

INTRODUCTION

As 1950 opened, there were “grounds for cautious optimism.”¹ After the series of reverses suffered in eastern Europe and Asia during the late 1940s, the Western democracies seemed at last to be making steady, if unspectacular progress, towards containing Communism. Canada and its North Atlantic allies made a moderate start in early 1950 on controlling exports to the Soviet bloc, on providing military aid to Western Europe and on determining North Atlantic defence requirements. Moreover, they began to re-define the economic relationship that united Europe and North America. By the early spring of 1950, Canadian rhetoric reflected the country’s renewed confidence. “The steps taken to implement the North Atlantic treaty,” the Minister of National Defence, Brooke Claxton, asserted in March, “... have increased the improbability of military aggression and strengthened the faith of the western European nations in the possibility of preventing aggression by collective action.”²

The apparent diminution of the Soviet threat in Western Europe allowed Canadian policy-makers to turn their attention to Asia, where decolonization, economic under-development and Communism were beginning to prove an unstable and dangerous mixture. Early in the new year, the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson, with a handful of advisors, climbed the wobbly steps of an RCAF North Star for the lengthy voyage to Ceylon for a meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers. This conference and its aftermath, which this volume documents in considerable detail (Chapter 7), had important implications for Canadian foreign policy. It reinforced Ottawa’s increasingly multilateral perspective on Commonwealth affairs and underlined Great Britain’s waning attraction for the Canadian government as the centre of this historic association. In pioneering the transfer of Western capital to the developing world through what eventually became the Colombo Plan for Co-operative Economic Development in South and South-East Asia, these Commonwealth discussions drew from a hesitant and reluctant Canadian Cabinet the acknowledgement that the problem of world poverty was Canada’s problem too.

More important, the Minister’s trip to Ceylon and his subsequent tour through Asia added a Far Eastern orientation to Canadian foreign policy. Whether or not Indo-Canadian relations were especially close during this period,³ there is little doubt that Pearson’s exposure to the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had a profound impact on the Canadian’s thinking. Pearson, who later described Nehru as “an extraordinary combination of a Hindu mystic ... and an Eton-Oxbridge type of Englishman,”⁴ was never entirely comfortable with the Indian premier, but he listened carefully to his views on Asian issues. As a result, Canadian policy towards Indochina (Chapter 11), Kashmir (Chapter 3) and China (Chapter 11) bore the unmistakable imprint of Nehru’s influence. Canada’s attempt to understand and respond to Asia as it became a new arena for Cold War conflict forms one of the major themes of this volume.

¹ *Report of the Department of External Affairs, Canada, 1950* (Ottawa: King’s Printer, 1951) p. v.

² Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, March 17, 1950, p. 852.

³ See Escott Reid, *Envoy to Nehru* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁴ L.B. Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, Volume 2, 1948-1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), p. 118.