from the “other side of the hill.” Canadian war diaries, contemporary press accounts, and oral histories failed to grasp the scope and complexity of operations of Canada’s principal opponent on the battlefield, the Chinese People’s Volunteer Force, whose vast efforts and ambitions in Korea irrevocably shaped the war. The essays collected here address the contribution of the Korean armies, often ignored in the literature, as well as the war’s enduring military and cultural legacy in North and South Korea. Cumulatively, these histories help us grasp the scope, nature, and impact of the war effort of the United Nations Command and provide a fuller picture of the war’s legacy. They will help future readers grasp the roots of the present situation surrounding the Korean peninsula, as the armistice agreement did much to freeze the Cold War into place. In the decades since, the test of maintaining military preparedness, the politics and diplomacy of the war, the challenge of working with and through international and local allies, and the larger competition between North and South Korea and the Chinese and American superpowers all remain intractable problems.

This volume unfolds in three thematic and largely chronological parts. Part 1, “Canada, Korea, and Politics,” establishes the nature of international and domestic political affairs that successive Canadian governments faced in the early Cold War. A close focus on Ottawa’s political response to the Korean crisis tells us much about Canada’s evolving attitude towards entanglements with its allies, as well as its caution in engaging with East Asia, which its traditional foreign policy generally ignored in favour of North America and European affairs. Canada’s initial indifference to Korea was not indicative, as Hector Mackenzie and Norman Hillmer note in their chapter, of any trepidation about what role the country should play in the Cold War. Key government officials were united in solidarity with American and western European allies against the Soviet and Chinese threat. Canada never approached the Cold War as a neutral participant.

However, even when the die was cast in favour of intervention, as Ryan Touhey describes in his chapter, Canadian political leaders had to carry out a balancing act between satisfying the demands of the United Nations and, more importantly, the United States. They did this while keeping a worried eye on public opinion
that was, as ever, divided between those who believed Canada needed to respond with vigour to the crisis and those who urged caution because they recalled previous wars had led to lasting social disruptions. Surging economic good fortune in North America eased some of these concerns. Canada’s limited war effort yielded electoral dividends for the government’s management of the crisis far from the country’s borders.

Part 2, “Canada, Korea, and the War,” examines the conflict itself from the perspectives of the different parties to the conflict, including allies and enemies. More than thirty thousand Canadians served in the Korean War theatre from the war’s start until 1957, when the last units returned home years after the armistice. Within the UN’s war effort, Canada’s contribution was the fourth largest, but it was still a fraction of the colossal commitment of soldiers and personnel arrayed against the North Korean and Chinese war efforts. As William Stueck notes in his work *Rethinking the Korean War*, “The Korean War was a multifaceted event, the mastery of which challenges the capacity of the most diligent of historians.” One cannot understand the war solely through Canadian eyes – a wider study of the international war is required. Ottawa’s decision to support the UN took place against a backdrop of a war already raging. The main combatants, to that point, were the Republic of Korea and American garrison and reinforcements fighting a vital battle for control of the peninsula.

Brian McAllister Linn’s chapter addresses the US Army’s transformation during and after the war, with an emphasis on the hard-fought battles of 1950 and 1951, which prevented South Korea’s fall. As the Canadian government weighed the benefits and drawbacks of deeper involvement in the UN war effort, the United States fought what some thought was an existential struggle against communism. Its regional and international reputation was on the line. But the US Army’s ill-preparedness and poor initial performance created both near and long-term consequences not only for the American effort in Korea but also for reforms that would extend to NATO operations and concepts about the atomic battlefield.

The initial American (and British) experiences during the 1950–51 campaign in turn shaped Canada’s war on the ground. William Johnston’s two chapters concerning the Canadian Army in Korea also analyze the war on the ground by comparing the successful campaign conducted by the Canadian volunteers who formed the first rotation of soldiers to fight in 1950 and 1951 and their Regular force successors, who largely ignored the lessons learned in combat in favour of a more rigid and unimaginative approach to operations.

In examining the “Commonwealth spirit” that united the Canadians, Australians, British, and other members of the Commonwealth Division, S.P. MacKenzie shows that the fondness with which the division’s work in Korea
was recalled was often achieved despite significant differences between its members. The division’s success owed much to the clear-eyed management of the formation by its leadership. Meghan Fitzpatrick’s study of the Commonwealth units’ medical management, both near the battlefield and farther afield, notes the advancement of both the physical and psychological treatments offered to soldiers and the battlefield medical advances that were brought back to Canada at war’s end. Both chapters indicate that the way forward from Korea pointed to greater integration and coordination between national contingents.

A successful war in the air and at sea was built on the foundations of close cooperation between the Canadian, British, and American forces, and these United Nations forces triumphed because of technological superiority and their extensive combat experience. In their analyses of the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Air Force, Michael Whitby and Richard Mayne argue that while the service arms had to manage competing priorities – wartime needs, domestic defence duties, and contributions to NATO – they nonetheless contributed to victory.

Whether at sea, in the air, or on the ground, service in Korea came at a cost, and Andrew Burtch unearths how the Canadian military tallied its war dead, the circumstances leading to losses, and how families at home responded during and long after the war. In his study of the Chinese Volunteer Peoples’ Force in Korea, Xiaobing Li highlights China’s stunning initial successes and subsequent struggles against the United Nations Command. The stakes for China’s intervention were high, and its strategic goals hinged on transforming the Cold War in East Asia, cementing its regional influence, and persuading the UN that China was a power in its own right. The Korean War is not forgotten in China but etched into its founding mythos as the War to Resist the United States and Aid Korea. The United States was forced to withdraw from North Korea, which survived, and so the Chinese war aims were achieved. The war, and Chinese victories against US forces, was the subject of the 2021 film *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, the second highest-grossing film of the year. It earned $200 million, more than the most recent James Bond sequel.¹⁵

**Part 3**, “Korean War Memories and Legacies,” focuses on the many legacies of the so-called forgotten war. Jonathan Vance considers the dilemma that prisoners of war faced as they waited for negotiations leading to the armistice. Even when freed, the prisoners had to deal with allegations of “brainwashing” and concerns about the conduct of Western service personnel after capture. Canada, for its part, seemed eager to leave behind Korea after the war, though, as Tina J. Park notes in her study of Canada-Korea relations over the past seventy years, this aversion was short-lived as Korea emerged as an important market and regional partner with shared points of interest.
Because the war ended with an armistice rather than a peace treaty, a renewal of the conflict was still possible. Youngjun Kim dissects the war’s legacy for the armed forces of the Koreas. Each country learned foundational if opposing lessons that shaped their militaries, societies, and alliances. Canadian veterans returning home from the war, as Ted Barris shows, did not enjoy a warm reception either from their communities or from veterans of past wars, and they were forced to build their own associations over time. Unlike in China or in North and South Korea, Canadians had the luxury of distance and geography to protect them from these still fraught battlegrounds, and they easily moved on from a war that had involved relatively few men and women and left no great divisive legacy in the country.

We conclude by examining how the war came to be remembered and commemorated during decades when the Canadian government failed to put much effort into marking the war or honouring those who served in it. Veterans stepped into this gap with privately coordinated remembrance. They were supported by the South Korean government, which had benefited from their service and the sacrifice of their comrades who never came home.

What shapes a country’s military history? Do all wars carry equal weight in framing our understanding of the world in which we live? Clearly not. The world wars have an outsized presence and place in public memory for many reasons, not least their titanic impact on shaping global affairs, their staggering loss of life, and their cultural resonance. For Canada, narratives surrounding peacekeeping in the Cold War were woven into public perceptions of the country’s military disposition, partly out of a nationalist desire to distance Canada from the United States. More recently, the costly Canadian contribution to the Afghanistan War from 2001 to 2014 led to much public debate about the role of Canada’s armed forces abroad, as well as a resurgence in public efforts to commemorate the service of those who served in Afghanistan and past wars.

Amid these historical and social developments, it is unsurprising that the Korean War often faded from the public’s view. Korea was referred to as a “forgotten war” while it was still ongoing. The term was coined in Canada by Anglican Primate the Reverend Walter Foster Barfoot after he returned from ministering to Canadians in Korea in November 1951. Although veterans of the war and their families never forgot, Barfoot was correct in lamenting that Canadians were fighting and dying far from home and would return to a largely indifferent country.

While few wars are forgotten during the fighting – and this was not the case with Canada and Korea, despite Barfoot’s claim – most wars fade over time, treading lightly on Canada’s public memory. They are rarely taught in classrooms and ignored in general histories, and save for lesser-known memorials and
monuments, there are few cultural products to stir the imagination. Rarely do
Canadians think of the many battles of the Seven Years War, the clash between
Canadians and Americans in the War of 1812, the internal struggle and strife of
the 1837–38 rebellions, the South African War of 1899 to 1902, or even more
recent conflicts, missions, or wars. Added to that amnesia is a mythos of Canada
as a peaceable kingdom, at least when compared with the United States. National
narratives about Canadians as natural peacekeepers are a by-product of this
reading of military history.

A greater understanding of our complex past has emerged since the late
twentieth century in response to bursts of commemorative activities, books,
exhibitions, and other cultural output. Yet during this resurgence, the Korean
War was often overshadowed, as Canadian scholars and commemorative efforts
focused heavily on the impact and importance of Canada’s participation in the
world wars. The absence of major commemorative events about Korea didn’t
surprise some veterans. “Well, we weren’t met with any fanfare,” recounted Reg
Redknap about his homecoming from Korea in an oral history conducted at
the Canadian War Museum. “I don’t think any of us really cared. By this stage,
all we wanted to do was get on that train in Seattle and go home.”18 Much of the
scholarly literature from the Korean War points to the lessons countries drew
from the conflict and moved on to new Cold War crises.

However, the scholarship showcased here shows how rewarding it is to engage
with the war in its own right and to more carefully understand its origins, its
contradictions, and how the public memory of the war has been framed and
reframed over nearly three-quarters of a century. Now, as most of the war’s
veterans have passed away, and as more archival evidence from participating
countries has been opened, historians can further public understanding of this
watershed war. This obligation extends to keeping alive the memories of all
those affected by the war (civilian and military), those who never had a chance
to come home, those veterans still living, and the many other Canadians who
have come to share a connection to the war in Korea and its enduring legacy.

Notes
1 David Bercuson, Blood on the Hills: The Canadian Army in the Korean War (Toronto:
University of Toronto Press, 1999); Brent Byron Watson, Far Eastern Tour: The Canadian
Infantry in Korea, 1950–1953 (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002);
William Johnston, A War of Patrols: Canadian Army Operations in Korea (Vancouver:
UBC Press, 2003); and Meghan Fitzpatrick, Invisible Scars: Mental Trauma and the Korean
War (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017). These studies build on the dated yet still relevant
official histories such as Lieutenant-Colonel Herbert Fairlie Wood’s Strange Battleground:
The Operations in Korea and Their Effects on the Defence Policy of Canada (Ottawa: Queen’s
Introduction


5 Although it touches on the military course of the war, Denis Stairs’s seminal volume, *The Diplomacy of Constraint*, focuses on understanding how the war shaped Canadian foreign policy and how multilateralism was a method of constraining the American superpower through Canada’s admittedly limited means. A more recent work, John Price’s *Orienting Canada*, examines the Korean War more in passing, as part of an overall effort to correct the perspective that Canada was solely an “Atlantic” country. Using race as a filter, Price re-establishes the importance of the Pacific and East Asian populations and politics to the formulation of Canadian foreign and domestic policy. Like American historian Bruce Cumings, Price is critical of the Korean War as an exercise in American imperialism and marshals evidence to reveal the role that racist attitudes towards Koreans and East Asians played in the prosecution of the war. Both Stairs and Price account for an important chapter in Canadian military and diplomatic history – not the Korean War per se, but how Canada reacted to the replacement of the British Empire with the American empire at the end of the Second World War and the dawn of the Cold War. See Francine Mackenzie, “The Conundrum of Canadian-American Relations,” *International Journal* 69, 1 (2014): 110–17. See also Andrew Burtch, *Give Me Shelter: The Failure of Canada’s Cold War Civil Defence* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); and Andrew Godefroy, *In Peace Prepared: Innovation and Adaptation in Canada’s Cold War Army* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014).


owing to its sharply critical interpretation of the United States' role in the origins of the Korean War, its ongoing military presence in South Korea, and the extensive nature of the bombing campaigns against North Korea, Cumings' work offers indispensable insight into the origins and ongoing impacts of the Korean War and the legacies of atrocities committed by all sides in the conflict.


12 As in other arenas, North and South Korea differ on the commemorative dates attached to the war. The North Koreans mark the armistice of 27 July 1953 as Victory Day in the Fatherland Liberation War. South Korea, meanwhile, marks 25 June, the anniversary of the North's invasion, as the key commemorative date, though the government often marks the armistice date.

13 The phrase most often employed is “more than 26,000 Canadians.” This includes 21,940 Canadian soldiers (not including the 484 soldiers who served more than one tour), approximately 3,600 sailors, and an indeterminate number of air personnel. These figures do not include the approximately 7,000 military personnel who served in the theatre (Korea and Japan) between 1953 and 1957. In all, the number exceeds 30,000. We have chosen to include the more expansive number in this volume. For a discussion of troop deployments, see Wood, *Strange Battleground*, 257.


15 Its 2022 sequel, *The Battle at Lake Changjin II*, was the ninth highest-grossing film worldwide that year.


Part 1

Canada, Korea, and Politics
At the end of the Second World War, Canada’s global position was one of exceptional, unprecedented, and unaccustomed international standing, a result of its wartime military and economic contribution to victory and the devastating impact of that conflict on other nations. Its armed forces – by various measures, the fourth military, naval, and aerial power of the Allied wartime alliance – were prominent in the final offensives of 1944–45. Canada was also the fourth industrial power, with a disproportionate share of its output contributed to its allies, usually without asking for anything in return. That financial approach reflected its economic strength as the second greatest creditor nation in the world, after only the United States. Though loans and grants underwrote its exports to a considerable extent, Canada was unquestionably a major trading nation and a key source of goods vital not only for the war effort but also for postwar reconstruction in Europe. These goods included manufactured products, food, and mineral resources, notably uranium, essential for the peaceful and military development of atomic power.¹

Canada was a steadfast postwar partner and ally of the United States and the United Kingdom. Close association in defence and foreign policy was reinforced by Canada’s financial and trade interests. The country’s wealth was determined by its commerce within the North Atlantic Triangle, which linked Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom.² Canada was a major player in the global economy as its allies and enemies recovered from six years of conflict and even more years of economic and political disruption. In the new global institutions that it helped to shape – the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade – Canada’s greatest preoccupation and its largest benefits centred on the reconciliation of American and British policies and interests. The rewards of reducing international barriers to trade and exchange were expressed and gained in traditional markets for Canada’s exports. The economic world outside the North Atlantic Triangle was not nearly as important to Canada.³
Policy-makers at the heart of government were under no illusion that the increase in the country’s stature and influence was permanent. But the circumstances that gave Canada clout when the war ended were expected to last for some time. There was a firm resolve to wield the country’s temporary authority to help its principal allies, the United Kingdom and the United States, in establishing an international regime that favoured its long-term interests and values. Whatever the forum or issue, Canada’s stance was remarkably consistent and unambiguous. There were occasional differences over priorities or specific actions, but Canada’s North Atlantic alignment was unshakable. Most of the time, Canada could rely on its allies to pursue objectives and outcomes that were consonant with its own aims. Taking the initiative was seldom seen as necessary, although there were times when the Canadian government took a leadership role, as it did in the establishment of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and as it would in the talks that led to the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949.

The country’s armed forces had a small presence in the Pacific, most notably at the doomed defence of Hong Kong and in airlift operations over Burma, as well as a short-lived naval contribution. Canada’s significant participation in the global conflict and its major contributions to victory in the Second World War were predominantly in the North Atlantic, alongside its long-time partners in world affairs. An Anglo-American perspective framed all aspects of Canada’s international outlook and determined how and when it would act. There was no notion of an independent path for Canada. It was hoped that, when the war was over, the victorious coalition would implement and uphold the noble aims that they had elaborated in wartime – in effect, that the victors would collaborate to win the peace much as they had done to defeat their enemies.

Central to the Allied alliance’s grand design for the postwar world was the United Nations, established at the 1945 San Francisco peace conference and intended as the continuation of the victorious wartime alliance, with the UN’s membership, structure, and distribution of powers reflecting that origin and purpose. San Francisco was the occasion for much idealism about the new organization’s potential to act as the fulcrum for multiple levers of global cooperation, but the making of the UN was, at bottom, an exercise in unsentimental politics and diplomacy. Here as elsewhere in the war-winning partnership, the contradictory interests that weakened the UN from the beginning were in evidence.

Canada’s international engagement after 1945 stood in marked contrast to its deliberately limited involvement before the war. In the poet W.H. Auden’s “low dishonest decade” of the 1930s, Canadians stood aloof from the conflicts of Europe and Asia. Within the evolving British Commonwealth, however weighty
the bonds of sentiment and self-interest, Canada's relationship with the United Kingdom was, at best, an informal alliance. There were strong military ties but no definite obligations.\(^5\) Canada and the United States, despite mostly cordial relations and high-minded rhetoric, were not certain partners or allies. At the League of Nations, Canada evaded responsibility, claiming that the troubles of Europe were a world away from a young country with problems of its own. In early 1937, aware of what was at stake if aggression overseas went unchecked, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King instituted a program of modest rearmament. Against the grain of a reluctant Canada, he eased his country's politics towards participation in the coming war.\(^6\)

During the Second World War, repeating a frequent complaint of the 1930s, King's critics did not think that his foreign policy amounted to much.\(^7\) The Department of External Affairs, small in numbers but bursting with ideas, was "always at me to be asserting more strongly Canada's position," the prime minister complained.\(^8\) Hume Wrong, the brightest of Canada's diplomats, provided the idea that became rooted in wartime policy as the functional principle, which argued for greater representation in allied decision-making bodies where Canada had resources or other assets that justified its participation.\(^9\) Lester Pearson, serving in senior External Affairs posts in London, Washington, and Ottawa during the war, explored the notion of Canada as an in-between or middle state, residing somewhere between a little big power and a big little power. Soon enough, expanding on the theme, External Affairs was using the term *middle power* to claim that Canada was close to being a great power by reason of its size, stability, material resources, and willingness to accept responsibility.\(^10\) In a widely distributed 1944 pamphlet, Pearson promoted Canada's powerful war effort and enhanced international standing in what he called the emerging "world community." Yet he made clear that Canada's relationships with the United States and Britain and its Commonwealth mattered most. Nothing could be allowed to bring "Canada's American and British interests" into conflict.\(^11\) A similar pragmatism characterized thinking at the San Francisco peace conference. Canada's delegation at the peace table was out to "get what it could," in the words of historian Robert Bothwell, "but not at the price of offending the great powers, meaning the Americans and the British."\(^12\)

Canada's moderate stance at San Francisco reflected what came before and what came after. There was no sudden break with the past that ushered in a course of disinterested internationalism that revolutionized Canadian foreign policy.\(^13\) Mackenzie King, fully in control and uncomfortable with taking on too much international responsibility, remained prime minister until the end of 1948. His officials at External Affairs themselves found in postwar geopolitics the advantages of caution and restraint.\(^14\) At the same time, there was a much
greater role for Canada in world affairs and a significant shift in the appreciation of how best to advance its interests. Politicians and policy-makers acknowledged that Canada and the world had changed and grasped the opportunities and dangers that lay ahead, as well as what remained constant. This interplay of change and continuity happened within the decisive and familiar context of the North Atlantic. Charles Ritchie, who joined External Affairs before the Second World War, remembered that time well. “We were all Atlantic men,” he told an audience in the 1980s.15

At the beginning of 1947, shortly after King appointed him foreign minister, Louis St. Laurent gave a landmark address at the University of Toronto describing the “foundations of Canadian policy in world affairs.” There were, he announced, five principles that guided the government’s thinking – national unity, political liberty, respect for the rule of law, Christian values, and a willingness to take on global responsibilities. To the speaker and his audience, these tenets were not expressions of a new international outlook, as some commentators have insisted.16 Instead, they had been identified and verified by experience. The Second World War demonstrated that St. Laurent’s principles were best upheld in concert with like-minded and more powerful allies. Beliefs about what was right for Canada, furthermore, were enhanced by the extent to which they were shared with Canada’s closest partners in world affairs and other nations with which it might collaborate in pursuit of constructive international cooperation. St. Laurent went out of his way to emphasize the limited influence of “any secondary power” such as Canada. He saw “little point in a country of our stature recommending international action, if those who must carry the major burden of whatever action is taken are not in sympathy.”17 The fluently bilingual St. Laurent was presented to the Toronto audience by his hosts as the embodiment of the “Canadian unity” imperative of the nation’s life and politics.18 Already the obvious choice to become the country’s next leader, St. Laurent became prime minister the following year and brought Lester Pearson into his government as foreign minister. They were a formidable team for the next decade. They were also, as Ritchie put it, “the inheritors of Mackenzie King.”19

When the Allied wartime coalition fractured and divided into the hostile camps that ultimately defined the Cold War, there was never any question about which side Canada would take in the transcendent clash of interests and ideas.20 As the North Atlantic partners split from their former ally, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and confronted their adversary over contested terrain in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia and the Pacific, Canadians and their government employed their newfound wealth and power steadfastly in support of the policies and actions of its Cold War allies. In late-1940s meetings of Commonwealth prime ministers, which included representatives from the new
South Asian dominions of India, Pakistan, and Ceylon, Canada was instrumental in redefining the criteria of membership so that republican members could remain in an increasingly multiracial organization. The government hoped to employ that goodwill to strengthen the Commonwealth as a Cold War bulwark, establish key links to South Asia, and sway the new dominions in favour of positions consistent with Canada’s global purposes. Similarly, in the novel setting of the UN, no matter the question on the agenda, the paramount purpose was to bolster the Western side in a bipolar world.

Canada played a leading part, not of its own volition, in the revelation of Soviet espionage that did so much to initiate and sustain the bipolar division of the world. The first evidence of USSR spying in North America came from the testimony of a cipher clerk in the Soviet embassy in Ottawa, Igor Gouzenko, who defected in September 1945, carrying with him incriminating documents. Mackenzie King hesitated for a moment – the Soviets, after all, were “close friends” – but he took firm hold of Ottawa’s response to the crisis while he and his officials kept in close contact with their Anglo-American counterparts and took their advice seriously. The world had taken on an “appalling outlook,” King wrote in his diary, fearing another war that would bring “total destruction” and “come against America by way of Canada from Russia.” Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, he counselled, had to form a united front to meet an existential threat.

Days after Gouzenko’s revelations were made public in February 1946, Winston Churchill spoke in Fulton, Missouri, about the breakdown of the wartime alliance and the descent of an “iron curtain” dividing eastern from western Europe. Churchill’s visit to the United States fit the purposes of President Harry Truman, who introduced the former British prime minister to his audience and sat approvingly nearby as the speech hit its mark. According to the Cold War historian Melvyn Leffler, Churchill’s “warning of a totalitarian menace intent on geopolitical domination resonated deeply” in the minds of Americans, accelerating “a widespread hostility to the Soviet Union. Changing perceptions of the Kremlin permitted Truman and his advisers to go on the offensive.” In Ottawa, Mackenzie King saw in Churchill’s Fulton plea for Anglo-American collaboration another chance to line Canada up with its two closest economic and defence partners in the anti-Soviet fight. Lester Pearson had a folksy image at hand that captured King’s thinking. Canadians liked to play the triangle in the international symphony. They were happiest when the British and American instruments were in harmony.

Alongside the United States and Britain, Canada worked during the Second World War on the development of atomic energy and its application to nuclear weapons. That program, which had been one of the principal targets of Soviet
Espionage, carried on after 1945, with American leadership even more pronounced than before. Canada was represented on the Combined Policy Committee, established in 1943 and designed to continue the Anglo-American-Canadian wartime cooperation into the peace. The committee was chaired and directed by the United States, but increasingly the Americans acted unilaterally, with minimal consultation with their allies. That tendency for the United States to go it alone and to withhold highly secret information from even its closest partners was reinforced when the USSR successfully tested its own atomic weapon in the late summer of 1949. The Soviet bomb's accelerated development was attributed to spies linked to the Anglo-American scientific contribution to the trilateral program. Canada participated actively in the UN Atomic Energy Commission, with General A.G.L. McNaughton serving as its first chair, though that institution was effectively sidelined by the independent and adversarial actions of the two superpowers.

Canadian engagement with the UN was shaped by its role as a forum in which the government articulated its alignment with the Western alliance in a divided world. This was demonstrated by Canada's conduct during its 1948–49 term as a temporary member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), where the consistent aim was to bridge differences within its own grouping of member countries, not with the West's principal adversaries in the Cold War. Canada sought to avoid or limit the damage from contradictory interpretations by the United States and the United Kingdom of regional conflicts, whether in Asia or the Middle East. That intent, rather than any dedication to the UN as an institution whose membership was far from universal, explains Canada's stance on a succession of major issues that came before the UNSC. Canada donned the armour of a Cold Warrior rather than the garments of a peacemaker. Its attempts at mediation or conciliation, the professed avocation of responsible middle powers such as Canada in the postwar international system, were directed at easing interallied tensions rather than seeking the best outcome for the antagonists. The overwhelming, almost exclusive, focus of Canada's interest and activity was Europe and the North Atlantic, even when the locus of the dispute before the UNSC was elsewhere.

The most inflammatory dispute dealt with by the UNSC during Canada's term, and the one that most seriously divided the United Kingdom and the United States, concerned the fate of the mandate in Palestine, which the British had abandoned in 1948. Canada had withstood considerable pressure to serve on the UN Special Commission on Palestine. At the UNSC, its foremost aim, as stated by Foreign Minister St. Laurent, was to avoid “a bitter public controversy between the United Kingdom and the United States on this matter,” since that
could only benefit the USSR.\textsuperscript{28} Prime Minister King agreed that reconciliation of British and American views was Canada’s priority. Part of the strategy, reminiscent of Canada’s stance at the League of Nations in the 1930s, was to be as quiet as possible. Its discretion brought a success – an Anglo-American agreement to appoint a regional mediator – but that accord did not last. Even as the disagreements became wider and more public, compounded by sympathies for the Jewish cause in Washington and sentiment falling on the Arab side in London, Canada treated the restoration of Anglo-American harmony as far more important than the fate of Palestine or the United Nations.

The clash between India and Pakistan over Kashmir was already on the UNSC’s agenda when Canada took its seat. Canada was again determined not to take sides, only assuming a mediatory role when obliged to do so by its presidency of the UNSC in the final month of its term in 1949. Canada’s representative, General McNaughton, side-stepped continuing involvement by stressing that Canada’s time on the UNSC was coming to an end. The suspicion was that the British and Americans wanted Canada to assume a responsibility that neither country was prepared to accept. However, at least Canada’s principal allies were not divided on the question. Instead, it was the Commonwealth relationship that was threatened. As did its key partners, Canada interpreted the dispute over Kashmir from the perspective of its implications for the Western alliance rather than on the basis of an assessment of what might be best for the UN, South Asia, or Kashmir.

The third major conflict to come before the UNSC while Canada was a member was Indonesia’s struggle for independence from the Netherlands. Once again, the local questions and even the broader issue of colonial rule versus national self-determination were subordinated in Canadian assessments and actions to the implications of the problem for the West. The Netherlands was expected to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and negotiations to that end were underway by the autumn of 1948. What most worried the Canadians, along with the British and Americans, was that the Dutch government’s harsh suppression of the Indonesian independence movement was alienating the rest of the world, with potentially “grievous consequences in the relations between the Western world and Asiatic community generally.”\textsuperscript{29} Canada’s cautious approach upset India and Australia especially, both firm supporters of Indonesian independence, so the Commonwealth, which Canada hoped could play a pro-Western role in world affairs, was divided on this question as well. Canada’s efforts to persuade the Dutch to moderate their stance succeeded only after worldwide condemnation forced the Netherlands to seek a way out through a ceasefire and negotiated agreement to establish
an Indonesian republic, a path illuminated by McNaughton’s persistent diplomacy.

The most emphatic expression of Canada’s Atlanticist alignment was its zeal to transform the nebulous sense of shared Western perspectives and fears of the USSR into the firm commitments that underpinned the North Atlantic Treaty. That outlook and resolve prompted Louis St. Laurent to warn the UN General Assembly in September 1947 that the West, “if forced,” might “seek greater safety in an association of democratic and peace-loving states willing to accept more specific international obligations in return for a greater measure of international security.” St. Laurent’s speech highlighted perceptions and concerns not only in Canada but elsewhere in what was increasingly seen as a North Atlantic world, encompassing western Europe, with Britain included, and North America. At the invitation of the American and British governments, Canadian delegates participated in the highly secret and ultimately decisive talks in the Pentagon with their British and American counterparts during March and April 1948.

The Canadians made vital contributions to drafting a document that provided the rationale and framework of a prospective treaty, particularly in persuading the Americans that a unilateral guarantee of support, subject to reversal by another president (or even the current president), would not meet the needs of a threatened and vulnerable western Europe. Those “security conversations” not only outlined the provisions that must be included in a treaty, but also set out the requisite obligations of the signatories for collective self-defence in unmistakable and unambiguous language. Throughout the early “ABC talks” and the wider negotiations that followed, it was an irrevocable American commitment to the defence of western Europe that was indispensable. Canadian negotiators, like the British and later their European colleagues, were determined to obtain a binding American pledge. The North Atlantic Treaty, signed on 1 April 1949, gave them just that.

Later Canadian commentaries would stress how the representatives of Canada strove to broaden the purposes of the North Atlantic alliance with the Treaty’s Article 2, the clause affirming the need for political, social, and economic collaboration. The pursuit of that goal, though, was always a lesser consideration than Article 5, which especially assured the European members of immediate and substantial American help in the event of an attack by the unnamed but obvious enemy, the USSR. Canada understood and supported the European position. Article 2 was desirable. Article 5 was vital, and, for all signatories, it was the essence of the alliance. The illusion that the UN might herald an era of global cooperation and peaceful collaboration had been dispelled. The concept
and means for collective security were redefined by the treaty and limited to a regional pact, whose geographical scope included those nations most important for Canada’s prosperity and security, as well as its most likely partners in international affairs. As before, Canada’s international perspective was dominated by the North Atlantic, but it was now to be protected by a military alliance in peacetime, a significant departure for Canada as well as the United States, and an advance on past British commitments to Europe. Hume Wrong, Canada’s chief treaty negotiator, welcomed the prospect of the pieces of the North Atlantic Triangle being brought into a regularized defence partnership. His hope was that the presence of Britain might ease some of the pressures that were accumulating in the ever-tighter Canada–US military relationship. As the influence of the United States in North American affairs grew, the notion that multilateral alignments could counter the power of the United States took hold in Canada’s foreign policy.

Even as it was pledging its support for the territorial integrity of those states lying in the potential path of the Red Army, the Canadian government stayed aloof from an early test of Western resolve in Europe, the dramatic 1948–49 allied airlift in response to the land blockade of West Berlin by the USSR and its authorities in the eastern zone of occupied Germany. This failure to match Canada’s actions to its internationalist rhetoric cannot be entirely attributed to the chronic anxiety of the departing leader, Mackenzie King. The policy was emphatically supported by his defence minister, Brooke Claxton, who was not keen to risk Canadian personnel and equipment in a dangerous mission that might spark a third world war. Nor was the decision to turn a deaf ear to British entreaties for help reversed by King’s successors after he left office. Canada’s abstention from the Berlin airlift has been ignored in later commemorations of the event, to which the Canadian ambassador is invariably invited to mark the successful defiance of the USSR by the Western allies.

The other place where American and Soviet forces confronted one another after the war was in the Korean Peninsula, with occupation zones divided by the armistice at the thirty-eighth parallel. Canada’s involvement there initially came through a back door that was opened by the delegation of the United States to the UN, not because of any direct Canadian interest or commitment. That engagement provoked a serious controversy within the Canadian government, prompting one of the more unexpected and bizarre Cabinet crises in the country’s political history, especially since it was a group of notably harmonious ministers.

The United States was keen to extricate itself from its costly role as an occupying power in the southern part of the peninsula, preferably by shifting the burden
to the UN, where it might advance its aims by proxy. It hoped to provide a pretext for the withdrawal of Soviet as well as American forces from the peninsula and unify Korea as perhaps a democratic and preferably a pro-Western country. The first step on this path would be the establishment of what the United States proposed as a United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK). Without warning or consultation, the United States nominated Canada as a member in a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly in mid-November 1947. This happened while King was in London for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth, so St. Laurent was acting prime minister. St. Laurent and Pearson approved the recommendation of the Canadian delegation to accept this role, not out of any concern for the fate of Korea, but as a favour to the United States.36

When King learned of this decision taken in his absence, he was apoplectic, not only because he opposed an active role in Korea but also because he had not been consulted. At the first Cabinet meeting after his return, he opposed the Order-in-Council required to appoint a Canadian representative to UNTCOK. An acrimonious dispute followed between King and his anointed successor, St. Laurent, who threatened to resign over the matter. His deputy minister, Pearson, also intended to resign in support of his minister if King did not relent. The Cabinet in the end agreed to name the Canadian diplomat and Asian expert George Patterson to UNTCOK, with the explicit understanding that he would quit the body if it attempted to extend its authority beyond the south of Korea, where it had permission to function. Should the commission attempt to intervene where it was not welcome – above the thirty-eighth parallel – Canada would play no part in that endeavour. That King did not follow up on this condition to remove Canada from UNTCOK’s membership when the commission ventured, at American behest, to sponsor elections ostensibly governing the whole peninsula in May 1948 does not alter the fact that the Canadian government’s decision surrounding the appointment was a compromise.37 These were not, as King’s defence minister claimed, “the last bellows of the leader of the herd before he cashed in the cheques.”38

Moreover, when an opportunity presented itself, shortly after King’s retirement, for the government to extricate itself from this unwelcome responsibility, it did so promptly and effectively. The UN General Assembly decided in December 1948 to reconstitute UNTCOK as the United Nations Commission on Korea. In the circumstances, the Canadian government volunteered to resign, with the disingenuous argument that the commission would function better with fewer members. Canada’s formal involvement in the affairs of the North Pacific came to an end barely a month after St. Laurent succeeded King as prime minister.
In the aftermath of that withdrawal and with its preoccupation with the North Atlantic Treaty and the fate of Europe, the Canadian government paid little attention to what was happening on the Korean peninsula and in that part of the world. Even the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on 1 October 1949, after the Communist triumph in the Chinese Civil War, was treated as a secondary concern since there was no “strong sense that vital Canadian interests were engaged.” Pearson, then secretary of state for external affairs, made his first visit to Asia early the next year. In Tokyo, he was told by General Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander for the Allied powers in Japan and the senior American officer in Asia, that the United States would not defend South Korea, now the Republic of Korea. Pearson never forgot what MacArthur told him: “It would be embarrassing, it would be disappointing, it would be worrying if an enemy took Korea, but it is not vital to our security.” MacArthur’s assurance was bound to be good news to Pearson. He, like most of his colleagues and subordinates, wanted the Western allies to keep their focus on Europe, the source of the most significant threat to world order.

The American intervention in the summer of 1950, under the auspices of the UN, to defend the Republic of Korea against invasion from the north came as a shock to policy-makers in Ottawa. “At almost the exact time on 26 June when President Truman was deciding that the United States would be giving air and sea support to the South Koreans,” Pearson wrote in his memoirs, “I was talking to some press people in Ottawa and telling them, off the record, that I did not expect a US military response to the invasion.” In the weeks and months that followed, the Canadian government scrambled to define and defend its initial tentative and somewhat limited commitment and then to enlarge that contribution, less from a determination to support South Korea than in response to persistent pressure from the government of the United States. As the crisis unfolded and the conflict and its costs escalated, the Canadian government still cast a sharp eye on developments in Europe, as it worried that the conflict on the Korean peninsula might be a Soviet-inspired diversion to take attention and resources away from the principal battleground of the Cold War. A third world war might result.

The story of Canada’s involvement in the Korean War and its surrounding diplomacy is one for other contributors to this volume. What is critical for an understanding of Canada’s world before the Korean War is an appreciation of the extent to which Canada’s international outlook and policies were shaped by a North Atlantic perspective. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the part Canada played in international affairs was that of an ally, not a bystander or disinterested activist. Canada’s alignment was unequivocal, and there were no illusions about a peaceful new world order.
Notes


2 John Bartlet Brebner, North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States and Great Britain (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1945). Brebner's geometric image had its greatest application in the economic realm in the 1940s and early 1950s, and the triangle was always more visible and important for Canada than it was for Washington or London. See Hector Mackenzie, “Delineating the North Atlantic Triangle: The Second World War and Its Aftermath,” Round Table 95, 383 (2006): 101–12.


15 Charles Ritchie, “After Dinner Thoughts” (presented at “Canada, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance,” Ryerson Polytechnical Institute, Toronto, Ontario, April 1987).

18 St. Laurent, “Foundations,” 9. The lecture was published with French and English side by side.
25 Norman Hillmer, “The Canadian Diplomatic Tradition,” in Canadian Culture: International Dimensions, ed. Andrew Fenton Cooper (Waterloo, ON: Centre on Foreign Policy and Federalism, University of Waterloo/Willfrid Laurier University, 1985), 56–57; and Bothwell, Alliance and Illusion, 46–47.
28 Quoted in Mackenzie, “Knight Errant,” 458.
29 Quoted in Mackenzie, “Knight Errant,” 464.
34 Hillmer, “Canadian Diplomatic Tradition,” 57.


