

NATO FISSURES

After almost forty years, cracks are appearing in the North Atlantic alliance. Unlike all previous crises this one is about basic values and beliefs.

BY FEN OSLER HAMPSON

IN MARCH OF THIS YEAR THE heads of government of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) met to reaffirm Alliance unity and reassert support for strategic arms reductions with the Soviet Union, the elimination of chemical weapons, and negotiations with the Soviets on conventional arms reductions in Europe. The communique issued by the leaders expressed continued support for policies that were first enunciated in the mid-1960s: the future of NATO must be based on an "appropriate mix of adequate and effective nuclear and conventional forces which will continue to be kept up-to-date where necessary." The summit failed to come to grips with the tough issues facing the Alliance such as whether and how to modernize NATO short-range tactical nuclear weapons. The shop-worn rhetoric about "Alliance unity" and a "watershed" in East-West relations, served merely as a reminder that the rifts in the Alliance are widening in the absence of strong leadership, imagination, and political foresight.

There have been crises and then there have been crises in NATO. In the mid-1960s, there was the crisis over the ill-fated Multi-lateral Force – essentially a fight between Americans and some European allies over who got to control US nuclear weapons based in Europe. More recently there was the crisis over what to do about the growing number of Soviet SS-20 missiles. And then there was another crisis when the Alliance finally decided to respond by deploying its own intermediate-range missiles – Cruise and Pershing II.

These past crises were mostly over means: how to implement

already agreed NATO strategy and how to respond to the Soviet threat. They never really threatened the unity of the Alliance because there was always general agreement about the ends and goals. The Alliance was held together by a kind of political glue or articles of faith shared by all of its members. What were they?

THE FIRST ARTICLE OF FAITH WAS a shared belief in the severity of "the Soviet threat." As long as Brezhnev and Gromyko were in charge, the anti-Western orientation of Soviet policy kept NATO together. The Soviets helped create this sense of threat with their conventional force buildup and modernization in the 1970s and the deployment of their SS-20s. Most Europeans believed that the Soviets would cross the inter-German border and invade Western Europe if they had half a chance and that the Warsaw Pact had the "overwhelming conventional superiority" necessary to do so. Soviet actions in Afghanistan, the Horn of Africa, and elsewhere reinforced NATO's fears even though NATO's members were not united about what to do in response.

The second article of faith was enshrined in the doctrine of "flexible response." Although NATO thinking began to move away from the doctrine of "massive retaliation" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the new approach was not formally expressed until 1967. Flexible response meant that NATO would respond to a Warsaw Pact attack initially with conventional forces and then, if necessary, with nuclear weapons. It was a doctrine which recognized the

need for "proportionality" – fitting the level of retaliation to the level of attack – if NATO had to defend itself against invasion.

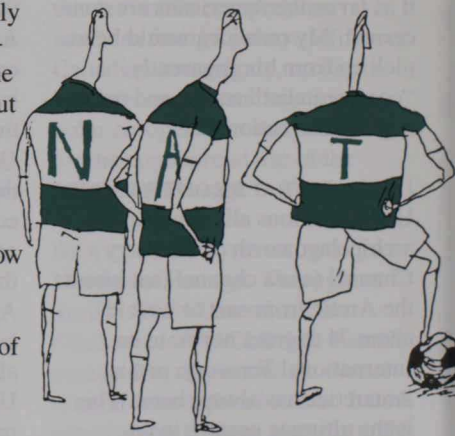
Flexible response meant different things to different people, however. To Europeans, it meant "go nuclear early" because that was good for deterrence – keeping the Soviets from attacking in the first place. To Americans, it meant "don't go nuclear early and leave yourself enough time to think about it." Flexible response was cloaked in ambiguity but it was an ambiguity that everyone could live with.

The third article of faith was that the United States would use nuclear weapons in Western Europe's defence; in this way, America's national fortunes were inextricably tied to Europe's. Some had reservations about the credibility of the American guarantee to risk all-out nuclear war with the Soviets in order to defend Europe, but they were a minority.

THESE ARTICLES OF FAITH ARE NOW seriously eroded. The current crisis is not a political crisis like the others. It is an internal crisis of values and beliefs. NATO's political glue is drying out and the cracks are beginning to appear.

In the first place, the Gorbachev revolution is undermining NATO's shared perception of the Soviet threat. Its most visible manifestation is the great change in Soviet political rhetoric. The Soviets now talk about "global interdependence," "reasonable sufficiency," and "non-provocative defence" when referring to matters of security in Europe. It is seductive talk to the Europeans and we are witnessing a new and extremely vigorous round of *Ostpolitik* (West

Germany's early 1970s initiative for better political and trade relations with Eastern Europe and the USSR) as the Soviets press for closer trade and economic links with Western Europe. It is surely a sign that times are changing when Bavarian leader Franz Josef Strauss, one of West Germany's staunchest cold warriors, returns from Moscow, as he did recently, singing Gorbachev's praises while saying that President Reagan is "unpredictable." Washington is slower to see change and more skeptical of Gorbachev than Europe. But the intermediate-range missile treaty has reinforced Western European perceptions that Gorbachev is serious about arms



control and perhaps even limited or partial disarmament.

The second article of faith, "flexible response," is also coming under serious question. The allergy to nuclear weapons has grown enormously in the past decade among America's political elites. The intermediate-range forces agreement per se does not make much of a difference to the overall strategic equation or to the