

Patterns of Canadian UN policy were being set in Korean conflict

By Arthur Menzies

The Korean War may appear to many as a receding episode of the Cold War in a remote corner of the world. It flared like a brush-fire for a year after the North Korean attack on June 25, 1950, then smouldered for another two years until the Korean armistice agreement of July 27, 1953. Over 25,000 Canadians served in Korea during this period; 300 were killed and 1200 wounded or injured. It also stirred up great flurries of diplomatic activity at the UN in which Canada was much involved. Professor Denis Stairs has examined this episode with clinical thoroughness. He not only provides us with a meticulously-documented record of the diplomatic side of the story but, more important, illuminates the way in which Mr. Lester Pearson used his skills to exercise Canadian influence through the UN on the policies of the U.S.A. The experience gained by all active participants in the diplomacy of the Korean War had considerable influence on their conduct in later events, where analogous factors were at play.

By way of background, Stairs recounts how, in September 1947, the U.S. brought to the United Nations General Assembly the problem of Korea divided at the 38th Parallel into Russian and American military occupation zones in the hope that the deadlock over unification might be resolved. When the General Assembly voted on November 4 to establish a UN Temporary Commission on Korea, Canada was asked to serve on it and Mr. J. L. Ilsley, the Leader of the Canadian delegation, exercising his best judgment on the basis of the advice available to him, agreed

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that Canada would serve. Stairs gives a detailed account of the subsequent Cabinet-level debate on Canadian involvement in UNTCOK, one which rings true with my own recollections as the responsible desk officer in the Department at the time. On the one side was Prime Minister Mackenzie King, suspicious of big-power manoeuvres, and on the other those, like Mr. St. Laurent, Mr. Ilsley and Mr. Claxton, who believed that Canada should do what it could to enable the UN to play an effective international role. Mr. Pearson, then Under-Secretary, played a skilful backroom role in finding a compromise solution acceptable to all but only after some very deeply felt differences had divided the Cabinet. After UNTCOK observed elections in South Korea, Canada did not take part in the succeeding UN Commission on Korea.

When the North Koreans invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, Mr. Pearson did not believe that the U.S.A. would intervene militarily because only in January of that year Mr. Dean Acheson had said publicly that Korea lay outside the U.S. defence perimeter in the Pacific. But President Truman regarded the invasion as a Russian-planned or -authorized probe to test the Western will to resist. Stairs expounds the thesis that the U.S. first decided to intervene and then sought endorsement and support from the UN, which it was fortuitously able to obtain because the U.S.S.R. was boycotting the Security Council then. He says that "by acquiring UN auspices for their policies, however, and by soliciting the moral and material support of their allies, the Americans exposed themselves to a series of external pressures and constraints".

The central theme of Stairs book is given on Page 303 as "Canadian policy-makers sought to maximize the role of the UN in the politics of the Korean War as a means of imposing multilateral constraints on the exercise of the American power".

In a thoughtful final chapter, Stairs outlines a number of analytical alternatives that may be applied to this historical record. In one he shows what an unfettered role Mr. Pearson played in the diplomacy

Pearson's skills used to exert influence on U.S.