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STATEMENTS AND SPEECHES

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DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

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Statement by the Secretary of State for External Affairs,
the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, to the Standing Committee
on External Affairs and National Defence, December 3, 1968.

From the outset the NATO ministerial meeting recently held in Brussels had a special character going well beyond the customary annual ministerial appraisal of the international situation and the state of the alliance. For the first time in the history of the alliance, the ministers assembled in advanced session to deal specifically with the implications of a serious international development -- namely, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. They did so in circumstances contrasting strongly with those surrounding their last two meetings.

Less than a year ago, in December 1967, they had met in regular session to proclaim a new emphasis on détente in the alliance's future activities. This new emphasis, which was seen as an essential prelude to a negotiated settlement of outstanding European problems, seemed warranted by the improved climate of East-West relations and the results of a year of intensive studies by the alliance. These studies had produced what became known as the Harmel Report, named after the Foreign Minister of Belgium, who played a leading role in its evolution. The theme of the Harmel Report, which was formally adopted by NATO ministers a year ago, is that future alliance policy should be based on the twin conceptions of deterring possible aggression and seeking solutions for East-West problems through a dialogue with the Eastern European countries. In approving the Harmel Report, Canada subscribed to a new collective emphasis on improving the political atmosphere, on developing East-West contacts and on concrete moves in the sphere of disarmament and arms-control. All of this was done without sacrificing the security of members of the alliance.

At Reykjavik, five months later, the ministers carried their détente policy a stage further with the concrete offer of mutual and balanced force reductions. At the time, this move was seen as the first in a series which would eventually enable the security of Europe to rest on some more durable foundation.

It is only in the light of this background that the profound effect of the Czechoslovakian affair, particularly on the European members of NATO, can be measured.