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AN ERA OF CHANGE FOR EUROPE AND NATO

A Statement to the House of Commons on December 8, 1969, by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honorable Mitchell Sharp.

I should like to report to the House on the NATO meeting from which the Minister of National Defence and I have just returned. I am tabling herewith the communiqué and the accompanying declaration which were issued at the close of the meeting....

... There is a coming-together of events in Europe today that opens the way to profound change. Basic differences between East and West will not be resolved overnight, but there is reason to believe that a new era of genuine negotiation has begun.

Three new developments herald this era of change. The most important, which may well turn out to be a turning-point in postwar history, is the opening in Helsinki last month of preliminary discussions between the United States and the Soviet Union on the limitation of strategic nuclear weapons - the "SALT" talks. The ground for these talks was prepared in NATO and at last week's meeting Secretary of State Rogers gave us a confidential report on progress to date. The very fact that these talks have begun in a business-like way has changed the East-West climate and brought a sense of cautious hope into East-West relations.

The second development of major importance is the manifest intention of West Germany to work out new relations with East Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union and other countries of Eastern Europe. This new West German policy has added new momentum to the search for negotiated settlements in Europe.

The third development of potentially historic significance was last week's summit meeting of the six Common Market countries at The Hague. The extent of agreement achieved at this meeting has created a new mood of optimism and co-operation in Western Europe - a development that will encourage new approaches to the problems of Europe as a whole.

It was in this atmosphere of movement and progress that the NATO ministers discussed and defined their common position. They did so in the knowledge that the outcome of their meeting as made known to both East and West by the communiqué and declaration, and by less formal but still important press reports, would become part of the evolving discourse among the nations concerned with the future Europe and its people.

The NATO Council functions not only as an important point of exchange and consultation for the ideas and intentions of its members but also as a transmitting station for signals to the other side. The issues before the recent meeting were, simply stated, what ideas and intentions should be conveyed to the countries of Eastern Europe, and in what ways they should be carried forward. All those present at the meeting had very much in mind that the ideas conveyed and the manner of their communication should be such as to make clear our desire to improve relations and negotiate outstanding issues. For our own part, in our contribution to the Brussels meeting we sought to advocate attitudes and measures which would be both realistic and conciliatory, to steer between the rigid "No" and the unthinking "Yes".

At the meeting, I put forward the view that NATO should seize the initiative by showing a clear willingness to start discussion of specific issues. The inclusion in the declaration of a proposal for early discussions on mutual and balanced reductions in Europe is one example of this, in the sensitive but vital field of arms control. This proposal is an advance on the previous NATO position and one that we actively promoted. We should have preferred a more precise formula, making clear, for instance, the regional limits and other detailed conditions which in the view of NATO members would govern any such force reductions. Others felt that such specifics should await some response from the nations of Eastern Europe, which up to now has not been forthcoming.

The declaration contains a section on Germany and Berlin which, among other things, gives support to the proposals of the West German Government for a modus vivendi between the two parts of Germany and for a related bilateral exchange of declarations on the non-use of force. I have no doubt of the firm resolve of Chancellor Willy Brandt's Government to break new ground in searching for solutions to the complex problems which have divided Europe for a generation. The response of the East to these overtures will be an important test of their intentions. The news this morning that negotiations have begun between the Soviet Union and the Federal German Republic on an exchange of declarations renouncing the use of force is a hopeful sign.

I also suggested that it would be useful to broaden the East-West dialogue to include discussion of non-political subjects such as the pollution of the environment, about which both sides are increasingly concerned, and the declaration also invites co-operation on this topic.

There has been much public discussion of the idea of a European security conference. I hope that such a conference will be held, at the right time and in the right circumstances. Such a conference is only one way of making progress toward the settlement of European problems, and for the time being it may not be the most effective.

Bilateral governmental contacts between countries of Eastern and Western Europe are a commonplace today, and there are many multilateral opportunities that underline the point that there is no shortage of meeting places or meetings. Canada attaches great importance to this process and plays an active part, as illustrated by the recent visit to Ottawa of the Soviet Foreign Minister, Mr. Gromyko.

Secondly, I do not doubt that, if and when it appears that a full security conference would be productive of tangible results, it could be readily organized. I am equally certain that Canada would be among the participating nations. What

does, however, concern many Western governments is that, if such a conference were held prematurely, it might prejudice the important progressive trends now so promising in Europe. Negotiations can make progress only when the other side displays a readiness to talk about something more than a mere freezing of the status quo in Europe. It would not make sense for the Western countries to be beguiled into a conference where the cards are stacked in advance against an outcome reasonably acceptable to both sides. The consensus emerging from the meeting reflects these factors, while keeping open the door to a conference.

The problem of procedures for organizing negotiations with the other side is a complex one. Bilateral contacts may be more suitable at present for some issues, limited multilateral discussions for others, and a general conference including the neutral nations of Europe will probably become appropriate in due course. We proposed some weeks ago that there should now be a detailed alliance study of this question of procedures for negotiation, and I am very pleased to report that, following the Canadian suggestion, the declaration includes a specific request to have the NATO Council study this issue and report on it to our next ministerial meeting in May.

Discussions at NATO meetings are necessarily detailed and sometimes technical. It isn't easy to get agreement when 15 governments, each with its own essential national interests and its own way of looking at things, are involved. I can tell the House, however, that some real progress was made last week. It was encouraging to me, and to all who were with me, to find a new and more hopeful atmosphere and a new resolve that the arid confrontation that has for too long characterized East-West relations should be brought to an end - not by any sudden dramatic initiative, but by steady and careful negotiation of specific issues, starting with those that show the best chances for success.

We found a new climate in Europe, a new dynamic in the Common Market, that points the way to enlargement of the Community and strengthening of ties between its members, a new German Government already working towards a modus vivendi with East Germany. Above all, we found a new atmosphere of hope brought about by the promise of progress in the SALT talks. I was encouraged, as I know all members of this House will be, to find NATO sensitive to the new trends, contributing to the great events that are taking place, and looking beyond its essential defence functions to the opportunities for a more positive role in securing the peace in Europe.

I took advantage of the NATO meeting to have individual talks with some of my NATO colleagues. I met with the Foreign Ministers of Italy and Turkey and had brief sessions with the German Foreign Minister and the United States Secretary of State. I also had a useful discussion with the French Foreign Minister of our bilateral relations, and I am glad to say that there was mutual agreement that we should work out arrangements to avoid future incidents of the kind that have marred our relations in the recent past. I am hopeful that in this way we may be able to put our relations on a better footing.