

HS

# Canada as a Middle Power

Between 1945 and 1982, three leaders—Lester B. Pearson, John Diefenbaker, and Pierre Trudeau—asserted Canada's independence on the world stage as a middle power and global mediator.

## LESTER B. PEARSON

Canada's role as mediator developed, in part, because of the Suez Crisis. The Suez Canal is a vital waterway linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, a shortcut for ships that must otherwise circumnavigate Africa. Constructed by the French between 1859 and 1869, from 1869 onward it was operated by British and French interests. In July 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt seized the canal from British and French control. As this action was seen as a threat to western links to vital Asian resources and markets, Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt and took over the canal zone. The Soviet Union supported Egypt and threatened to attack Britain and France.

Instead of backing Britain, which would have been the traditional Canadian course, Canada adopted the position of peacemaker. Lester B. Pearson, at the time Canada's minister of external affairs, proposed an international force to secure and supervise an ending of hostilities. The United Nations welcomed Pearson's idea. Within days, a UN force of soldiers from various countries, including Canada, was in the canal zone. The hostile countries withdrew their forces and found a peaceful solution. This mission marked the start of international peacekeeping. Since then, Canada has been involved in almost every UN peacekeeping mission around the world, although in recent years Canada's contributions to those missions have fallen.

## JOHN DIEFENBAKER

In 1959, Cuban communist forces, led by Fidel Castro, successfully overthrew the pro-American government of Cuba. The Soviet Union supported Castro, which made the United States uneasy because Cuba is just 150 kilometres south of Florida.

In 1962, the United States discovered that Soviet ships were secretly transporting missiles to Cuba. United States President John F. Kennedy demanded that the ships turn around. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev refused. The world held its breath as Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged stern warnings and threats of nuclear war in what became known as

the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy placed American forces on a state of high alert and asked the Canadian government to do the same. However, Prime Minister John Diefenbaker refused to do this right away. Canada was friendly with Cuba, and Canadian officials feared that the alert might provoke a Soviet attack.

Diefenbaker was also upset that Canada had not been consulted about the crisis. In debates in the House of Commons, Diefenbaker proposed that a UN force investigate the validity of a nuclear threat from Cuba. His suggestion caused a rift with American leaders, who did not like having their assessment of the threat questioned.

Fortunately, the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles and the crisis subsided. After this event, the United States stopped all relations with Cuba. Despite American pressure, Canada continues its friendship with Cuba and has become the country's leading investor and trading partner.

**Figure 13-37** What point was political cartoonist Edwin McNally trying to get across in this 1961 cartoon, which shows Prime Minister Diefenbaker running to intervene in a wrestling match between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev?



## PIERRE TRUDEAU

When Pierre Trudeau became prime minister in 1968, he continued to forge a path for Canada as an independent nation and middle power. As tensions in the Cold War began to ease in the late 1960s, Prime Minister Trudeau decided to slash Canada's defence spending. Trudeau also tried to strengthen Canada's presence on the international stage. Trudeau believed that if Canada was to remain a strong country, it needed to set its foreign policies independent of American interests. While the United States had stopped all political and economic relations with Cuba, Trudeau strengthened Canada's ties with the communist country. And while the United States was

hostile to the communist People's Republic of China, Canada broke rank with the Americans by officially recognizing the republic and supporting China's membership in the United Nations. Trudeau also began to seek out new and wider trading relationships with China, Japan, and other Asian countries.

Although Trudeau agreed to allow American cruise missiles to be tested in Canadian air space, he phased out nuclear armaments and froze contributions to NATO. Canada also dismantled NORAD's Bomarc missile sites in northern Canada. By 1984, the last nuclear warheads had been removed from Canada.

**Figure 13-38** Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro and Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau join a singalong during Trudeau's visit to Cuba in 1976. On one of his rare international trips, Castro came to Canada in October 2000 to serve as an honorary pallbearer at Trudeau's funeral.



HS

1. What was the historical significance of Canada defining itself as a middle power during and after the Cold War?
2. Imagine that you were a Canadian soldier who was part of the UN peacekeeping force that went to the Suez Canal in 1956. You are now describing the significance of this mission to your grandchildren.

What points would you mention? Explain why. Would your explanation to friends and family have been the same in 1957? Explain your answer.

3. In looking back, how were the decisions of Pearson, Diefenbaker, and Trudeau historically significant for Canada and its path as a middle power?