

Questioning the "Obligation"

I have mentioned five of the eight obligations set forth in the North Atlantic Treaty. The sixth is the obligation to "contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, [and] by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded" (Article 2). Those principles are defined in the preamble of the Treaty as "democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law."

The two remaining obligations are military. Article 3 requires the allies to "maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack . . . by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid . . . in order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty." The United States is foremost in living up to this obligation. Indeed it is probably spending too much on defence.

Under Article 5 the allies undertake to consider "an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America . . . [as] an attack against them all; and . . . if such an attack occurs . . . [to] assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area."

All obligations binding

The six non-military obligations and the two military obligations are equally binding on the members of the Alliance. The Treaty did not establish two sets of obligations, a military set to be taken seriously and a non-military set not to be taken seriously. The architects of the Treaty believed — and rightly believed — that the best way to reduce the chances of a third world war was by strict adherence by the allies to both sets of obligations. The military set would deter the Soviet Union from running risks of precipitating a war. The non-military set would make war less likely by increasing cooperation among the members of the Alliance on economic matters, by close consultation among them on threats to their security, and by strict adherence of each to its undertaking to base its international relations on a renunciation of the threat or use of force anywhere in the world, unless it or an ally were subjected to armed attack by another country.

The bad effects of the failure of the Atlantic allies to take their non-military obligations as seriously as their military ones have been compounded by the insistence of some spokesmen for allied governments that the allies are bound by obligations which are not in the Treaty and which are indeed inconsistent with obligations under the Treaty. One such erroneous belief is that once the North Atlantic Council has made a decision an ally is under an obligation not to question that decision. The North Atlantic Council is not infallible. If any ally on reflection concludes that a decision it has concurred in does not serve the interests of the Alliance it is under an obligation as a loyal ally concerned with the strength of the Alliance to use its best efforts to have the decision changed.

A variant of this error is the belief that decisions of the Council are binding on member countries. A decision of the Council binds only those members who agree to be bound by it. The Council was not given power by the Treaty

to commit its members to go to war if one or more of them were subjected to armed attack. Allies decide for themselves "in accordance with their respective constitutional processes" whether an armed attack has occurred and, if so, what action "it deems necessary [to take] to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area" (Article 11). The rule which applies to decisions on war applies with equal force to other decisions of the Council.

Defining "loyalty"

Another erroneous belief is that loyalty to the Alliance means that an ally should support the foreign policies of its allies. Loyalty to the Alliance may mean the opposite. If an ally believes that a policy of one of its allies weakens the Alliance or increases the risks of war it is bound to oppose that policy. When in December 1957 I was putting this point to the newly-appointed Canadian foreign minister, Sidney Smith, I said:

If Great Britain had, after the war, tried to suppress the Indian independence movement, the friends and allies of Great Britain would have done Great Britain — and the whole free world — a disservice if they had given Great Britain diplomatic and other support for this policy. They would have strengthened both Great Britain and the free world as a whole if, by refusing to support such a suicidal British policy, they had put pressure on Great Britain to grant independence to India. Here would have been a case where strength did not lie in unity among Great Britain and its friends and allies. Unity would have been a source of weakness. In disunity lay strength.

There is one thing worse in an alliance than disunity. It is unity on an unwise policy. The most impressive demonstration in history of unity of purpose and collective action is that of the Gadarene swine who, with one accord, rushed down a steep place into the sea and were drowned.

One reason for misunderstandings about the nature of the Alliance is that it is not generally realized that Britain, the western European countries and Canada wanted the Alliance not only because it would restrain the Soviet Union, but also because they hoped it would restrain the United States from pursuing impatient and provocative policies toward the Soviet Union.

Restraining the US

In April 1948 the British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, made a guarded reference to British apprehensions about American attitudes to the Soviet Union in a message to General George Marshall, the Secretary of State. The United States and Britain, he said, must be careful, while remaining firm, not to provoke the Russians into ill-considered actions from which it would be difficult for them to retreat. The motto of the United States and Britain must be moderation, patience and prudence combined with firmness and toughness.

Four months later at the beginning of August, the French used more forthright language in a message delivered by the French embassy to the State Department. The French government felt that "the developments in regard to Germany and in particular [the American] attitude thereto might well bring matters to a head in Europe"