

The 1988

CIIPS

Public Opinion

Survey

INTEREST IN CANADA ON SECURITY AND DEFENCE issues, it has often been charged, is virtually non-existent. As a result, there is little informed opinion or discussion about these issues and no tradition of consistent commitment to a strong defence. Canada, according to C. P. Stacey, the country's most eminent military historian, is an "unmilitary community." Canadians, he asserts, have "an apparently deep-rooted reluctance to spend money on military preparation in time of peace."

The results of a new public opinion survey sponsored by the Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security might seem at first glance to bear out the argument that Canadians neither care about,

of an ally desirous of influencing the course of both its bilateral defence arrangements and its multilateral alliance, or at the very least provide for a right of consultation. In the case of NATO they reinforce a linkage with Europe, providing a small but concrete symbol of a Canadian commitment to those countries. If there is no military rationale for deciding, say, the number of Canadian troops that should be deployed on the Rhine, such calculations necessarily become essentially political-diplomatic in character. If this is the case then it surely sheds important light on how Canadians can be expected to view many defence and security issues. It is simply unreasonable to expect Canadians to regard their own defence preparedness in the same manner in which, for example, Israelis regard theirs.

CANADIANS AND THEIR DEFENCE

Despite the fact that most Canadians no longer harbour cold war views, most are still committed to the Western alliance and conventional defence.

BY DON MUNTON

nor care for, defence and security. For example, they approve continued membership in NATO but reject its basic doctrine for defending Europe. They claim to support present or greater levels of defence spending but reject tax increases for this purpose and believe arms reductions will increase, not decrease, security.

Closer examination of the poll results suggests, however, that neither the assumed ignorance and inconsistency nor this "unmilitary" label are accurate characterizations, especially in the context of Canada's security situation. While it is certainly true that there is less public debate about defence and security in Canada than many other countries, it does not necessarily follow that Canadians have uninformed or random views about military matters.

It is widely recognized that the security of Canada cannot be assured by its own, autonomous effort. This stems not merely from the impossibility of defence in the age of ballistic missiles and nuclear warheads, but also because of the country's large territory and relatively limited human and economic resources. Coupled with these factors are Canada's particular geographic position and the near certainty of American involvement in the case of any attack on Canada. The possible contribution to Canadian security of Canadian military forces, is, as one writer among many has noted, "no more than marginal."

Given this situation, defence analysts argue, the Canadian armed forces represent the dues expected

THERE IS EVIDENCE IN THE PUBLIC OPINION DATA CONSIDERED HERE that Canadians do, in fact, apply a rough political-strategic logic to their views on defence and security policy. Their attitudes on these issues cluster around four main questions: (1) What alignment or defence arrangements are most desirable? (2) What level of defence expenditures is necessary? (3) What military capabilities are possible and appropriate? and (4) What general policies ought to be followed?

Current Canadian opinion can be considered with respect to each question. First, it is useful to examine attitudes on a number of background factors: The 1988 CIIPS poll confirms what the 1987 one suggested, that Canadians' attitudes on peace and security have undergone some substantial changes since the 1960s. There is clear evidence that perceptions of friends and foes have shifted and that perceptions of threat no longer correspond with standard cold war scenarios.

Overall, Canadian confidence in the ability of the US to deal with world problems is only very slightly greater than that in the ability of the Soviet Union. Neither superpower, majorities say, genuinely wants disarmament and neither, near majorities say, can be trusted entirely to keep its part of any arms control bargain.

While half of the Canadian public agrees with the statement that "the Soviet military threat is constantly growing and represents a real, immediate danger to the West," half also disagrees. A bare 5% perceive the USSR to be the greatest threat to world peace; most point to the arms race, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, and non-European regional conflicts such as the Middle East.

Moreover, most (75%) think a Soviet attack on Western Europe in the next ten years is unlikely or very unlikely; almost 80% similarly regard the chances of such an attack on North America. At the very least, the security threat perceived by Canadians is no longer simply or even mainly Moscow.

None of this change, fundamental and long-term

The survey, the second in an annual series of such surveys, was commissioned by CIIPS and designed by the author and Institute staff. This article represents the first public release of the results. It was conducted in June-July 1988 by the Longwoods Research Group with a national sample selected randomly to be representative of Canadian households and chosen from a panel of 30,000 households maintained by Market Facts Ltd. The survey was conducted by mail and comprised 1002 respondents in all, 573 of whom also participated in the 1987 survey. The response rate to the 1988 survey was 63%. The margin of error with a sample of this size is approximately +/- 3%, 95 times out of 100. The full descriptive results of the survey and technical information on sampling, etc, are available in a CIIPS Working Paper by Michael Driedger and Don Munton.