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Statement by the Secretary of State for External Affairs,
the Honourable Mitchell Sharp, to the Standing Committee
on External Affairs and National Defence, December 3, 1968.

From the outset the NATO ministerial meeting recently held in Brussels had a special character going well beyond the customary annual ministerial appraisal of the international situation and the state of the alliance. For the first time in the history of the alliance, the ministers assembled in advanced session to deal specifically with the implications of a serious international development -- namely, the Soviet invasion and occupation of Czechoslovakia. They did so in circumstances contrasting strongly with those surrounding their last two meetings.

Less than a year ago, in December 1967, they had met in regular session to proclaim a new emphasis on détente in the alliance's future activities. This new emphasis, which was seen as an essential prelude to a negotiated settlement of outstanding European problems, seemed warranted by the improved climate of East-West relations and the results of a year of intensive studies by the alliance. These studies had produced what became known as the Harmel Report, named after the Foreign Minister of Belgium, who played a leading role in its evolution. The theme of the Harmel Report, which was formally adopted by NATO ministers a year ago, is that future alliance policy should be based on the twin conceptions of deterring possible aggression and seeking solutions for East-West problems through a dialogue with the Eastern European countries. In approving the Harmel Report, Canada subscribed to a new collective emphasis on improving the political atmosphere, on developing East-West contacts and on concrete moves in the sphere of disarmament and arms-control. All of this was done without sacrificing the security of members of the alliance.

At Reykjavik, five months later, the ministers carried their détente policy a stage further with the concrete offer of mutual and balanced force reductions. At the time, this move was seen as the first in a series which would eventually enable the security of Europe to rest on some more durable foundation.

It is only in the light of this background that the profound effect of the Czechoslovakian affair, particularly on the European members of NATO, can be measured.

On the eve of their meeting in Brussels, the NATO ministers faced a difficult dilemma. By its actions, the U.S.S.R. had dramatically rejected a conception of détente upon which all Western planning had been based. In addition to hopes of successful arms-limitation talks with the U.S.S.R., the Western conception of détente had assumed that there would be a gradual evolution within the Communist bloc towards more humane and open societies, together with a gradual establishment of healthy relations between Eastern and Western Europe. There had been an underlying assumption on our part that the Soviet Union would acquiesce in these developments; certainly, they were not expected to have recourse to force to impede them. This assumption proved wrong and now there can only be serious doubts about how the Soviet Union will react to the changes which must inevitably occur in Eastern Europe. This new situation could affect Western interests indirectly, or even directly in the case of West Berlin, which is surrounded by the territory of the so-called German Democratic Republic.

Despite the setback the Soviet Union had dealt to their hopes, NATO member states realized there was no real long-term alternative to East-West understanding.

The question, therefore, was: How could they most effectively bring some influence to bear on Soviet leaders? How could NATO register its condemnation of the Soviet Union's action in Czechoslovakia while still holding the door ajar to the resumed pursuit of peaceful and mutually beneficial relations between East and West, including progress in the vital fields of disarmament and arms-control?

Since this was a problem shared by all members of the alliance, the opportunity which the Brussels meeting provided for consultation with other countries in similar circumstances demonstrated once again the value of the consultative aspect of NATO's activities. For Canada, it was not only an occasion to hear the views of others; it also provided us with an opportunity to play a part in determining the kind of response which NATO should make to the Soviet intervention. In this way, we can reasonably feel that we were able to influence the evolution of East-West relations in a direction that I believe reflected the views of Canadians -- i.e., that NATO should respond in a firm yet restrained fashion.

It is a tribute to the alliance that it was possible to solve so effectively the dilemma of condemning Soviet action while still holding the door ajar, as well as to reconcile the nuances of difference with which 15 governments would naturally view a situation as complicated as the one which has been brought about in Eastern Europe. A sense of compromise founded on common purpose and the habit of consultation, together with the excellent preparatory work which preceded the Brussels meeting, made possible the balanced and restrained consensus which is set out in the communiqué issued at the end of the meeting....

The discussion in Brussels had two principal elements. In the North Atlantic Council itself, foreign ministers examined the political aspects of the situation, while in the Defence Planning Committee the defence ministers of the 14 countries which contribute to NATO's integrated forces dealt with the military considerations. I shall be describing to you the results of the political discussion and Canada's approach to it, while my colleague, the Minister of National Defence, will deal with the military side.

It was the strong and unanimous view of the ministers that the Soviet Union's use of force in Czechoslovakia had not only jeopardized peace and international order but had also violated the basic right of the people of Czechoslovakia to shape their own future without outside interference. In view of earlier Canadian condemnation of Soviet action, you will not be surprised that we supported this approach by the Council.

There was also agreement that the use of force and the stationing in Czechoslovakia of Soviet forces not hitherto deployed there gave rise to uncertainty about the future intentions of the U.S.S.R. After all, the Soviet Union had demonstrated an impressive capability to bring substantial military force speedily to bear on a situation in Central Europe. Its decision to intervene with force in Czechoslovakia could not help but raise questions as to whether such an approach foreshadowed a new direction in Soviet policy for the future. It is hardly any wonder that, in the words of the communiqué, it was considered that this uncertainty required great vigilance on the part of the alliance. For us in Canada it is not always easy to put ourselves in the position of our European allies. However, I am sure that the reality of the concern and uncertainty felt by them will have been sensed by Members of Parliament who had the opportunity to attend the recent meeting of the North Atlantic Assembly, which happened by coincidence to be held in Brussels the same week as the ministerial meeting.

The ministers also expressed their concern about the Soviet contention, made following the invasion of Czechoslovakia, that there was a "Socialist Commonwealth" within which the U.S.S.R. had the right to intervene if it considered that developments in the area were inimical to its own interests. This concern, of course, paralleled our own, which I referred to earlier in the fall, during my statement to the United Nations General Assembly on October 9. I said at that time that Canada could not accept that a community of interests, real or alleged, political, cultural or economic, entitles one country to take upon itself the right to interfere in the internal affairs of another. In the Commonwealth of Nations to which we belong, the right of national self-determination is so taken for granted that member countries are free to develop ties with any other countries, including socialist countries.

The doctrine of the Socialist Commonwealth is the antithesis of the principle of non-intervention recognized in the United Nations Charter. It is particularly disturbing for the implications it could have for attempts at rapprochement and the ultimate unification of the two parts of Germany. In this context, the ministers in Brussels confirmed the support of their governments for the declared determination of the United States, Britain and France to safeguard the security of Berlin and to maintain freedom of access to the city. This part of the communiqué represents a reaffirmation of existing commitments for Canada.

The ministers accepted that the uncertainties extended to the Mediterranean basin. They agreed that recent expansion of Soviet activity in that area required continuing vigilance to ensure that the security of the alliance was not adversely affected. It was also accepted that there should be a continuing effort on the part of members of NATO to find political solutions for the problems of the region which would help to ensure its peaceful evolution.

The ministers agreed that, while the Soviet action in Czechoslovakia did not constitute a direct threat to NATO, the uncertainties regarding future Soviet intentions could not be ignored. The communiqué therefore reaffirmed the determination of their governments to defend members of the alliance against any armed attack, in accordance with the North Atlantic Treaty. It also observed that any Soviet intervention directly or indirectly affecting the situation in Europe or in the Mediterranean would create an international crisis with grave consequences.

It was considered that, in view of the new situation created in Eastern Europe, certain improvements in the military forces available to NATO would be desirable. The nature and extent of these improvements were discussed in the Defence Planning Committee, and the Minister of National Defence will be describing that discussion to you in more detail.

I should like to emphasize, however, that the limited improvements envisaged for NATO's forces could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered provocative or an escalation of the arms race. Their immediate military purpose was to improve the ability of the alliance to cope with the uncertainties of the period ahead resulting from recent Soviet action. Behind this, they served the larger political purpose of demonstrating to Soviet leaders that recourse to force in solving European problems was unproductive; that the reaction which it would inevitably generate could only serve to complicate rather than ease the solution of present or future problems.

Having accepted the requirement to maintain appropriate defences, the ministers underlined with equal emphasis their unanimous view that détente remained as the long-term goal of the alliance. It was agreed that the Soviet action in Czechoslovakia had seriously set back hopes of settling the outstanding problems which divided Europe, but it was acknowledged that solutions for these problems, together with progress in arms-control and disarmament, were essential elements in establishing a situation of lasting peace. In my own statement to the Council, I expressed the importance which Canada attached to continuing progress in the field of arms-control and disarmament. I expressed the hope that the Non-Proliferation Treaty would not become a casualty of the events in Czechoslovakia and urged that early action be taken by all concerned to bring the Treaty into force as soon as possible. I also indicated our desire to see the important discussions between the United States and the Soviet Union on the limitation and reduction of offensive and defensive strategic arms begin as soon as possible.

The ministers agreed that continuing attention should be devoted by the alliance to arms-control and disarmament so that progress could be resumed as soon as circumstances permitted. The communiqué specifically noted that, while recent Soviet actions seem to rule out any movement for the time being on the question of mutual force reductions, NATO should pursue its study of the issues involved so that it will be in a position to move ahead when more favourable circumstances prevail. Canada attaches particular importance to this element of the discussion in Brussels.

In conclusion, the ministers agreed that the North Atlantic alliance would continue to stand as the guarantor of security and the essential foundation of European reconciliation. Recent events had further demonstrated that its continued existence was more than ever necessary.

In my statement to the North Atlantic Council, I stated that, like others, we accepted that the threat to the alliance resulting from the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was an indirect one, which faced NATO not with a problem of responding to premeditated aggression but rather of coping with the uncertainty and the possibility of miscalculation which recent Soviet conduct had fostered. In view of this situation, we agreed that NATO's continuing determination to resist any aggression directed against its members should be made clear, as well as the fact that the alliance could not be expected to remain indifferent to any further moves which even indirectly threatened its security.

While we accepted that it was natural in the existing circumstances to stress the defensive character of the alliance, we considered it was important that NATO should take advantage of all reasonable opportunities to resume the dialogue with the Soviet Union and thus to promote, in due course, progress toward the settlement of the issues facing Europe. We therefore supported the view that NATO's policy should be to keep open the option of normal relations with the U.S.S.R. against the day when the Soviet Union itself would recognize that such a course was in its own best interest. We urged that the communiqué should clearly reaffirm the alliance's pursuit of détente, together with the achievement of arms-control and disarmament measures, as its long-term objectives.

There is no doubt that on the eve of the Brussels meeting there was some concern on the part of the other members of the alliance regarding Canada's support for NATO. The events in Czechoslovakia had caused them to appreciate once again the value of NATO as a means of ensuring their security and they were naturally anxious that nothing should be done, particularly at this time, to detract from the solidarity of the alliance. By the time the meeting was over, I think we were able to satisfy our allies that we shared their concern about the future security of Europe; that although we were reviewing our foreign and defence policy, we should continue to live up to our commitments to NATO until such time as they might be altered; and that, if in the future the Government of Canada should consider changing our role in the alliance, we should, of course, consult with them.

In summary, the Canadian delegation to the Brussels meeting endeavoured to reconcile two main objectives.

The first of these was to emphasize -- in a measured and practical manner -- our condemnation of Soviet action in Czechoslovakia.

The second was to co-operate with our allies in producing a response to this action which was designed to influence in a constructive way the thinking of Soviet leaders -- to encourage them to resume the dialogue with the West rather than resort to the use of force in seeking solutions to problems.