

# THE X CORPS EVACUATION OF THE WONSAN BEACHHEAD

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: Given today's ever-changing demands on U.S. forces, coalition operations such as those of the Gulf War may be the best way to assure international support and a consensus on the goals to be achieved. This was as true in the highly fluid situation of the early stages of the Korean War as it is today.*

*Major Garrett's article highlights the complexity of America's efforts to retain Allied support, while showing once again the criticality of timely, accurate information from senior military personnel on the ground. It was only when General J. Lawton Collins himself visited Korea that he was able to provide President Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff with the information they needed to formulate a course of action. We would do well to remember those lessons as we continue the business of forming the new brigade organizations that will be committed on future contingencies.*

On 28 November 1950, in response to Chinese attacks on the Eighth Army north of Pyongyang and X Corps at the Chosin reservoir, General Douglas MacArthur called an emergency conference at his Tokyo residence to discuss possible moves to counter the Chinese offensive. Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker, Eighth Army commander, and Lieutenant General Edward M. Almond, X Corps commander, flew back from the front to meet with MacArthur. Because the situation in the Eighth Army sector appeared the more precarious, the meeting focused on how to help General Walker regain control of the situation. MacArthur understood the need to extricate the 1st Marine and 7th Infantry Divisions from the fighting at the Chosin; nevertheless, he directed Almond to maintain contact with the Chinese and withdraw his forces to the Hungnam-Wonsan beachhead. This, he felt, would prevent the Chinese from turning the Eighth Army's flank and also preserve the X Corps. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) opposed this course of action, preferring instead that the Eighth Army and X Corps estab-

lish a contiguous defensive line across the narrow waist of Korea. On 4 December, however—faced with MacArthur's growing pessimism and strong objection to their position—the Joint Chiefs acquiesced and directed MacArthur to preserve his forces by ignoring the region northeast of the waist of Korea, except for strategic and tactical considerations relating to the security of his command. In other words, evacuate northeast Korea.

In the end, the decision to evacuate the Wonsan beachhead may have resulted more from MacArthur's pessimistic appraisal of the situation, and from political realities, than from an untenable tactical situation.

On 29 November MacArthur notified the JCS of his plans to withdraw the Eighth Army as far as necessary to prevent its envelopment by the Chinese. The X Corps, he explained, would withdraw to the Hungnam-Wonsan area and establish a beachhead. He then went on to assert that the current disposition of the X Corps actually threatened the flanks of the Chinese Army attacking Walker's forces. He failed to explain how this was possible, given the fact that the 1st Marine and 7th Infantry Divisions were currently executing a withdrawal under pressure from the Chosin Reservoir. Only the 3d Infantry Division, located near Wonsan, was available for any counterattack. Furthermore, any such attack would be across the Taebaek Mountains. In Almond's opinion, such an attack would result in the destruction of the 3d Division.

Finally, MacArthur disagreed with the JCS on establishing a defensive line across the narrow waist. In at least one respect, his rationale for not establishing this defense contradicted his claim that the X Corps posed a threat to the Chinese flank. MacArthur argued that the rugged mountain range separating Eighth Army and X Corps made it "impracticable" to establish a contiguous defensive line. Accepting this argument, it is difficult to understand how X Corps could threaten the flank of the Chinese forces operating on the *other side* of the Taebaek Mountains. Certainly, the mountain range would hinder X Corps' ability to maneu-

ver against the Chinese flank. Realistically, the tactical situation limited the options available to the United Nations forces. The Eighth Army was withdrawing to subsequent defensive positions in an attempt to establish a coherent defense. Simultaneously, X Corps was decisively engaged in its fighting withdrawal from the Chosin Reservoir. Under these circumstances, any coordinated operation of Eighth Army and X Corps was unlikely. This does not suggest that the UN Command was facing imminent defeat. To the contrary, field commanders were already identifying opportunities that would allow them to wrest the initiative from the Chinese.

On 3 December, the JCS received another dismal report from MacArthur that heightened anxiety in Washington. MacArthur explained that unless he received immediate reinforcements in significant numbers the Chinese forces would continue to push the UN forces into successive withdrawals. He predicted that each withdrawal would diminish the fighting strength of his forces and lead ultimately to the occupation of beachheads where the troops could do no more than hang on. In MacArthur's opinion, the Chinese were fighting an "undeclared war" that, if left unchecked, would continue the attrition of the UN Command and lead to its destruction.

In Washington, a joint conference of the Departments of State and Defense met to consider the situation and develop recommendations for President Harry Truman's consideration. The Joint Chiefs believed that an evacuation of Korea would be a political embarrassment to the United States. Since the U.S. had committed forces under the UN flag, a withdrawal would undermine the commitments of the Truman Doctrine. With respect to China's entry into the conflict, Admiral Forrest P. Sherman, Chief of Naval Operations, suggested that if China wanted war, the United States should get down to the business of defeating her. The State

Department, represented by Dean Acheson, viewed the situation in terms of the Cold War struggle. In his opinion, fighting China would be "fighting the second team," while the first team—the Soviet Union—took delight in seeing the U.S. bogged down in an Asian war with China.

Finally, the group agreed to recommend that MacArthur continue to consolidate his forces in the Hungnam-Wonsan beachheads. Truman accepted this recommendation, and on 4 December the JCS instructed MacArthur to focus on the preservation of his forces by consolidating them into beachheads. The JCS also decided to send General J. Lawton Collins, Army Chief of Staff and Executive Agent for the JCS, to Korea to assess the situation in view of MacArthur's pessimistic reports.

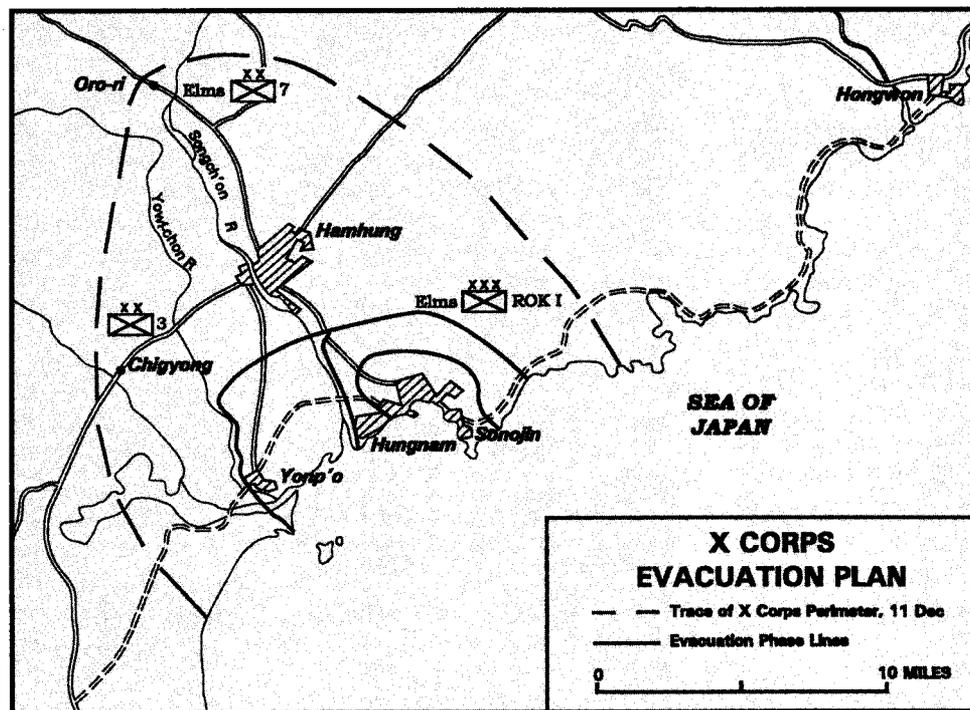
In Washington, the crisis, as reported by MacArthur, could not have come at a more inopportune time for the Truman Administration. The Republicans—reveling in their recent success in the November 1950 congressional elections—were subjecting Truman to intense scrutiny for being "soft on communism." The most vocal opponent was Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, who cited the Administration's failure in national security issues: the secret deals at Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam; the loss of atomic monopoly; the Alger Hiss espionage scandal; the Communist victory in China; and now the debacle in Korea.

The debate over Truman's foreign policy, especially in regard to China, limited his flexibility in responding to the current crisis. If he approached the Chinese on a cease-fire, the Republicans would probably renew their "soft on communism" charges. Furthermore, Truman Doctrine mandated that Washington *confront* communism. MacArthur's reports, if accurate, indicated that the Chinese were about to destroy the UN Command. Public support for the conflict was indifferent at best. In all likelihood, the nation would not support the deployment of additional forces to Korea.

And yet, the President could not stand by and allow the Chinese to destroy UN forces.

Compounding the problem were the growing tensions with Great Britain over the U.S. approach to the current crisis. On 4 December British Prime Minister Clement Attlee arrived in Washington to confer with Truman on the crisis. Attlee's visit was an attempt to assure the House of Commons and the British people that the United States would not commit its allies to a war with China without their willing consent.

During the talks, Attlee explained that part of the problem concerning America and her allies in regard to the Korean War was the continuing public complaints by MacArthur about the "privileged sanctuaries" of the Chinese and



European policy toward the Far East. In response, Truman issued a directive to all U.S. officials prohibiting public statements without prior clearance from the White House. Truman hoped the directive would curb MacArthur's frequent public statements at odds with Truman's intent. Ultimately, it was MacArthur's failure to comply with this directive that resulted in his dismissal.

While reaffirming Britain's commitment to the Korean effort, Attlee expressed hope that the UN would continue to be the forum for taking any action against China. Truman assured the Prime Minister that America's involvement in the conflict was in support of the UN and that any future U.S. action would be in support of UN decisions. The later stages of the talks dealt with issues of European security, and specifically with the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The conference ended with Truman and Attlee issuing a joint communiqué announcing the results.

While the meetings glossed over significant differences, such as the recognition of Communist China, two aspects influenced the decision to withdraw from Wonsan. First, Dean Acheson, attempting to allay Attlee's concerns over extending the war to China, explained that there were "not many of the President's advisers who would urge him to follow that course." Second, Truman and Attlee agreed that it would be advantageous to achieve a cease-fire along the old 38th parallel. By definition, such a proposal would entail the withdrawal of UN forces to positions south of that former demarcation line. Having abandoned the goal of forcefully unifying Korea, Truman could focus on withdrawing U.S. forces below the 38th parallel. His principle concern was probably whether Eighth Army and X Corps could escape destruction by the Chinese. General Collins, returning from his fact-finding trip to Korea, would provide the answer to that question.

### The Tactical Situation

General Collins had arrived in Tokyo on 4 December to obtain firsthand information on the situation. After a brief visit with MacArthur, he flew to Seoul and met with General Walker. Walker explained the general situation and stated that Eighth Army could withdraw to Pusan and hold indefinitely, provided the X Corps reinforced him. He felt that the growing gap between Eighth Army and X Corps made it impossible to defend Seoul along the Han River. In his opinion, such a defense would threaten his forces with encirclement.

Collins departed Seoul on 6 December en route to X Corps headquarters in Hamhung. Reflecting on Walker's briefings, he became convinced that Eighth Army's situation, although serious, was not as perilous as MacArthur had reported. Almond met Collins at the airstrip and took him on an aerial reconnaissance of X Corps defensive positions covering the beachheads. He briefed Collins on the status of the withdrawal of forces from Hagaru-ri and expressed the belief that X Corps could complete its withdrawal into the beachheads and defend them for a considerable period.

General Collins left Korea with an assessment of the situation that differed markedly from MacArthur's reports.

Drawing on the briefings of field commanders and a personal reconnaissance of the front, Collins did not believe that the Chinese could force the UN Command out of Korea. He did agree with MacArthur, however, that the U.S. should evacuate Korea if the UN chose not to give full support to operations against the Chinese attacks. Collins arrived back in Washington on 8 December and immediately briefed Truman and Attlee, who were then concluding their conference. He ended his briefing by expressing the opinion that while the situation was serious, it was not critical.

Collins's analysis of the tactical situation was correct. Although Eighth Army and X Corps had suffered significant losses of personnel and equipment, they still had enough forces to conduct a withdrawal and defend the beachheads. The X Corps—with its lines of communication becoming shorter and with extensive stockpiles of supplies in the beachheads—could defend Hungnam-Wonsan for an extended period. Given the primitive nature of the Chinese logistics system, and the fact that they had suffered significant losses at the Chosin Reservoir, it was doubtful that they could continue the offensive. Also, the UN Command had complete and unchallenged air supremacy, made possible by forward-operating bases in Korea and the carrier-based aircraft operating in the Sea of Japan. After reorganizing and reconstituting the forces in the beachheads, the X Corps could probably have resumed the offensive, assuming the UN Command received reinforcements. Certainly, once the X Corps established its defense in the beachheads, there was no danger of the Chinese pushing the Americans into the sea.

Clearly, MacArthur's defeatist appraisal of the situation in Korea convinced the JCS and the Truman Administration that American forces were in danger of annihilation. Although General Collins's report on the situation provided a more realistic assessment, it would not influence the political decision to evacuate the Wonsan beachheads.

Having failed to unify Korea by force and limit the scope of the conflict, as evidenced by the entry of Chinese forces, Truman now attempted to set the conditions for a cease-fire by withdrawing X Corps. What Truman and others failed to recognize was that maintaining the Wonsan beachheads could have been used as a bargaining chip in bringing the Chinese and North Koreans to the negotiating table. There was no tactical imperative for the withdrawal of forces, nor was there any certainty that a unilateral withdrawal by the UN would have the desired effect. In the end, it was political considerations instead of operational necessity that led to the evacuation of the Wonsan beachheads.

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