

CANADA'S MULTILATERAL VOCATION

I. MULTILATERALISM - WHY WE NEED IT

With the neat order of a bipolar world gone the 1990's will be confused. The creation of new states, the redesigning of security arrangements, the trend toward regionalism - all mean that Canada will be active and probably creative. But will we be as relevant in international politics as our influence in Europe wanes, and our foreign policy comes more and more to resemble that of the United States?

Canada's membership in the G 7 will remain a key entrée to international influence as long as our economy can meet the entrance requirements. But NATO, traditionally a pillar of our diplomacy, is moving increasingly toward European institutions and regional issues, diminishing the counterweight it provided against what was seen as Canada's isolation in North America with the US. As the EC bloc becomes more exclusive, the Canadian economy will be tied even more closely to NAFTA and any intermediary role between the US and Europe is likely to become increasingly vestigial. The CSCE, East Europe and the former USSR may offer more scope for Canadian foreign policy, especially in the Ukraine and Baltic States because of the sizeable immigrant diaspora, but overall Canada's assistance (and influence) is likely to be modest.

Possibilities appear to exist in the Asia/Pacific region through ASEAN and North Pacific security arrangements, where Canada's trade has for some time been more important than with the Atlantic area. But the fact is that in Canada there is a drift to continentalism and Americanization, like it or not, stimulated by the almost overwhelming media blitz washing over the country every day from the south via TV, books and magazines and confirmed by the NAFTA accord. In seeking foreign policy lines distinct from the US not much more than Cuba remains, though Canada's early diplomatic pioneering in the USSR and China in 1969-71 demonstrated how valuable an independent line could be.

1. The Other Option

If there is a danger of marginalization implicit in all this, Canada still has an option which springs from its own foreign policy roots, and that is the path of multilateralism, specifically in the United Nations and its agencies, renewed and adapted for the decade ahead. (a) Through these channels Canada can also pursue its own priorities, using well-chosen strategic alliances with others. (b) At the same time multilateralism has perhaps never been so important in our long history of attempting to survive next to a giant neighbour and in differentiating our policies from theirs.