NATO's Organization: How it Works

All 16 member states of the Alliance are represented on the North Atlantic Council, the highest consultative forum in the Alliance. Each has an equal voice and all decisions require consensus. The Council meets weekly at the level of ambassadors, and twice yearly at the level of foreign ministers. It may be called into emergency session at any time.

The Defence Planning Committee, established in 1966, and made up of representatives from all members except France, is responsible for questions concerning NATO's collective defence activities. This committee meets regularly at the level of ambassadors, and twice yearly at the level of defence ministers.

Only three members of NATO (the United States, the United Kingdom and France) have nuclear weapons. Of these, the United States and the United Kingdom are integrated into the military structure of NATO. To facilitate involvement by the non-nuclear members of the Alliance in NATO's nuclear affairs, the Nuclear Planning Group was also established in 1966. This group has permitted wider participation in the nuclear decision-making process.

The senior military authority of NATO is the Military Committee, made up of all NATO Members except France and Iceland. It advises both the North Atlantic Council and the Defence Planning Committee on those measures considered necessary for the common defence of the NATO area.

NATO's integrated military forces are divided into three major commands: Europe, the Atlantic and the Channel. Each Supreme Allied Commander is responsible for the planning of the defence of the region for which he is responsible, under the guidance of the Military Committee.

To assist in the co-ordination of work, a large number of subordinate committees and groups have been established to deal with matters as varied as civil emergency planning, political developments outside NATO, defence planning, analysis of economic relations between East and West, armaments co-operation, as well as scientific and environmental co-operation.

NATO's Role in East/West Relations

NATO's basic principles, its strength of purpose and solidarity deserve considerable credit for helping to defer conflict in Europe and to resolve East/West differences. Indeed, after four decades, NATO can be said to be the most successful example of collective defence in European history.

In 1967, the Harmel Report on "The Future Tasks of the Alliance," unanimously endorsed by NATO members, concluded that NATO continues to have two main functions: deterrence of conflict and defence against aggression should it occur; and the pursuit of progress towards a more stable East/West relationship. This two-track approach to East/West relations — combining steadfastness and solidarity on the one hand, and an open-minded and positive approach to negotiation on the other — has made possible the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, signed in Washington, D.C. on December 8, 1987.

To deter and defend against potential aggressors, NATO Allies co-ordinate their defensive arrangements through collective planning. Two topics which are being discussed at present and which relate directly to deterrence and defence are the Comprehensive Concept and nuclear modernization. The former concerns the development of a conceptual approach to arms control which takes account of the requirement to maintain weapons systems for our security while at the same time satisfies the desire of the Allies to see an immediate further reduction of nuclear weapons in Europe. The latter, nuclear modernization of our weapons system in Europe, is considered necessary to ensure an effective policy of deterrence and defence. To promote a better understanding of political developments and of ways of reducing international tensions, the Allies exchange information and views on political trends and developments which may affect the interests of