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Branding an Aggressor: The Commonwealth, the United Nations and Chinese Intervention in the Korean War, November 1950–January 1951

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ABSTRACT The crisis following China's intervention in the Korean War led to a significant rift between the United States and the Commonwealth at the United Nations (UN). This article examines the conditions under which the Commonwealth became united and was able to directly influence UN decision-making. It concludes that, when united, the Commonwealth could not easily be ignored by Washington, and thereby acted as an agent of constraint upon the Western superpower.

KEY WORDS: Commonwealth, United Nations, Aggressor Resolution

China's intervention in the Korean War in November 1950 precipitated the biggest crisis of the early Cold War period. Because of its importance, historians have lavished enormous attention on both the Truman administration's political and military responses and on the diplomatic manoeuvring that occurred inside the United Nations (UN).¹ But they have largely overlooked the role played by the

¹See, for instance, Rosemary Foot, *The Wrong War: American Policy and the Dimensions of the Korean Conflict, 1950–1953* (New York: Cornell UP 1985); William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2002); William Stueck, *The Korea War: An International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1995).

Commonwealth.² This is a significant gap, for during this crisis the Commonwealth not only challenged US hegemony at the world organisation but also directly influenced UN actions. Essential to the Commonwealth's success was the unity of its members. This article argues that Commonwealth unity occurred when the risk of a global conflict was at its greatest, when key Commonwealth personalities were prepared to exercise their influence, when coincidence brought the Commonwealth members together, and when the US government was willing to bow to Commonwealth pressure. After these conditions were removed, the Commonwealth members put their other allegiances ahead of Commonwealth loyalty. Crucially, no single Commonwealth country, not even Britain, had sufficient influence to constrain US policy, but as a unit the Commonwealth wielded considerable moral authority, not to mention influence in Washington.

The British Commonwealth and the United Nations before Chinese Intervention

Before the Singapore Declaration of 1971 the Commonwealth had neither a formal organisational structure nor a set of unifying principles.³ It remained largely defined by its founding document, the 1931 Statute of Westminster, which effectively established the legislative independence and equality of the then six Dominions – Australia, Canada, the Irish Free State, Newfoundland, New Zealand, and the Union of South Africa – who became known as the 'Old' Commonwealth members. The Statute also defined the Commonwealth as being 'a free association ... united by common allegiance to the

²There have been works on the role played by individual or a selected few Commonwealth members. See Shiv Dayal, *India's Role in the Korean Question: A Study of the Settlement of International Disputes Under the United Nations* (Delhi: S. Chand & Co. 1959); Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, Volume I: A Distant Obligation* (London: HMSO 1990); Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, Volume II: An Honourable Discharge* (London: HMSO 1995); Callum MacDonald, *Britain and the Korean War* (Oxford: Blackwell 1990); Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War, 1950–53. Volume 1: Strategy and Diplomacy* (Canberra: The Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service 1981); Ian McGibbon, *New Zealand and the Korean War – Volume 1: Politics and Diplomacy* (Auckland: Oxford UP 1992); Graeme Mount, *The Diplomacy of War: The Case of Korea* (Montreal: Black Rose Books 2004).

³For good accounts of the Commonwealth see Patrick Gordon-Walker, *The Commonwealth* (London: Secker & Warburg 1962); Hessel Hall, *The Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations* (London: Van Nostrand Reinhold 1971); and Liz Paren, *The Commonwealth: A Family of Nations* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat 2003).

Crown'. From the outset, therefore, the Commonwealth was a loosely-defined intergovernmental organisation of independent states united by a shared Head of State. The only official contact its members had with each other beyond normal diplomatic channels were at sporadic meetings on specific issues and roughly bi-annual Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conferences held in London in which common problems were dealt with informally.

World War II undoubtedly marked the pinnacle of Commonwealth cooperation. Although Britain's inability to offer adequate protection led to periodic spats, for the most part all the Commonwealth members, with the exception of Ireland, united against the dire threat posed by the Axis Powers, and London became the focal point of wartime planning. But the post-war world soon proved more complex. The composition of the organisation expanded with India, Pakistan and Ceylon⁴ accepting Commonwealth membership when they gained independence.⁵ These states became known as the 'New' Commonwealth members. Then in 1949 two members left the Commonwealth. Newfoundland joined Canada while Ireland became a republic, a path that India seemed likely to follow. But India was too important to lose. And so, rather than accepting its departure when it became a republic, the Commonwealth Prime Ministers agreed on the London Declaration. This allowed members who simply recognised the British Sovereign as Head of the Commonwealth, while also dropping the word 'British' from the organisation's title. These actions demonstrated the flexibility of the Old Commonwealth members, particularly Britain, not to mention their strong desire to retain close relations with the new partners.

Still, the importance of the Commonwealth to each of its members depended greatly on their foreign-policy priorities. The British Labour government was not overly sentimental towards the Empire. But Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin and Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations Patrick Gordon-Walker did realise that a united Commonwealth helped to perpetuate Britain's Great Power status, despite growing indications of post-war decline. Moreover, the British government hoped that by maintaining close relations with the New Commonwealth members, especially India, it could influence events in the emerging Third World and help prevent the spread of Communism in Asia. Bevin, though, was wary of using

⁴Ceylon was not a member of the UN until 1955 and so will not be considered in this article.

⁵Burma opted against Commonwealth membership when it gained independence in 1948.

the Commonwealth as a counterweight to American influence. His focus was on securing US aid and military support in Europe.

After Britain, Australia and New Zealand were the most emotionally attached members of the Commonwealth. The conservative Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers, Robert Menzies and Sidney Holland, were both fervent Anglophiles and looked to Britain to provide leadership. Yet Menzies and Holland disliked the admission of the non-white Commonwealth members and their respective Ministers for External Affairs, Percy Spender and Frederick Doidge, placed greater emphasis on courting American support for a Pacific security pact than Commonwealth loyalty. In contrast, Canada and South Africa displayed much greater independence from Britain. Canada had its own 'special' relationship with the United States, while its Francophone population, including Prime Minister Louis Saint Laurent, had few emotional ties to the Empire. Lester Pearson, Canada's foreign minister and a true internationalist, also thought the Commonwealth anachronistic but still maintained close relations with his Commonwealth colleagues, both Old and New. Meanwhile, the South African government of Daniel Malan, pursuing a policy of Afrikaner nationalism and racial segregation, had little desire to promote the multi-ethnic British Commonwealth.

After independence, the governing elites in India and Pakistan retained close cultural and personal ties with Britain and above all respected the British democratic tradition. Their economies also remained inextricably connected to the other Commonwealth members, particularly the British. Politically, the New Commonwealth governments were hopeful that the Commonwealth could be used to counterbalance US dominance of the non-Communist world. Ironically, India and Pakistan also used Commonwealth membership as a way of checking each other's global influence. With Kashmir a constant threat to regional stability, Jawaharlal Nehru and Liaquat Ali Khan hoped that the Commonwealth could provide a forum both for building bridges and for keeping an eye on each other.

The Commonwealth's role at the UN inevitably reflected the views of its individual members towards the world organisation. Britain's initial hopes for the UN had evaporated with the breakdown of the wartime Grand Alliance. The Attlee government, therefore, was generally content to follow the US lead at the UN, although some debates there had strained Anglo-American relations, most notably the initial wrangling over Palestine. By 1950, the only significant difference between London and Washington revolved around the former's desire to maintain the support of the neutral members whenever possible. The Australian, New Zealand and South African governments, for their parts, had little faith in the UN and preferred to remain quiet and

support the Anglo-American position. The Canadian government, however, felt that as a Middle Power Canada could play a useful mediatory role at the UN. Yet Canada always supported the American position when push came to shove.⁶

The Indian position was very different. Nehru, much to the irritation of the Americans, was convinced that the world organisation could be utilised to reconcile Cold War issues. As a result India styled itself as the leader of the Arab-Asian 'neutral' bloc, albeit one that always kept a wary eye on Pakistan.

Inside the UN, then, while the Heads of the Commonwealth delegations met informally to discuss policy, the Old and New Commonwealth members rarely acted as a single unit. Significantly, a partial exception came at the very start of the Korean War. In the wake of North Korea's sudden and brazen invasion, all the Commonwealth members endorsed a US-sponsored Security Council resolution condemning North Korea and calling for the withdrawal of its forces north of the 38th Parallel.

But beyond this, the Commonwealth states soon followed different paths, even during the period of great military uncertainty during the summer of 1950 when a North Korean conquest of the peninsula was a very real possibility. In the Security Council India, the only Commonwealth member represented except Britain, refused to vote on the second US-sponsored resolution calling for the members of the UN to furnish such assistance to South Korea necessary to repel the North Korean armed attack and restore international peace and security. It was only after intense British pressure that Nehru agreed to 'accept' the resolution as a natural progression of the UN action.⁷ Still, the Indian Prime Minister refused to sanction the British-sponsored but American-authored third resolution that placed the US government in control of the Unified Command in Korea – a resolution that transferred the Security Council's powers of military coordination to Washington.

On the other hand, the Old Commonwealth members rallied behind US leadership in the UN, particularly the British who were closely consulted by the Truman administration. These Commonwealth governments also talked among themselves regarding what contributions they could make to the UN action. Within days these governments pledged to provide military assistance to the UN action, despite their

⁶Lester Pearson, *Memoirs – Volume 2: The International Years, 1948–1957* (London: Gollancz 1974), 121–3.

⁷[New Delhi, India] N[atational] A[rchives of] I[ndia], M[inistry of] E[xternal] A[ffairs], CJK Branch, 67-CJK/50, Secretary-General for External Affairs [Gopal Menon]-Rau, New Delhi, 29 June 1950.

reluctance to commit ground forces in light of their domestic and global defensive commitments. Moreover, after the rapid reversal in military fortunes following UN Commander General Douglas MacArthur's successful amphibious counter-attack at Inchon, the older members supported a resolution in the General Assembly, jointly sponsored by the United States and Britain, which effectively permitted the UN Command to unify the peninsula by force.

It was a position that was anathema to the Indians. In Beijing, the Indian ambassador, Sardar K. M. Panikkar, had repeatedly been warned that the new People's Republic of China (PRC) would intervene if UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel. And Nehru's government thought a UN move into North Korea entailed an unacceptable risk of escalation. It proved to be a significant piece of foresight.

Limited Chinese Intervention

On 6 November 1950, with UN forces approaching the Chinese border, the Security Council received a special report from MacArthur stating that 'hostile contact' had been made 'with Chinese communist military units'.⁸ While this news came as a great shock to the international community, the American response was moderate. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson formulated a draft resolution, which simply called on the Chinese forces to cease their activities in Korea and withdraw to allow the UN Command to complete the unification of Korea.⁹

The British Delegation immediately agreed to co-sponsor this proposal along with four other members of the Security Council. But divergence between the Commonwealth and the United States had already begun to surface. The British Permanent Representative Gladwyn Jebb, with the support of Rau, insisted that as a preliminary measure the Security Council invite the PRC to send a representative to clarify China's objectives in Korea.¹⁰ Behind this request was the belief held by the Commonwealth governments, particularly Britain and India, that China might have intervened to protect her interests in the border zone, particularly the hydro-electric power stations on the Yalu river. Implicit in this conclusion was a sense that the United States was in some way responsible for the alarming turn of events.

⁸U[nited] N[atations] S[ecurity] C[ouncil], Official Records, Fifth Year Supplement for Sept. through Dec., S/1884, 6 Nov. 1950.

⁹F[oreign] R[elations of the] U[nited] S[tates], 1950, 7: 1053.

¹⁰U[nited] N[atations] S[ecurity] C[ouncil] *Fifth Year*, No.62 – 520th Meeting, New York, 8 Nov. 1950.

When China rebuffed the Anglo-Indian overture, Bevin became alarmed. He now feared that the PRC was planning a large-scale invasion of Korea. And to head it off he proposed the creation of a buffer zone south of the Korean–Chinese border. The Foreign Secretary hoped this would avoid a costly war without having to make any significant territorial or political concessions to the Chinese. Even so, Bevin grudgingly backed down when the Truman administration revealed it would only accept a buffer zone in Manchurian territory.¹¹ Acheson was opposed to taking any action that would hinder MacArthur’s forthcoming ‘end-the-war’ offensive to reunify the whole of Korea.¹² Clearly, Bevin was already more willing than Acheson to placate Beijing, which was hardly surprising given that the British had strong economic ties with China through Hong Kong.

Massive Chinese Intervention

On 24 November 1950 MacArthur launched his ‘end-the-war’ offensive confident that neither the PRC nor the USSR would intervene on a large scale. Yet within days his forces had encountered approximately 200,000 Chinese troops in northern Korea, and were now in rapid retreat.¹³

The Truman administration’s reaction to this news was emphatic. In the UN, the US Permanent Representative Warren Austin openly accused the Chinese Communists of committing aggression in Korea and pressed for an immediate vote on the Six-Power draft resolution.¹⁴ Although nine members voted for this resolution, its adoption was blocked by the Soviet veto, forcing the US government to switch debate to the General Assembly.¹⁵

Washington’s decisive response brought all the Commonwealth members into play. But rather than meekly follow the US lead, as many had done in the summer, this time the Commonwealth swiftly united behind an effort to constrain the Truman administration and prevent the US Delegation from convincing the General Assembly to take precipitate action that might escalate the crisis.

¹¹[Kew,] UK, [The] N[ational] A[rchives,] CAB[inet Papers] 128/18, C.M.(50)73rd Conclusions, 13 Nov. 1950; and C.M.(50)76th Conclusions, 20 Nov. 1950.

¹²*FRUS 1950*, 7: 1212.

¹³*Ibid.*, 1237.

¹⁴*UNSC Fifth Year*, No.68 – 526th Meeting, New York, 28 Nov. 1950.

¹⁵*UNSC Fifth Year*, No.72 – 530th Meeting, New York, 30 Nov. 1950; N[ational] A[rchives, College Park, MD], [State Department, Foreign Service Post Files Records] RG 84/350/82/5/7 E.1030-H, Box 4, 1950, Tel Incs US-December, Acheson to Austin, Washington DC, 4 Dec. 1950.

What united the Commonwealth states was their shared fear that an American effort to brand the PRC an aggressor would result in the implementation of the UN Charter's collective security provisions. From the Commonwealth perspective, such an outcome would be utterly disastrous. Although the various members had different strategic priorities, none relished the prospect of a wider war. The Indians, for instance, feared that another global conflagration would create both external and internal threats to their recently won independence, while Australia and New Zealand thought that such a war would leave them further isolated in the Pacific region. Canada felt more secure due to her proximity to the US and NATO membership but was unwilling to increase her military spending or deploy large numbers of troops overseas unless this was absolutely essential. And in London, Attlee's government concluded that any collective security measures against the PRC would divert resources away from Europe, trigger Chinese retaliatory action against Hong Kong or Indochina, and drag the Soviet Union into the fight, producing a global conflict.

Determined to restrain the United States, the Commonwealth states employed various techniques. Initially, the Indian and British delegations sought to find out through General Wu Hsiu-chuan, the Chinese representative in New York, whether Beijing had intervened in Korea for aggressive purposes or simply to defend its borders. But though Jebb managed to meet once with the Chinese representative, Wu simply stressed that the Chinese soldiers in Korea were volunteers and the only peaceful solution was the withdrawal of all US forces from the Far East.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the Indian Permanent Representative, Benegal Rau, was scarcely more effective. Though he got to see Wu on several occasions, Rau was given no indication that China would support a ceasefire.¹⁷

Stymied here, the Commonwealth players switched their attention to the Truman administration. In early December, in the wake of Truman's off-the-cuff press conference comments that the use of atomic weapons was under active consideration, Attlee flew to Washington to meet the President. The British Prime Minister, desperate to stave off a backbench rebellion, received full support from other Commonwealth members to discuss the situation in the Far East.¹⁸ But he had little joy. Once in Washington Attlee was unable to

¹⁶UK NA, F[oreign] O[ffice Papers] FO 371/84105, Jebb to Bevin, New York, 5 Dec. 1950.

¹⁷UK NA, FO 371/84106, British High Commissioner to India (Archibald Nye) to Gordon-Walker, New Delhi, 5 Dec. 1950.

¹⁸UK NA, CAB 128/18, C.M.(50)80th Conclusions, London, 30 Nov. 1950.

convince Truman to agree to an immediate ceasefire, let alone a commitment to discuss other Far Eastern issues, such as China's admission to the UN or the future of Taiwan after the fighting had ceased. Instead, the two leaders simply agreed to back the Six-Power draft resolution in the General Assembly.¹⁹

After Attlee departed from Washington, the focus shifted back to New York. Here the Heads of the Commonwealth delegations were decidedly unimpressed with the American stance. Meeting on 6 December, they concluded that the Six-Power draft resolution was outdated, divisive, and would be rejected by the PRC. In such circumstances the United States would inevitably press for an aggressor resolution, with all that this entailed. The Commonwealth members thus launched their most important diplomatic gambit. They all agreed to support the British suggestion for a resolution calling for a ceasefire.²⁰

Nehru, who felt most strongly that a cessation of hostilities should take place immediately and was the least concerned with upsetting the Americans, took up the mantle. His draft resolution proposed a ceasefire at the 38th Parallel, the creation of a demilitarised zone, and the prospect of negotiations with the PRC on Korea and Taiwan after the cessation of hostilities.²¹ Although Nehru's draft garnered general support from other Commonwealth members, Acheson immediately rejected it. But the Commonwealth's leverage over the United States was nevertheless beginning to take hold. Acheson recognised that Britain was Washington's only true global partner, while the other Commonwealth members represented its key allies in North America and the Pacific, together with the leading voice in the emerging neutral bloc.

Indeed, Acheson was in a difficult position. His initial instinct was clearly to reject Nehru's draft out of hand, convinced that the West ought to hang tough in response to Chinese aggression and acutely aware of the intense domestic political pressure to brand it an aggressor. But he also recognised that a united Commonwealth was far more difficult to ignore than its constituent members, even Britain, when they acted alone. Crucially, therefore, in an effort to maintain US-Commonwealth unity, Acheson proposed that the President of the

¹⁹UK NA, FO 371/84105, British Ambassador USA (Oliver Franks) to Bevin, Washington, 5 Dec. 1950.

²⁰UK NA, FO 371/84124, Record of Meeting Heads of Commonwealth Delegations, New York, 6 Dec. 1950.

²¹UK NA, PREM[ier Papers] PREM 8/1405 Part 4, Record Conversation Gordon-Walker to Indian High Commissioner UK (Krishna Menon), London, 11 Dec. 1950.

General Assembly, along with two people he would designate, be empowered to confer with the Unified Command and the PRC to determine the basis for a ceasefire.²²

The Indian Delegation seized upon this opportunity with alacrity. Within days it had convinced all 13 Arab-Asian members to co-sponsor a draft resolution incorporating Acheson's proposal for a ceasefire committee. The Heads of the Commonwealth delegations wholeheartedly supported this conciliatory first step,²³ while the US government, in light of the united Commonwealth position and the fact that Acheson had originated the resolution's provisions, was willing to give it priority over the Six-Power draft resolution.²⁴ The Arab-Asian proposal was thus adopted with only the Soviet bloc voting in opposition.²⁵ Furthermore, in fulfilment of the resolution's provisions President of the General Assembly, Nasrollah Entezam of Iran, asked two Commonwealth representatives, Rau of India and Pearson of Canada to join him on the Ceasefire Committee.²⁶ The Commonwealth thus had a special interest in the work of this newly formed body.

In the confusion following massive Chinese intervention, the Commonwealth had united against any attempt to push the UN into hasty action. Its unity, which was to prove important in exerting leverage over the United States, stemmed from a variety of factors. One was the dire nature of the crisis, which convinced the Commonwealth governments that any condemnatory action taken by the UN against the PRC would inevitably lead to an escalation of the conflict. Another was the role of key Commonwealth personalities, who took it upon themselves to defuse the situation. For the first time during the Korean conflict, therefore, the Commonwealth had coordinated its policy and achieved its goals at the UN.

²²H[arry] S. T[ruman] L[ibrary, Independence, MO] Truman Papers, Personal Secretary's File, Subject File 1940-1953, Box 187, Memoranda for the President: Meeting Discussions: 1950, Memorandum for the President, Executive Secretary of the National Security Council (James Lay), Washington DC, 12 Dec. 1950.

²³[Ottawa, Canada,] L[ibrary and] A[rchives] C[anada], RG 25/6444/5475-DW-4-40 [Pt 5], Record of Meeting of Heads of Commonwealth Delegations, New York, 13 Dec. 1950.

²⁴HSTL, [Dean] Acheson Papers, Memoranda of Conversations File, Box 67, Dec. 1951, Memorandum of Conversation with the President, 11 Dec. 1950.

²⁵U[nited] N[atations] G[eneral] A[ssembly] Official Records, Fifth Session Supplements, No.20 (A/1775) Resolution 384 (V) adopted 14 Dec. 1950.

²⁶Pearson, *Memoirs 1948-1957*, 280.

The Ceasefire Committee

By the second week of December 1950, with the UNC's reports clearly indicating that the Chinese offensive had halted north of the 38th Parallel, the Commonwealth members optimistically hoped that Beijing had achieved its war aims and that a ceasefire could be arranged. But even with the battlefield situation apparently improving, the work of the Ceasefire Committee got off to an unpromising start.

Taking advantage of India's favourable relations with the PRC, Rau was able to communicate with Wu on several occasions. But again to little effect. The Chinese representative unequivocally stated that his government did not recognise the 'illegal' Ceasefire Committee formed without China's consent and would not negotiate until it was agreed that all foreign forces would be withdrawn from Korea; that PRC sovereignty extended over Taiwan; and that the PRC would be admitted to the UN. Wu also revealed that he would be returning to China in a matter of days. In response, the Ceasefire Committee sent Wu a letter urging him to stay and talk, but even this approach was ignored.²⁷

The US government, acting through the Unified Command, had cooperated with the Ceasefire Committee inasmuch as it had revealed its willingness to agree to a ceasefire at the 38th Parallel.²⁸ But the domestic pressure on Truman to adopt a tough stance was mounting. In the middle of December, the President declared a state of national emergency paving the way for a massive increase in US military production.²⁹ This action only served to heighten tension and further jeopardised the work of the Committee. And, to make matters worse, in New York the American UN Delegation also snubbed Pearson and Rau, who were trying to push for the adoption of a second Arab-Asian draft resolution recommending that the representatives of several unnamed governments meet to make recommendations for the peaceful settlement of all outstanding Far Eastern issues.³⁰ The Ceasefire Committee hoped that such a resolution would convince the Chinese that the UN was serious about discussing other Far Eastern issues following a ceasefire.

²⁷Ibid., 282.

²⁸NA, Microfilm C0042 Reel 1, Acheson-Austin, Washington, 15 Dec. 1950.

²⁹HSTL, Truman Papers, Korean War File 1947-1952, Box 7, Massive Chinese Communist intervention and allied reactions, Press Release, Washington DC, 15 Dec. 1950.

³⁰UNGA *Fifth Session First Committee* 415th Meeting, New York, 12 Dec. 1950 (A/C.1/641 and A/ C.1/642).

In spite of the toughening American stance, the Ceasefire Committee sent a cable to Beijing stating that as soon as a ceasefire had been arranged it still planned to proceed with the 12-Power draft resolution.³¹ But the UN was again caught between the two belligerents. And it was not just Washington that was reluctant to negotiate. After much delay, Zhou En-lai firmly rejected the Arab–Asian Resolution arguing that it was meaningless without the 12-Power draft resolution.³² With the bargaining position of the two main belligerents as far apart as ever, the Committee’s two Commonwealth representatives realised there was little hope of brokering a deal through the UN.³³ The Ceasefire Committee’s report, therefore, made no recommendations.³⁴

During the Ceasefire Committee’s brief efforts to communicate with both sides, the Commonwealth governments remained quiet. With the lull in fighting the US government did not press for any drastic proposals risking escalation and so the Commonwealth members saw little need to coordinate their views. Moreover, although they disapproved of Truman’s decision to declare a state of national emergency, the Commonwealth members appreciated that the Unified Command had shown flexibility and had cooperated with the Ceasefire Committee, which was in marked contrast to the PRC’s intransigence.

Nonetheless, the Commonwealth remained united behind the work of the Ceasefire Committee and gave much encouragement to Canada and India to persevere in their efforts. On a more personal level, Rau and Pearson showed great determination and used their connections with both the PRC and United States in their attempts to find an acceptable ceasefire. Yet their efforts were not enough to bring the positions of the belligerents any closer and the threat to international peace continued to ensure that the Commonwealth did not disunite.

The Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference

Despite disappointment with the failure of the Ceasefire Committee’s efforts, battlefield events led to the Commonwealth’s most serious challenge yet to US hegemony at the UN. On New Year’s Eve 1950 Chinese forces launched a massive offensive south of the 38th Parallel. The UNC offered little resistance to the Communist advance and

³¹NA, RG 84/350/82/4/2 E.1030-F, Box 29, Delga 384–471 (6–30 Dec. 1950), Austin to Acheson, New York, 20 Dec. 1950.

³²UK NA, RG 84/350/82/4/2 E.1030-F, Box 29, Delga 384–471 (6–30 Dec. 1950), Austin to Acheson, New York, 24 Dec. 1950.

³³Pearson, *Memoirs 1948–1957*, 287–8.

³⁴UNGA *Fifth Session Annexes Volume 1 A/C.1/643*, 2 Jan. 1951

MacArthur recommended that the UN forces should be withdrawn from the peninsula.³⁵ The Truman administration, reacting to the public outcry at these developments, demanded that the PRC be branded an aggressor or else the UN would lose all credibility. The Commonwealth members were equally disturbed by the radical change in nature of the crisis, but they believed that the American proposal risked escalating the conflict and alienating the Arab-Asian members. The Commonwealth, therefore, called for another intermediary step in the hope of convincing the Chinese to accept a ceasefire. Crucially, the US Government again agreed to put its own desires to one side, largely because Acheson believed that Beijing would inevitably reject all UN calls for a settlement, giving the Commonwealth members time to 'return to comparative sanity'.³⁶ The Secretary of State was therefore willing to accept a limited delay if this proved necessary to have an aggressor resolution adopted by an overwhelming majority.

The Truman administration, however, underestimated the unity of purpose of the Commonwealth in searching for an acceptable intermediary step. Pearson and Rau remained at the forefront, using the continued existence of the Ceasefire Committee to formulate a statement of ceasefire principles to propose to the PRC. These principles were an immediate ceasefire followed by the staged withdrawal of all armed forces from Korea; the creation by the UN of machinery whereby the Korean people could express themselves freely; interim arrangements for the administration of Korea and the maintenance of peace pending the establishment of the new government; and affirmation that the United States, Britain, USSR, and PRC would seek a peaceful settlement of all outstanding Far Eastern issues after the cessation of hostilities.

More vitally to Commonwealth unity, the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, called by Attlee when the crisis had just begun, coincidentally opened in London on 4 January 1951. For the first time at such a conference the government leaders sought to formulate a united policy, and thereby take the initiative in the Korean debate. Bevin summed up the sentiment of the Commonwealth when he stated in the opening meeting that the nature of the organisation's membership – spanning the globe and various races as well as representing both the Western and neutral camps – meant that it could exert great moral influence at the UN and over US policy.³⁷ The Foreign Secretary then tabled a memorandum suggesting that a ceasefire occur simultaneously

³⁵FRUS 1951, 7: 56.

³⁶Dean Acheson, *The Korean War* (New York: W.W. Norton 1969), 94.

³⁷LAC, MG 26 N1/22/Commonwealth – Prime Minister's Meeting 1951, P.M.M.(51)3rd Meeting, London, 5 Jan. 1951.

with settlement of the Korean question, the admission of the PRC to the UN and for Taiwan to come under Beijing's sovereignty.³⁸ Nonetheless, this proposal met a mixed response. Nehru predictably supported the idea of settling all Far Eastern issues, arguing that the PRC would accept no other course. Saint Laurent, Menzies and Holland, however, warned that the US government would only accept political negotiations after a ceasefire had begun.³⁹

As a result, Saint Laurent, after receiving some strongly worded telegrams from Pearson, urged his colleagues to support the Ceasefire Committee's principles arguing that they might be acceptable to Washington and Beijing but that, if not, their adoption would at least postpone the submission of an aggressor resolution. This course won favour with the Australian, New Zealand and South African representatives. Nehru nevertheless stated that Panikkar had informed him that the principles were unacceptable to the PRC and suggested a simplified version of Bevin's plan merely mentioning the resolution of outstanding issues.⁴⁰ Interestingly, Nehru's rival Liaquat Ali Khan made a similar proposal.⁴¹ After this muddled meeting Attlee took it upon himself to send a message to Truman stressing that the Commonwealth was principally concerned with Washington's intentions at the UN after the PRC was branded an aggressor.⁴² But the President's reply was evasive, only stating that the UN should not shrink from stating the truth.⁴³ In response, Bevin suggested a resolution disapproving of Chinese intervention and calling for Chinese forces to be withdrawn and for the Great Powers to meet in order to deal with issues threatening world peace. The Commonwealth Prime Ministers tentatively agreed to this new proposal⁴⁴ but Acheson was non-committal.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, events beyond the Commonwealth Conference worked to unify the Prime Ministers. In New York, at the behest of Rau under instruction from Nehru, the Ceasefire Committee sought to revise its

³⁸UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, P.M.M.(51)7 Memorandum by the UK Government, London, 5 Jan. 1951.

³⁹LAC, MG 26 N1/22/Commonwealth – Prime Ministers' Meeting 1951, P.M.M.(51)4th Meeting, London, 5 Jan. 1951.

⁴⁰UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, P.M.M.(51)8, Memorandum by the Prime Minister of India, London, 5 Jan. 1951.

⁴¹UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, P.M.M.(51)5th Meeting, Minute 2, London, 8 Jan. 1951.

⁴²*FRUS 1951*, 7: 37.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁴UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, P.M.M.(51)7th Meeting, Minute 1, London, 9 Jan. 1951.

⁴⁵UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, Franks to Bevin, Washington DC, 10 Jan. 1951.

ceasefire principles in an effort to make them more acceptable to the Chinese. Pearson, wary of Rau's zealous efforts to appease the Chinese and his willingness to overlook the Truman administration's difficult domestic position, took it upon himself to amend the principles. After close consultation with the US Delegation, and taking into account the reports he had received from Saint Laurent regarding the Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference, Pearson revised the principles so that negotiations on other Far Eastern issues would take place 'as soon as a ceasefire had been agreed on', while also including specific reference to the settlement of the questions of Taiwan and Chinese representation.⁴⁶

The Truman administration once more proved willing to compromise, despite domestic uproar, and instructed the US Delegation to vote for the ceasefire principles.⁴⁷ In light of this development the Commonwealth Prime Ministers agreed there was no longer any need to consider an alternative policy since the Americans had accepted the moderate ceasefire principles.⁴⁸ With US-Commonwealth unity intact, the General Assembly approved the Ceasefire Committee's supplementary report in spite of Soviet warnings that its principles were unacceptable.⁴⁹

The Chinese New Year Offensive had heightened the crisis and led to the resumption of the Truman administration's demand for the PRC to be branded an aggressor. This reaction effectively united the Commonwealth in opposition to Washington's position. Furthermore, the Commonwealth Prime Ministers Conference in London used this opportunity to try to formulate an alternative UN policy. The Commonwealth members realised that the very nature of their organisation made it difficult to ignore. The fact that the Truman Administration remained silent at the UN for over a week while the Commonwealth leaders discussed this matter in isolation dramatically highlights this point, especially as the military situation worsened during this time and the American public increasingly turned against its government.

The Commonwealth Prime Ministers' Conference had, however, also demonstrated that its members were not as united as they had hoped. Attlee and Bevin were preoccupied with trying to appease Nehru who,

⁴⁶UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, P.M.M/(51)9, Note by the Secretariat, London, 11 Jan. 1951.

⁴⁷Acheson Papers, Memoranda of Conversations File, Box 67, Memorandum Conversation with President, 11 Jan. 1950.

⁴⁸UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, P.M.M.(51)10th Meeting, London, 11 Jan. 1951.

⁴⁹UNGA *Fifth Session First Committee* 425th Meeting, New York, 13 Jan. 1951 (A/C.1/650 and A/C.1/651).

in turn, was most concerned with placating China. In contrast, Saint Laurent, Menzies and Holland were more sensitive to the Truman administration's desperate domestic position. These fissures within the Commonwealth were soon to open into a gaping chasm. Yet for the meantime, the Commonwealth was united by the clear-sightedness displayed by Pearson and Rau on the ceasefire Committee and the US government's continued willingness to meet the Commonwealth's viewpoint.

The 'Aggressor' Resolution

The Prime Ministers' Conference represented the pinnacle of Commonwealth coordination. After this point in time, the conditions for unity were removed one by one during the second half of January 1951.

To begin with, the US government's willingness to compromise evaporated. On the same day as the ceasefire principles were adopted, Acheson, predicting that Beijing would reject the peace overture, formulated a draft resolution branding the PRC an aggressor and calling for the UN Collective Measures Committee to make recommendations accordingly.⁵⁰ After 17 January, when Zhou En-lai rejected the ceasefire principles, the Truman administration's patience finally snapped. Although the Chinese Premier did make a counter-proposal for a conference to be held in China composed of the PRC, USSR, US, Britain, France, India and Egypt to negotiate all outstanding Far Eastern issues before a ceasefire, Truman immediately told the press that the US government would seek to brand the PRC an aggressor 'with everything that we could bring to bear'.⁵¹ In the General Assembly Austin stressed that the UN had explored every possibility for a peaceful settlement; now the time had come to take firm action or face ruin.⁵² In addition, Acheson told the British that the US government's support for the ceasefire principles had brought it 'to the verge of destruction domestically' and was unwilling to make any further compromises.⁵³ In New York, the US Delegation was instructed to search for sponsors for the aggressor resolution, starting with the

⁵⁰FRUS 1951, 7: 74.

⁵¹UNGA Fifth Session Annexes Volume 1 A/C.1/653, 17 Jan. 1951; Truman Papers, Korean War File 1947-1952, Box 8, 26. US efforts to obtain UN action re: Chinese intervention, White House Press and Radio Conference, Washington DC, 18 Jan. 1951.

⁵²UNGA Fifth Session First Committee 426th Meeting, New York, 18 Jan. 1951.

⁵³NA, [State Department Records] RG 59/250/46/3/5, Entry 394B, Box 1, Memoranda from S and U 1951, Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State (Lucius Battle), Washington DC, 18 Jan. 1951.

Commonwealth members, but if none could be found then it should table the proposal alone.⁵⁴

Under this pressure the Commonwealth alliance began to splinter. The New Zealand and South African governments were the first to support the US draft resolution as it stood. The Australian Foreign Minister Percy Spender also accepted the American proposal, but suggested that its condemnation paragraph be rephrased. And he proposed the establishment of an ad hoc body to use its good offices to bring about the cessation of hostilities.⁵⁵ In contrast, the British Cabinet called for the US draft resolution to be divided into two stages, the first would condemn the PRC for rejecting a ceasefire; the second would deal with the question of additional measures only if the first did not bring about a cessation of hostilities.⁵⁶ The Canadian government held similar views.⁵⁷ Nehru, meanwhile, was encouraged by the Chinese response and sought further elucidation of Beijing's position before committing to any UN policy.⁵⁸

Yet, despite his aggressive posturing, Acheson remained sensitive to Commonwealth pressure. And he soon agreed to revise the US draft resolution by incorporating the Australian phrasing regarding the condemnation of the PRC, as well as adding a provision for the establishment of a Good Offices Committee, which would be composed of the President of the General Assembly and two persons he would designate to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict. The US government hoped that the addition of these clauses would allow the Commonwealth governments to co-sponsor the proposal and avoid the embarrassment of tabling its draft resolution alone. But Acheson's ploy was only partially successful. Although Australia was a willing co-sponsor, Britain and Canada continued to insist that the paragraph referring to additional measures be deleted. Under intense pressure from both Houses of Congress, the Truman administration decided to table the revised draft resolution alone.

Washington's determination to demonstrate the strength of its convictions was not shaken by the arrival of a communication from the Indian government containing a set of 'clarifications' to the earlier PRC's counter-proposal. Zhou En-lai now suggested certain concessions, including the removal of all conditions before negotiations and

⁵⁴*FRUS 1951*, 7: 108.

⁵⁵[Canberra, Australia,] N[ational] A[rchives of] A[ustralia] A1838, 88/1/10 PART 5, Spender to Australian Delegation UN (K. Shann), New York, 17 Jan. 1951.

⁵⁶UK NA, CAB 128/19, C.M.(51)4th Conclusions, London, 18 Jan. 1951.

⁵⁷LAC, RG 25/4741/50069-A-40 Pt.18, Canadian Representative to the UN (David Riddell) to Pearson, New York, 18 Jan. 1951.

⁵⁸UK NA, PREM 8/1405 Part 4, Menon to Attlee, London, 18 Jan. 1951.

that the Seven-Power conference would first agree to a ceasefire before other Far Eastern issues were resolved.⁵⁹ But the Truman administration dismissed them as nothing more than Chinese propaganda that would delay the work of the UN.

The US action thoroughly divided the Commonwealth, but not along the familiar 'old'–'new' cleavage. On one hand, Bevin and Pearson joined with Nehru in concluding that the Chinese proposals were sincere and that a window of opportunity had been opened. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, on the other hand, were against opposing the Americans, especially now that Washington had clearly signalled that it would stop at nothing less than an aggressor resolution. On 22 January Commonwealth disunity was made public when the Indian, British, Canadian and Pakistani delegations supported a motion tabled by Rau to have the Korean debate adjourned for 48 hours so that the clarifications could be examined. The Australian, New Zealand and South African delegations abstained. Notably, in spite of a negative American vote, the motion was narrowly adopted by 27 votes to 23 with six abstentions.⁶⁰

During the 48-hours adjournment Commonwealth unity disintegrated completely. The vote on the Indian motion had exposed the rift within the Western alliance and finally brought home to the Commonwealth members that they might find themselves voting against a US resolution. In addition, it had become increasingly clear to the Commonwealth governments by this time that the severity of the crisis had lessened in the preceding weeks. Under the operational command of Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway the UN forces had halted the Chinese offensive and restored confidence that a line could be held across the peninsula. In this situation the Truman administration, with a slight easing of public pressure, felt there was no need for the UN to immediately impose additional measures upon the PRC while the Commonwealth members no longer feared that the conflict would necessarily escalate if China was branded an aggressor.

As a result, the key personalities within each Commonwealth government reassessed their positions in light of their long-term relations vis-à-vis Washington. With a possible Pacific security pact uppermost in his mind, Spender gave the Australian Delegation final instructions to vote in favour of the US draft resolution, despite Menzies' desire not to diverge from Britain.⁶¹ Doidge, equally desirous

⁵⁹NA, RG 59/250/49/5/3 E.1459, Box 3, India 1951–1952, Clarification of certain points included in the counter-proposal made by the Chinese government to Political Committee of the United Nations General Assembly.

⁶⁰UNGA *Fifth Session First Committee* 429th Meeting, New York, 22 Jan. 1951.

⁶¹NAA, A1838, TS88/1/10, Spender to Shann, Canberra, 24 Jan. 1951.

of a US security guarantee for New Zealand, convinced his own Prime Minister to fully support the US draft resolution.⁶² More significantly, Britain and Canada started to gravitate back towards the Americans. Pearson recognised that if Ottawa wished to maintain its special relationship with Washington it would have to vote for the draft resolution. What's more, even the British government showed the first signs of breaking. With Bevin gravely ill in hospital his more cautious deputy, Minister of State Kenneth Younger, warned the Cabinet that if it did not support the US draft resolution Britain would become isolated from her key allies. Even so, the majority of the Labour Cabinet remained firmly opposed to branding the PRC an aggressor and Attlee reluctantly agreed to vote against the draft resolution unless the provision concerning additional measures was deleted.⁶³ Britain thus found itself standing alone with India against the United States.

Nehru's convictions, however, were little affected by concerns of voting against the US proposal. In fact, the Indian Prime Minister had become greatly disillusioned with the Commonwealth precisely because the majority of its members had folded under US pressure at the critical moment. India, therefore, turned its attention to the neutral bloc where it continued to hold much sway. Rau had consequently been able to persuade the Arab-Asian members to revise their outstanding draft resolution to incorporate the Chinese proposal for a Seven-Power conference.⁶⁴

Yet even though the Commonwealth was thoroughly disunited and the majority of its members had endorsed the American position, at the eleventh hour the Truman administration proved willing to make a final concession to avoid a split with Britain. While Acheson was pleased to have broken up the united Commonwealth front he recognised that Britain represented Washington's closest and most influential ally and was prepared to go one step further to maintain this partnership. Moreover, Acheson realised that without British support the Western alliance would appear acutely divided even if the other Commonwealth members voted for the US draft resolution. The Secretary of State feared the domestic response to this act of apparent British insubordination and how Communist propaganda would take advantage of the situation.

Taking all this into account Acheson unwillingly agreed to amend the US draft resolution so that the committee for additional measures would defer its report if the Good Offices Committee reported

⁶²LAC, RG 25/4741/50069-A-40 Pt.19, Canadian High Commissioner New Zealand (Alfred Rive) to Pearson, Wellington, 25 Jan. 1951.

⁶³UK NA, CAB 128/19, C.M.(51)8th Conclusions, London, 25 Jan. 1951.

⁶⁴UNGA *Fifth Session Annexes Volume 1* A/C.1/642/Rev.1, 24 Jan. 1951.

satisfactory progress in its work.⁶⁵ The British Cabinet, content that they had forced Washington to make significant concessions and realising that they could wring no more now the Commonwealth was disunited, finally agreed to vote in favour of the aggressor resolution to avoid being alienated at the UN.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, India continued to oppose any attempts to condemn the Chinese intervention in Korea and in a final effort to win support revised the 12-Power draft resolution so that the first action of the proposed Seven-Power conference would be to arrange a ceasefire.⁶⁷ Additionally, Rau informed the General Assembly that the Indian government had received information from the 'highest sources in Peking' that the Chinese government regarded the revised 12-Power draft resolution as 'providing a genuine basis for a peaceful settlement'.⁶⁸ In the circumstances, these efforts did not prove enough to reunite the Commonwealth or convince the majority of the UN members. When the Arab-Asian proposal was put to the vote it was rejected with a large number of members abstaining, including all of the Old Commonwealth. In comparison, the US draft resolution was overwhelmingly adopted with all the Old Commonwealth members voting in its favour, Pakistan abstaining, and India finding itself in opposition with the Soviet bloc.⁶⁹

Over the following 18 months of the Korean conflict US leadership at the UN prevailed while the Commonwealth remained quiet. The Commonwealth accepted this passive role because of the relative stability of the conflict, once a military stalemate had been established at the 38th Parallel and the PRC failed to take any retaliatory action. Moreover, the Truman administration waited patiently for the efforts of the Good Offices Committee to peter out and then only pressed for an economic embargo on the export of strategic goods to China. When armistice talks started between the UNC and Communist High Command in July 1951 all of the Commonwealth members were content that the risk of escalation was minimal and supported the US Delegation's motion to have the Korean debate postponed until a ceasefire had been arranged. While this was a practical measure it also demonstrated Washington's concern that it could no longer expect to dominate discussions in New York with the unquestioned support of the Commonwealth. These concerns proved well judged since when the debate finally resumed in October 1952 in response to the breakdown

⁶⁵*FRUS 1951*, 7: 137.

⁶⁶UK NA, CAB 128/19, C.M.(51)10th Conclusions, London, 29 Jan. 1951.

⁶⁷*UNGA Fifth Session Annexes Volume 1 A/C.1/642/Rev.2*, 29 Jan. 1951.

⁶⁸*UNGA Fifth Session First Committee 437th Meeting*, New York, 30 Jan. 1951.

⁶⁹*UNGA Fifth Session Plenary Meetings 327th Meeting*, New York, 1 Feb. 1951.

of the armistice talks the Commonwealth, fearing a prolongation of the conflict and the American military response to such an eventuality, once again united in opposition to US policy at the UN. In this instance the Commonwealth forced the lame duck Truman administration to back down.

Nonetheless, in the crisis following Chinese intervention in the Korean War the Commonwealth by remaining united had been able to force the US government to make a number of significant concessions. These created the delay necessary to expose China's insincerity and bring about the overwhelming support of the UN members for the aggressor resolution.⁷⁰ As William Stueck points out, this delay came at a crucial time: had the United States been able to push through an aggressor resolution during January, when the battlefield situation was so bleak that a UN defeat seemed distinctly possible, then it was possible that such a resolution might have been used to give legitimacy to some of the escalatory measures the US government briefly considered. But by February the military situation on the ground was already starting to improve. The Commonwealth had thus bought some valuable time.⁷¹

Meanwhile, the Old Commonwealth members were generally pleased that their challenge to US hegemony at the UN had brought them closer together than they had been since World War II, and this helped to ensure that the Commonwealth remained a significant aspect of their foreign policies for the foreseeable future. More importantly, however, the Commonwealth members were relieved that this act of resistance, though serious in the short-term, had not jeopardised their long-term relations with the Western superpower. In fact, the Australian and New Zealand governments believed that the signing of the ANZUS defence treaty later that year vindicated their flexible policies during this period. For these two countries the heightened state of the Cold War over the previous months had only served to highlight that the Commonwealth, particularly Britain, could no longer guarantee their security. As a result, efforts to court Washington had been seriously stepped up and Australia and New Zealand had been willing to sign a Pacific pact excluding Britain.

On the debit side, however, for India the adoption of the aggressor resolution dented its belief in the Commonwealth as a counterweight to US influence. Nehru, therefore, placed his long-term allegiance with the neutral bloc. It was a paradoxical consequence of the high-water mark of the Commonwealth's influence on international politics.

⁷⁰UK NA, CAB 128/19, C.M.(51)10th Conclusions, London, 29 Jan. 1951.

⁷¹Stueck, *Korean War*, 152, 163–4.

In terms of broader importance this episode demonstrated that the Commonwealth was more than a symbolic group of states bound by a common history. When certain conditions were met the Commonwealth could coordinate a united position and wield influence over the United States, especially in the multilateral environment of the UN. When these conditions were absent and the Commonwealth members acted independently none of them, not even Britain, could have hoped to constrain US policy to the extent witnessed during the crisis following Chinese intervention in the Korean War. The events that took place at the UN over the winter of 1950–51 thus suggest that in the deeply polarised world at the height of the Cold War the Commonwealth mattered and its role in international affairs warrants further academic study.

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