

# Strengthening the North Atlantic Alliance

by Escott Reid

**M**isconceptions about the obligations of members of the North Atlantic Alliance under the Washington treaty of 1949 are so widespread that they greatly weaken the Alliance. The existence of some obligations is ignored. Obligations are invented which are contrary to obligations set forth in the treaty. The removal of these misconceptions will make the Alliance a more effective instrument for maintaining peace. An urgent task for a strengthened Alliance is to seek an agreement with the Soviet Union for the renunciation of the first-use of nuclear weapons and of Star Wars programs.

A message which the United States sent to its fellow members of the Alliance in February, 1985, suggests that the administration in Washington may have serious misconceptions about the Alliance. The message reaffirmed "the commitment of the United States to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the importance of consultation, and the importance of all countries honoring their obligations as best they could." It seems unlikely that the draftsmen of this message would have used the words "the importance of all countries honoring their obligations as best they could" if they had realized that a good case could be made that the United States had failed, especially in recent years, to honor three or four or perhaps even five of the eight obligations set forth in the treaty.

## Treaty obligations

The first obligation is "to settle any international dispute in which they may be involved by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice are not endangered" (Article 1). Has the United States in its dealings with the Soviet Union under the Reagan administration lived up to this obligation?

The second obligation is "to refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force in any manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations" (Article 1). Has the United States in its relations with Nicaragua violated this obligation? Was the United States invasion of Grenada a violation?

The members of the Alliance "will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations . . . by promoting conditions of stability and well-being" (Article 2). It is generally agreed that there cannot be stability and well-being in the world so long as about a fifth of mankind live in the most squalid and degrading poverty. Has the United States by its recent reductions in its economic aid to poor countries violated this obligation?

The allies "will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic

collaboration between any or all of them" (Article 2). Has the United States sought with vigor to carry out this obligation?

To pose questions about how far the United States may have failed to honor these four treaty obligations is not to suggest that similar questions might not be addressed to other members of the Alliance. The record of many of them is far from perfect. Certainly the responsibility for the failure of the Alliance to give effect to one of the most important articles in the treaty (Article 4 on consultation) must be shared by all the allies. Article 4 requires the allies to "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened." This provision "is applicable in the event of a threat in any part of the world, to the security of any of the Parties." (Agreed interpretation of March 15, 1949.)

## NATO Summits unfruitful

Pierre Trudeau, a few months after his resignation as Prime Minister of Canada, stated in November 1984 that he had attended four of the six summit meetings the Alliance had held since its foundation and that at none of them was there any real consultation. "NATO heads of state and of government meet only to go through the tedious motions of reading speeches drafted by others with the principal objective of not rocking the boat. Indeed, any attempt to start a discussion . . . was met with stony embarrassment or strong objection. Is it any wonder that the value of NATO as a political alliance is increasingly being questioned? . . . NATO must be transformed into a vital political alliance, as had been intended at the beginning . . . NATO summits must be frequently held and sufficient time must be allowed for fruitful and creative exchanges."

While the responsibility for the failure of the allies to carry out their obligation to consult on threats to their security must be shared by all the allies, is it not likely that the strongest member bears more of the blame than the others since the stronger the member the less it is likely to welcome discussion by its less strong allies of international issues on which it holds firm views not shared by some of its allies?

---

*Escott Reid was assistant to Lester Pearson, one of the principal architects of the North Atlantic Treaty, in the negotiation of the Treaty and is the author of the standard book on the negotiation, *Time of Fear and Hope: the Making of the North Atlantic Treaty, 1947-1949*. He lives near Ottawa.*