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PRESS RELEASE



COMMUNIQUE

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

CANADA

MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES EXTÉRIEURES

NO. 32

DO NOT PUBLISH OR MOVE
BEFORE 0530 HOURS (A.M.)
TUESDAY, JUNE 7, 1966.
ORIGINAL: FRENCH

NATO MINISTERIAL MEETING - BRUSSELS

Opening Statement by

the Secretary of State for External Affairs

as

President of the North Atlantic Council

Monsieur le Bourgmestre, Monsieur le Premier Ministre, Mesdames, Mesdemoiselles, Messieurs:

I know that I speak for all of us when I say how happy I am that we are meeting this year in Brussels. This beautiful and historic city has always been one of the centres of European civilization and art, as the architectural treasures of Grand Place and the Hotel de Ville testify. Moreover, the thoughtful arrangements for our reception and the warm welcome we have received have touched us and impressed us all very much. They redound to the credit of the Belgian Government and of Bourgomaster Cooremans, who has guided the affairs of this city with such distinction in recent years.

The conjunction of recent events was not foreseen when it was decided last December to accept the invitation of the Belgian Government to hold this meeting in Brussels. It is especially appropriate that we are meeting at this turning point in our Atlantic affairs in this city. For it was from Brussels in 1948 that the nations of Western Europe sent forth their historic message of hope and of courage - the first call for common action to meet a common threat. The Governments of Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom "resolved to afford assistance to each other, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, in maintaining international peace and security and in resisting any policy of aggression". They further resolved "to associate progressively in the pursuance of these aims with other States inspired by the same ideals and animated by the like determination". The Atlantic Treaty a year later was the direct consequence of this call from Brussels.

It has also been in Brussels that the seeds of the European movement were sown. The institutions of the European Communities centered in this city testify to the success and promise of this movement. We meet, therefore, in an environment which has solid European and Atlantic foundations. Progress at this meeting towards harmonizing our national views and interests - and we must make progress if the Alliance is to continue to serve our common good - will enrich the best traditions of this city, of this country and of the trans-Atlantic community which NATO represents.

We meet at a critical moment in the history of our Alliance. NATO has faced crises before and surmounted them. But our present crisis is of a different order; our problem this time is more internal than external. It arises out of the decision taken by one of the respected members of our Alliance to withdraw from the integrated military structure. The other members of the Alliance, known colloquially as the Fourteen, wish to continue to contribute to and participate in a collective defence programme. Particularly because of the central geographic position occupied by France in Western Europe, the process of adjustment is complex. However, this task is in hand, although it will take some time to execute.

In the process of carrying out the withdrawals required by France, the Fourteen have decided to make certain changes in the NATO military structure which should add to its efficiency. We need have no fears therefore as to the continuing defence and deterrent strength of NATO. NATO will continue to be a stout shield.

In the course of our meeting, it will be necessary to give approval to these changes which are consequent on the French action.

But our task at this Meeting of the Foreign Ministers is larger and more important. The task is really two-fold, though the two aspects are interdependent. We have first to take counsel with one another about our evolving relations with the USSR and Eastern Europe against the background of serious and pressing developments elsewhere in the world. Secondly, we must address ourselves to the state of our Alliance, particularly in the light of the actions of the French Government.

Before setting about our task, we must see our problems in perspective. NATO has been so successful that it is now being taken for granted. Europe now enjoys a sense of security greater than at any time since the last war. The remarkable fact is that this sense of security exists even though the military strength of Soviet and Eastern European forces located in Eastern Europe is greater than ever. The answer to this paradox is that NATO has contained the Soviet threat and is still doing so.

As this situation persists, there has been a welcome, even if only gradual, evolution in the Soviet attitude toward the West. There has been increasing recognition by the Soviet leaders that nuclear conflict must be avoided. This is a trend which all members of the Alliance welcome and wish to encourage. We are all expanding our relations and increasing our contacts with the countries of Eastern Europe. The process has developed so far that what until a few years ago was unusual is now commonplace.

This is all movement in the right direction. For NATO is not only an instrument created for our mutual defence. The North Atlantic Council is an institution through which we collectively work and plan for a peace settlement in Europe. In a period of

evolution, unity of purpose is the more necessary if we are to make progress towards that settlement, which is the major objective we all seek.

The North Atlantic Treaty is the manifestation of a trans-atlantic partnership linking the peoples of Europe and North America in their common search for peace. Now that the danger of attack has been contained and Soviet policy has begun gradually to evolve, we must concentrate increasingly on the search of the solution of problems in Europe. France's welcome decision to remain a party to the Treaty is evidence that they continue to share with the other members the same basic objectives and continue to regard the North Atlantic Council and its subordinate institutions as the appropriate forum for ensuring that Western policy on East-West relations remains in harmony.

Let it be clear, therefore, that we are not gathered here merely to patch up our differences. Indeed, it may be no bad thing that we should have been shaken out of whatever complacency we may have felt as a result of the very success of NATO. Our responses have reconfirmed the vitality of the Alliance and the importance we attach to the concept of a collective approach. We are faced as never before with an opportunity as well as a challenge. Our task is to develop and define a new relationship within the Alliance which will reflect both the vitality of the concept and the special concerns of France. In short, we want an Alliance in more than name only.

The great strength of our way of life -- and the advantage we hold over our adversaries -- is our capacity to maintain unity in diversity. Seen in this perspective, the present crisis in our Alliance is more than a problem to be overcome. It is a test of the very foundations of the political system we all share. Let us set to work with imagination, moderation and goodwill. Let us determine to succeed.