

A shifting Asian power balance and China's changing priorities

By William Saywell

"China watching" has always been an intriguing and exciting, but hazardous occupation. Hard, cold information on the policy-making process and the shifting loci of power in Peking is hopelessly inadequate at the time new policies are unfolding. Most of us have fallen off the proverbial limb more often than we wish to recall. In the past five years the record has been staggering.

Yet, for the courageous or foolhardy, the contemporary remains compelling. With the height of the Cultural Revolution having been safely passed by the autumn of 1968, the attention of China-watchers riveted on what was then labelled the "warming trend" in Chinese foreign policy. It was at about that time that China appeared intent upon improving its foreign image, which had become badly tarnished in many capitals during the summer of 1967.

When Sino-Canadian talks opened in Stockholm in February 1969, they were watched with keen interest in countless world capitals. But as they dragged on interminably observers warned that the road to normal relations with the People's Republic of China remained a long and bumpy one, with Peking more insistent than ever that there could be no detour around the Taiwan tangle. It took the Canadians more than 18 months not only to find the magic formula of "taking note" of Peking's claim to sovereignty over Taiwan but also to convince the Chinese that we were sincere in our position and not about to use it as some kind of "Two-China" ploy.

In the next 12 months, the walls quite literally came tumbling down — walls in many capitals and the procedural ones in the United Nations General Assembly. The past year has afforded the spectacle of dozens of new diplomats struggling to find accommodation in Peking, ping-pong players and American newsmen meeting Chou En-lai, Henry Kissinger slipping in and out of China announcing that President Nixon would soon follow, and the

vote giving the Chinese entry into the United Nations.

It was an extraordinary year. As one looks back over it, a personal confession must preface any attempt at analysis. I applauded the long overdue establishment of Canadian-Chinese diplomatic relations, but warned Canadian audiences that it would not have very momentous international implications. After all, we had been forced to confront the Taiwan issue more squarely than the French, who in 1964 simply recognized the People's Republic of China without any mention of Taiwan at all. In this respect the Chinese had grown tougher, not more flexible. Yet, despite this and the more obvious limitations to the influence a "middle power" can exert, it now appears that Canada did play a very significant role in breaking the log-jam, both in bilateral relations between other nations and China, including the United States, and at the United Nations.

Other nations encouraged

Canada's role has not been limited simply to finding the diplomatic formula that could be used by other nations. Our success unquestionably encouraged other nations like Italy and Belgium to believe that Washington's China policy was itself changing. It had become widely rumoured that on at least two earlier occasions direct American pressure helped dissuade Ottawa from beginning negotiations for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. Indeed, even if direct pressure from the

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