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## The Shaping of Canadian Foreign Policy: 1945-1957

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## Abstract

The years between 1945 and 1957 represent a time period in which Canadian foreign policy emerged. It was during this time that Canada became a truly sovereign and autonomous nation, and was beginning to receive recognition on the international stage. Issues to be examined include: transformation of Canadian foreign policy from heavy dependence on Britain to becoming an autonomous function of the domestic government; the increase in involvement in multilateral organizations, and how the instability of these encouraged the diversification of external policies; the effects of internal influences, mainly changing domestic governments, and that of external influences, including allies and enemies; and the effects of the Suez crisis in 1956 and how the fundamentals of Canadian foreign policy materialized.

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To comprehend how Canadian foreign policy developed into what it is today, it is crucial to understand the conditions in which original policy was

based. The years between 1945 and 1957 represent a time period in which Canadian foreign policy emerged. It was during this time that Canada became a truly sovereign and autonomous nation, and began to receive recognition on the international stage. In order to gain depth into this development it is important to study world events leading up to this period, including the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War. One must also investigate the developments surrounding this time period; specifically: how Canadian external policies transformed from being dependent on Britain to becoming an autonomous unit operating within the government; the increase in involvement in multilateral organizations, and how the instability of these encouraged the diversification of external policies; the effects of internal influences, mainly the federal government, and that of external influences, including the impact of allies and enemies; and the effects of the Suez crisis in 1956 and how the fundamentals of Canadian foreign policy materialized.

To first comprehend how Canadian foreign policy originally took shape, it is essential to consider the world situation of the time. The end of the First World War, in 1918, created a desire among nations to ensure global stability and a balance of power. This ultimately led to the creation of international organizations, the first most notably being the League of Nations. This strategic military alliance was designed to provide a balance of power to the Axis of Evil but proved to be unsuccessful <sup>1</sup> as world events eventually led to the Second World War. The demise of the League of Nations appeared to be the beginning and end of multilateral organizations; however upon the conclusion of World War II (1945) many nations were again eager to ensure international stability. The renewed inspiration among nations ultimately resulted in the United Nations (U.N.). The difference between the League of Nations and the U.N. was most notably "the United Nations [was more of] an organization for diplomacy rather than [enforcer] of collective security" ("Shaping of Peace" Vol. 2 292). This was reflected in the organization of the U.N. Security Council, which was primarily a monopoly of super-powers dominating the interests of the council <sup>2</sup>. This fundamental ineffectiveness of the U.N. was a primary motivator to the creation of new security alliances including; the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact. The development of these multilateral institutions eventually resulted in the shift of the international political stage. The end of the World Wars marked the beginning of an intense and ideologically motivated war, which later became known as the Cold War. Divisions of ideology between Western nations (primarily the United States), and Eastern nations (primarily the Soviet Union), was another reason previous war-time alliances became ineffective, and thus highlighted the need for new security alliance such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact. This disintegration of alliances in addition to the "unprincipled use of the veto [which] paralyzed the United Nations" was just the beginning of the changing international relations of the world (Granatstein 2).

During this time of international adjustment Canadian foreign policy was also beginning to evolve. Traditionally Canada tended to be isolationistic in her

approach to external relations, described as containing a “lingering colonial mentality” (“Canadian External Policies” 137).

... Canadian foreign policy was virtually non-existent, and aside from the small but influential Canadian Institute of International Affairs, there were few men interested in current policy outside the ranks of the department of External Affairs. (Granatstein 1)

Although Canada created the Department of External Affairs in 1909, designed to provide some level of autonomy in the world arena, Canada did not legally have control over external relations until 1931 with the Statute of Westminster (Melakopides 37). This being said, however, policies of isolationism favoured by Mackenzie King, and Canada's strong links to Britain led to Canada's involvement in the Second World War, as King gave in to Chamberlain's policies of appeasement (Melakopides 37). It is due to this that some would argue that Canada's external relations were “conducted in a semi-autonomous fashion” up until 1945<sup>3</sup> (Melakopides 37). Even after the era of British domination over Canadian foreign policy Canada still insisted on policies of isolationism. King took pride in his vision of Canada, one in which concern of domestic issues over-rid the need to be burdened by foreign issues (“Canadian External Policies” 137). King's isolationistic policies were to avoid conflicts overseas principally due to the domestic issues that were created as a result, primarily the conscription crisis during the First World War, which ultimately divided the nation (Melakopides 37).

It is in this time in which Canada resumed her focus on domestic issues that the external world began to evolve into the ideological differences which would transform international relations.

The Atlantic Alliance... had long shed its original character of a multilateral coalition of reciprocal advantage between the North American and European members and had become, from the security standpoint, largely a relationship of guarantor and guaranteed and, from the political, appeared to be moving towards a bi-polar American-European system in which Canada's place was uncertain. (Buchan 16)

It appeared as though Canada's place in the international system was becoming uncertain. This was largely due to the fact Canada placed much of “its security eggs in the U.N. basket in 1945, and the armed forces had been demobilized” (Granatstein 2). It was in this time that the United Nations had been “declin[ing] steadily in authority and relevance”<sup>4</sup> that posed the biggest threat to Canadian security (Buchan 16). Lester B. Pearson recognized Canada had too much conviction in the U.N. in 1946 as he said “little confidence can be placed in the ability of the U.N. to guarantee security...” (qtd. in Pearson 19).

Regardless of this supposed decline, however, Mackenzie King's idea of functionalism revived Canada's place on the world stage. This idea enforced the belief that "each nation should have responsibility appropriate to its particular capacities" ("Canadian External Policies" 137). This functional theory, as it later became known, proved Canada's role as a middle power was important in the international system. It was not until the end of the Mackenzie King government that Canada began to fully embrace her role as an international actor.

The tradition of conducting foreign affairs semi-autonomously ended in 1948 when the King government was replaced by Louis St. Laurent. The new Prime Minister was described as "less inhibited by the phobias which had prevented both nationalists and imperialists in the past from seeing Canada's place in the world clearly and confidently" ("Canadian External Policies" 138). With the change of government in Canada came the beginning of what is known as the "St. Laurent-Pearson Era [(1945-57)]" which contributed to the shaping of foreign policy for succeeding years (Melakopides 38). Laurent brought a new vision to Canadian foreign policy as he embraced his new Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Lester B. Pearson ("Canadian External Policies" 137).

Under Pearson's direction, Canada increased her involvement in numerous multilateral organizations. These organizations were not limited to security commitments, as most did in the past, but also encompassed economic and social obligations. Such organizations included: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank <sup>5</sup>. During this same time period Canada engaged in numerous international treaties and pacts increasing the size of international commitments;

... [These commitments] included sustained contributions that spanned the entire spectrum of the U.N.'s agenda and mandate... Canada dealt energetically and creatively with social, economic, educational, and technical issues, including those of disarmament and arms control. (Melakopides 41)

John Holmes indicates in his essay on Canadian external policies, Canadian diplomatic missions and international responsibilities "multiplied from seven in 1939 to sixty five in 1962" (138). Participation in such obligations promoting economic and social security may have increased in such a dramatic fashion since a deep sense of Canadian self-importance in foreign relations developed as a result of such involvement. The pride of Canadian contributions to multilateral organizations eventually became an expectation among foreign policy advocates.

It is worthy of noting that Canada's foreign policy of the time was heavily influenced by close allies, such as Britain and more importantly the United States. As international events transpired and the Cold War continued to divide nations, it became apparent Canada must consider her relations with the U.S., and the outcomes if a war were to ever become a reality (Granatstein 3). Canadian involvement in NATO was largely due to the events surrounding the Berlin Blockade, which was believed to be the beginning of another World War. It was Pearson's view that signing onto NATO "was the best hope to prevent war in the absence of a UN system of collective security" (Seize the day, 24). Canada's geographical proximity to the U.S. also motivated the signing of the Ogdensburg Agreement <sup>6</sup>, and later the NORAD agreement; due to the idea that if a war to ever be fought between the Soviet Union and the United States, Canada would be devastated (Melakopides 40; Granatstein 3).

Although Canada's external relations were being influenced by the great powers, Canada continued to maintain commitment to multilateral organizations. Canadian involvement in the Korean War was "nominally under the aegis of the U.N. but in fact an American-run operation" (Granatstein 2). It became apparent that Canada became involved in foreign issues, not due to their interest in them, but because of their "lack of interests," this was the basis of Canada's "reputation for objectivity and independence, if not neutrality, in international affairs" ("Canadian External Policies" 137). As Canada attempted to maintain impartiality in global affairs she was also responsible for shaping these affairs. Upon becoming involved with NATO Canada insisted that the organization not merely be a "collectiveness of common defense," but also a medium for non-military cooperation (Melakopides 44). This determination ultimately resulted in Article 2 <sup>7</sup> of the NATO charter (Melakopides 44). The values Canada pursued during the time not only shaped NATO but also laid the foundation of future foreign policy.

It was not until the Suez Canal Crisis <sup>8</sup> of 1956 that Canada exercised the diplomacy and neutrality which would become the cornerstone of all Canadian foreign policy. The Suez Canal was a time of high tension between Egypt, Israel, Britain, and France. Essentially the conflict stemmed from a long list of different events involving these countries, but was highlighted by the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 by the Egyptian government. Britain and France took issue with this since they had invested a significant amount of money into the construction of the canal, and therefore a controlling stake of the canal. With the nationalization came the possibility of losing their controlling stake over the operation of the canal, which may have resulted in the upset of Western economies as the canal was a major oil supply route. Pressure for war mounted as aspects from the Cold War besieged the conflict. It appeared as though the conflict would result in the next World War. Some compared the situation to that of Hitler, and the beginnings of the Second World War. During the crisis Canada and the United States were called upon, as in the past, by Britain to support the old war-time alliances. However Canada and the U.S. both refused to become entangled in yet another European conflict. As the

circumstances intensified Canada insisted on diffusing the situation, and this became a top priority of Canada foreign policy. (Pearson 137-155)

The Suez crisis was very significant for Canada as it threatened to undermine the international institutions Canada had been committed to. Pearson was apprehensive about the fact that if Britain were to take action in the Suez crisis, the Commonwealth would be divided, NATO would be ruined and the United Nations would be undermined<sup>9</sup> (English 131). Specifically there were three main concerns of Canada, Prime Minister Laurent commented;

The first was the impact on the United Nations, whose position was undermined by the British-French-Israel joint action. The second was the Commonwealth, whose unity was threatened... The third was 'the deplorable divergence of viewpoints and policy between the U.K. and the U.S... [whose] cooperation and friendship is the very foundation of our hopes for progress toward a peaceful and secure world. (qtd. in English 135)

Such comments by the Prime Minister indicated the seriousness of the situation, which required immediate action. It was the foreign affairs minister, Pearson, who turned his full attention to preventative action in the middle-east. Pearson eventually developed the idea of the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF), commonly known as peacekeeping, to intervene in the imposing situation (Buchan 17). As Robert Bothwell indicates it was through Canadian neutrality that Pearson was able to bridge the gap between seemingly old allies (26). Acting through this neutrality Canada was able to maintain objectivity in the situation as to not damage close ties with allies, but to also ensure that military confrontation never occurred. The new concepts of peacekeeping allowed time to attempt to reach a resolution<sup>10</sup> on the Suez issue. It was upon this that Canadian foreign policy of multilateralism was truly established, as Pearson renewed faith in the U.N. as a body capable of handling "regional or global crisis by diplomatic means" (Melakopides 40). In 1957 Pearson was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in creating the UNEF, Pearson commented "in the end, the whole problem always returns to people... to one person and his own individual response to the challenge that confronts him" (qtd. in English 143). Success in handling global conflicts in such a diplomatic manner gave way to the Canadian tradition of being a leader in peacekeeping; over the next ten years Canada was engaged in numerous operations in countries including: Lebanon, Congo, Yemen, New Guinea, Cyprus, and India-Pakistan (Granatstein 3). This involvement solidified Canada's role in world affairs, and gave Canadians an immense pride in their nation on the global stage. This carried over to foreign affairs by popular demand in Canada, and has since been a major contributing factor in developing new foreign relation policies.

After examining the conditions in which Canadian foreign policy was created it becomes apparent that many events played a factor in forging the policy. It was in a time of change, where a major shift in the balance of power

occurred, and a time of uncertainty that Canada managed to lay the foundation of her foreign policy. The policy at the time was largely a result of the international events that were occurring and the open-mindedness of the Canadian government. The importance of international organizations has been ingrained into Canadian government. These traditions created from the time period between 1945 and 1957 have given Canada a highly respected name on the world stage, and a reputation of neutrality. This reputation will most likely be the basis of future foreign policies, as Canadians have a deep sense of pride in their countries involvement in global affairs.

## Endnotes

1. The failure of the League of Nations was due to a number of complex issues relating to World War I. For more information see Holmes 188.
2. The veto power allocated to each of the super-powers on the Security Council led to over-all ineffectiveness of the council ("Shaping of Peace" Vol. 2).
3. The end of World War II and Canada's involvement in peace-talks is when many believe the strong British influence in Canadian politics officially ended. See Granatstein 2-3.
4. This decline is largely attributed to the aforementioned monopoly of super-powers in the Security Council. Refer to page 6 for more information
5. These are only a few of the most notable institutions Canada became involved with.
6. An agreement promoting the cooperation of Canada-U.S. military, see Ogdensburg Agreement for more information.
7. The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them. (North Atlantic Treaty).
8. For more in-depth information on the Suez crisis see Pearson 137-155 and Suez Crisis.
9. "...[I]f Britain attacked Nasser it 'would be brought before the UN as an aggressor;" if such action were to occur it was believed that the UN would undoubtedly collapse (English 130).
10. A permanent resolution was not successful, but Pearson's initiatives allowed time to alleviate tensions and prevent a war (Granatstein 3).

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