

These objectives are shared by our allies. NATO can, I believe, contribute significantly to their achievement. The requirement now is to decide what concrete steps should be taken. The last ministerial meeting in Paris in December adopted a suggestion, put forward by Canada in 1964, to study the future tasks of the alliance. I look to this study, which, it is hoped, will be completed in time for consideration at the ministerial meeting next December, to set NATO's course for the future. Meanwhile, all members are seeking to improve East-West relations through bilateral channels.

In some quarters there is misunderstanding about the importance of the year 1969 for NATO. The impression is widespread that in that year the alliance will come to an end or that member states must formally recommit themselves to NATO or that the Treaty must be revised. None of this is true. The only significance of 1969 is that the North Atlantic Treaty provides that in that year, the twentieth anniversary of its ratification, it becomes legal for members to withdraw on giving one year's notice of intention.

Importance of NATO

There are some critics who consider that NATO, as an organization founded to resist possible Soviet aggression, is handicapped by its past and not equipped to promote a peace settlement. Others say that NATO is obsolete and no longer needed. Some even go so far as to argue that NATO's mere existence obstructs the movement towards a peace settlement.

It seems to me that, before reaching any conclusions, one has to consider the benefits which NATO provides.

First, NATO's combined military strength has deterred possible Soviet military or political penetration of Western Europe. At a time when relations with the U.S.S.R. may be slowly improving, the maintenance of effective deterrent forces is a form of insurance against the danger of an unexpected recurrence of Soviet hostility. Nor can we afford to overlook the fact that Soviet military power in Eastern Europe, far from being diminished, has over the years been augmented and perfected. This is a fact to be set on the scales in assessing how we should respond to the more forthcoming Soviet political posture. The Soviet Union's own actions suggest that they find no incongruity in combining military preparedness and political negotiations. Should we be any less flexible? Sure of our strength, can we not more confidently work to improve East-West relations? And has past experience not demonstrated that allied solidarity and strength have caused the development of Soviet interest in a European peace settlement?

It is true that the strength of the countries of Western Europe has grown enormously since the alliance was formed. Nevertheless, these countries together -- let alone separately -- could not match Soviet military power. I believe it significant that France, while withdrawing from NATO's integrated military structure, has indicated its intention of remaining in the alliance, even beyond 1969. Moreover, France, while it has required the withdrawal of United States and Canadian forces from French territory, has not advocated their withdrawal from Europe.