

On the eve of their meeting in Brussels, the NATO ministers faced a difficult dilemma. By its actions, the U.S.S.R. had dramatically rejected a conception of détente upon which all Western planning had been based. In addition to hopes of successful arms-limitation talks with the U.S.S.R., the Western conception of détente had assumed that there would be a gradual evolution within the Communist bloc towards more humane and open societies, together with a gradual establishment of healthy relations between Eastern and Western Europe. There had been an underlying assumption on our part that the Soviet Union would acquiesce in these developments; certainly, they were not expected to have recourse to force to impede them. This assumption proved wrong and now there can only be serious doubts about how the Soviet Union will react to the changes which must inevitably occur in Eastern Europe. This new situation could affect Western interests indirectly, or even directly in the case of West Berlin, which is surrounded by the territory of the so-called German Democratic Republic.

Despite the setback the Soviet Union had dealt to their hopes, NATO member states realized there was no real long-term alternative to East-West understanding.

The question, therefore, was: How could they most effectively bring some influence to bear on Soviet leaders? How could NATO register its condemnation of the Soviet Union's action in Czechoslovakia while still holding the door ajar to the resumed pursuit of peaceful and mutually beneficial relations between East and West, including progress in the vital fields of disarmament and arms-control?

Since this was a problem shared by all members of the alliance, the opportunity which the Brussels meeting provided for consultation with other countries in similar circumstances demonstrated once again the value of the consultative aspect of NATO's activities. For Canada, it was not only an occasion to hear the views of others; it also provided us with an opportunity to play a part in determining the kind of response which NATO should make to the Soviet intervention. In this way, we can reasonably feel that we were able to influence the evolution of East-West relations in a direction that I believe reflected the views of Canadians -- i.e., that NATO should respond in a firm yet restrained fashion.

It is a tribute to the alliance that it was possible to solve so effectively the dilemma of condemning Soviet action while still holding the door ajar, as well as to reconcile the nuances of difference with which 15 governments would naturally view a situation as complicated as the one which has been brought about in Eastern Europe. A sense of compromise founded on common purpose and the habit of consultation, together with the excellent preparatory work which preceded the Brussels meeting, made possible the balanced and restrained consensus which is set out in the communiqué issued at the end of the meeting....

The discussion in Brussels had two principal elements. In the North Atlantic Council itself, foreign ministers examined the political aspects of the situation, while in the Defence Planning Committee the defence ministers of the 14 countries which contribute to NATO's integrated forces dealt with the military considerations. I shall be describing to you the results of the political discussion and Canada's approach to it, while my colleague, the Minister of National Defence, will deal with the military side.