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Statement by the Secretary of State
for External Affairs, the Honourable
Paul Martin, before the Senate External
Affairs Committee, March 15, 1967.

I followed your recent debate on NATO with much interest. The subject is important and timely. The Government is aware of the need to consider anew the future role of NATO and Canada's place in the Organization. I thought it might be of interest if I were to share with you in a preliminary way some of the considerations which have to be taken into account in our study of this aspect of our foreign policy.

The situation in Europe, in the East as well as in the West, is changing. The requirement for a high level of collective defence, which no one could deny when Western Europe was vulnerable to Soviet political and military pressure, is no longer unquestioned. For the first time there is hope and even expectation that we can in time work out a peace settlement in Europe. In this changing situation, it is appropriate to ask ourselves whether existing international institutions -- in this case NATO -- are well adapted for the achievement of the tasks ahead and for the satisfaction of our interests and our objectives.

Canada's Interest in a Peace Settlement in Europe

In spite of the achievement of independence by many new nations in the past decade and the changes in international obligations which this and other developments have caused for Canada, Europe remains a primary focus of interest for us. Within Europe what do we seek? For my part, I believe it self-evident that our interest lies in a stable Europe whose internal difficulties will not constitute a threat to the peace of the world. This will require ultimately a German peace settlement and an end of the present division of Europe.

These aims will be difficult to achieve. There are no easy solutions when basic conflicts of interest have to be reconciled - the more so, when this process must take place against a legacy of suspicion fed by ideological difference, past ill-will and continuing world-wide rivalry. Solutions will take time, hard work and persistence. In the meantime, guided by a clear perception of final goals and of the genuine and major obstacles to be surmounted, we can and must take firm steps along the way. Among our immediate objectives I should include the improvement of East-West relations and, in particular, the establishment of better relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the countries of Eastern Europe. These developments will help further reduce tension and promote the confidence essential to reaching a settlement -- which will mean the end of the division of Europe.

These objectives are shared by our allies. NATO can, I believe, contribute significantly to their achievement. The requirement now is to decide what concrete steps should be taken. The last ministerial meeting in Paris in December adopted a suggestion, put forward by Canada in 1964, to study the future tasks of the alliance. I look to this study, which, it is hoped, will be completed in time for consideration at the ministerial meeting next December, to set NATO's course for the future. Meanwhile, all members are seeking to improve East-West relations through bilateral channels.

In some quarters there is misunderstanding about the importance of the year 1969 for NATO. The impression is widespread that in that year the alliance will come to an end or that member states must formally recommit themselves to NATO or that the Treaty must be revised. None of this is true. The only significance of 1969 is that the North Atlantic Treaty provides that in that year, the twentieth anniversary of its ratification, it becomes legal for members to withdraw on giving one year's notice of intention.

Importance of NATO

There are some critics who consider that NATO, as an organization founded to resist possible Soviet aggression, is handicapped by its past and not equipped to promote a peace settlement. Others say that NATO is obsolete and no longer needed. Some even go so far as to argue that NATO's mere existence obstructs the movement towards a peace settlement.

It seems to me that, before reaching any conclusions, one has to consider the benefits which NATO provides.

First, NATO's combined military strength has deterred possible Soviet military or political penetration of Western Europe. At a time when relations with the U.S.S.R. may be slowly improving, the maintenance of effective deterrent forces is a form of insurance against the danger of an unexpected recurrence of Soviet hostility. Nor can we afford to overlook the fact that Soviet military power in Eastern Europe, far from being diminished, has over the years been augmented and perfected. This is a fact to be set on the scales in assessing how we should respond to the more forthcoming Soviet political posture. The Soviet Union's own actions suggest that they find no incongruity in combining military preparedness and political negotiations. Should we be any less flexible? Sure of our strength, can we not more confidently work to improve East-West relations? And has past experience not demonstrated that allied solidarity and strength have caused the development of Soviet interest in a European peace settlement?

It is true that the strength of the countries of Western Europe has grown enormously since the alliance was formed. Nevertheless, these countries together -- let alone separately -- could not match Soviet military power. I believe it significant that France, while withdrawing from NATO's integrated military structure, has indicated its intention of remaining in the alliance, even beyond 1969. Moreover, France, while it has required the withdrawal of United States and Canadian forces from French territory, has not advocated their withdrawal from Europe.

Secondly, I wonder if the Soviet and Eastern European leaders have not come increasingly to regard NATO as a stabilizing force in Europe. They may well look to NATO -- and the Warsaw Pact for that matter -- to prevent the emergence of nationalist elements in Europe. Perhaps the clearest evidence of this approach appeared in some Yugoslav and Polish journals last year, when there was speculation that French action in NATO might lead to its break-up. These journals wrote apprehensively of such a development, showing concern that the countries of Western Europe would in such a circumstance develop their own national forces, which would not be subject to the constraints of international command. This would indicate, in spite of some continuing Soviet propaganda against NATO, that the Soviet and East European leaders increasingly regard NATO as a force for stability in a divided Europe. Nothing which the Soviet or Polish leaders said -- or did not say -- during my recent visit to Eastern Europe would contradict this impression. While emphasizing our interest in détente, I deliberately made clear to them our view that NATO had an essential role to play and that Canada would continue to contribute forces to it.

Thirdly, NATO has helped to restore the confidence of the peoples and governments of Western Europe which had been shattered by the experience of the Second World War. This has been achieved in spite of continuing dependence on the United States deterrent force which is fully admitted -- even by France. The extent of this revived self-confidence was well demonstrated by the remarkable speed and effectiveness of the adjustment within the alliance to the French decision last year to withdraw from the integrated military structure.

But the situation in Germany, in particular because of its geographic location and the division of its territory, remains difficult. It is increasingly accepted and acknowledged within Germany that the Government must eventually reach understandings with its Eastern Communist neighbours. This will involve the German Government, now and in the future, in taking some difficult decisions. Obviously, the German Government cannot be forced into agreements with the countries of Eastern Europe. They must take the necessary decisions themselves. But is it not important, particularly at a time when there is a German Government which is prepared to act, that that Government should not be inhibited or restrained by concern for its future security? And will such action not be better understood and appreciated in Western Europe if Germany is acting within the framework of an alliance?

Finally, NATO has provided an effective framework for consultation and, if necessary, common action. This, of course, does not prevent bilateral activity by the members of the alliance. It does ensure that such action is understood and taken into account by one's allies. Thus my trip to Eastern Europe last autumn was undertaken for Canadian reasons. But I was conscious, at the same time, of playing a Canadian part in a larger effort to improve East-West relations.

We should not forget that NATO is an organization in which, over the years, 15 countries, spanning the Atlantic Ocean, have increasingly learned to consult together. This, in itself, is a significant achievement. The alliance is proving to be a flexible instrument capable of adjusting to the requirements of the times. Its raison d'être may change and broaden, as the political tasks assume priority. But the Organization has shown itself capable of making the necessary adjustment. Does this not merit consideration in our assessment of the continuing value of this alliance?

Canada's Political Stake in Europe

There is another consideration which is often overlooked. NATO has, over the years, served in a tangible way to strengthen our connections with the countries of Western Europe. As a North American nation in a world moving toward continentalism, is it not in our national interest to develop every reasonable link -- political, economic, military, social and cultural -- with the countries beyond the Atlantic?

We had hoped when NATO was established that the alliance would become the nucleus of a political community linking Canada with the United States and with Europe. Had this happened, NATO might have served as the instrument for balancing our major international relationships. But this has not so far happened; and there is no evidence that any member of the alliance is ready to submerge national sovereignty in any supra-national political authority which would represent a true Atlantic Community. In this circumstance, where our national interest calls for the greatest possible links with the countries of Western Europe, are we not furthering this policy through active participation in NATO?

As a small illustration of this benefit which we derive from participating in NATO, the annual meetings of the NATO Parliamentarians Conference come to mind. This organization, which owes its origin to a former distinguished member of your Chamber, Senator Wishart Robertson, is to my knowledge the only institution which brings Canadian Members of Parliament together with colleagues from all of Western Europe to discuss common problems. I believe that the personal experiences which some of you had at these meetings will have brought home to you the significance and the importance of this connection.

Why Canada has Forces in Europe

Another line of argument which has recently gained some support in Canada is that Canadian military forces in Western Europe no longer have military significance and should, therefore, be withdrawn. It is certainly true that the European nations have built up their armed forces to the level where our contribution is relatively less important militarily than it was ten years ago. But does it follow that we could withdraw forces without provoking unintended consequences?

The North Atlantic Treaty and associated agreements provide that member states will not significantly reduce their assigned forces without the agreement of their allies. The allies recognize that members of the alliance may at some time or other have no alternative to reducing their commitments. But, in Canada's case, the normal arguments for a withdrawal of forces would not be persuasive. It is a major requirement for our forces. Our total defence budget as a percentage of gross national product is, in fact, one of the lowest in NATO countries. The number of men in our armed forces as a percentage of population is likewise one of the lowest among NATO countries.

It would, of course, remain open to Canada to act unilaterally. But a unilateral decision to withdraw forces could have significant political consequences. It could start a chain reaction by exerting pressure for similar action on the governments of the other members of the alliance, which are just as concerned with the cost of providing defence forces. It could damage the fabric of co-operation. It could do harm to Canada's good name with its allies. It could cause our allies to ask themselves whether we were making a respectable contribution to maintaining security in the world.

I do not say that these considerations are necessarily of lasting validity. The Government is not insensitive to the argument that Canada's contribution should be made from bases in Canada. Indeed, Canada provides a battalion, which is stationed in Canada, to what is known as the ACE Mobile Force for use on NATO's northern flank. The day may come, with changes in technology or strategy, when it would be feasible and satisfactory to ourselves and to our allies to make our entire contribution from Canada. But, in the meantime, Canada, as a responsible member of the international community, cannot fail to take into account the political consequences of unilateral action to withdraw forces from Europe.

Type of Canadian Forces

If one agrees that Canada should continue to make an appropriate contribution to NATO forces in Europe, it does not of course mean that the character or level of our present contribution should remain static. Obviously, our contribution must relate to changing requirements. If, for instance, it should prove possible to reach agreement on mutual reductions of NATO and Warsaw Pact forces, this could affect the level of Canadian and U.S. forces in Europe. This is not, of course, the only arms-control measure which we seek in Europe. Indeed, as I have already indicated, the Government will support efforts to improve East-West relations and to achieve disarmament agreements, thereby increasing our security in Europe and in the world.

The specific form of our contribution is under continuing review and has, in fact, changed significantly over the years. One example will, I think, suffice to illustrate my point. In the middle Fifties, Canada provided 12 squadrons of F-86 interceptor aircraft to NATO. These were replaced in the early Sixties by eight squadrons of F-104 aircraft, six squadrons of which had a strike role and two a reconnaissance role. This year, as a result of attrition, we are reducing the number of squadrons of strike aircraft from eight to six. At some time in the 1970s, all the F-104 aircraft will be "phased out". At the appropriate time in the future, the Government will have to decide what position to take on a "follow-on" aircraft.

It will be apparent that changes of weapons of the kind I have illustrated are of necessity gradual. First, each national contribution represents only a part of the total forces available to the NATO commanders, and adjustments in these contributions must be "phased" into the overall plan. Secondly, the expense of modern weapons is such that a commitment, once the equipment has been procured and the training completed, cannot lightly be abandoned in favour of another commitment requiring new equipment and training.

Summation

I have appreciated this opportunity to discuss some of the considerations affecting the Government's policy towards NATO. It seems to me that these support the argument that the continuation of the alliance will actually facilitate progress toward an eventual European peace settlement and can, in the meantime, assist in the improvement of East-West relations. A recent European visitor to Ottawa with a profound understanding of European problems put the issue to me very clearly. "NATO is essential to us," he said. "What other organization links Europe and North America, brings Germany into an alliance relationship with the other nations of Western Europe, prevents France and the other larger Western European states from dominating their neighbours, and makes it possible for the Western European nations to treat on a basis of equality with the Russians?"

I have also outlined certain considerations which suggest that the withdrawal of Canadian forces from Europe could disturb the fabric of co-operation and hence prejudice NATO's ability to contribute to the development of the kind of conditions in Europe necessary in the long run for the achievement of a European settlement. The maintenance of appropriate Canadian forces in Europe also serves to increase our links with the countries of Europe, which are so necessary in a world moving toward continentalism. At the same time, I should remind you of what I have said about achieving mutual reductions of forces between NATO and Warsaw Pact countries.

I have indicated that the precise nature of our contribution to the alliance is under constant review. Our future commitment will take into account the relevance of that commitment to collective security and to the major political objective of a peaceful settlement in Europe.

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