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## NATO BEFORE AND AFTER THE CZECHOSLOVAK CRISIS\*

Leo J. Reddy\*\*

There are few black and white issues in the field of foreign relations. The problems that NATO faced and that our government faced as a member of NATO in responding to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia illustrate at least some of the complexities that may not have been evident in the news reports.

For example, there is a widely held impression that NATO was in a state of decline prior to August 20, 1968 when the Soviet armies marched on Prague, and that this event snatched the organization from the jaws of historical oblivion. This statement greatly oversimplifies the actual state of affairs. In order to understand how NATO responded to the Czech invasion and what the implications are of the United States in the longer term, it is important to have a brief look at where NATO stood prior to the events of last August.

### NATO Before Czechoslovakia

In the months prior to the Czech invasion, NATO had been concerned with three main items of business: first, to adapt to French withdrawal from the military command structure; second, to reevaluate the role of the organization at a time when improved relations with Eastern Europe appeared increasingly possible; and third, to continue developing a military strategy and force posture that was politically and economically acceptable to all the members. At this time, there was also to be overcome the psychological obstacle of NATO's twentieth anniversary in 1969 -- a date at which any member could give notice of withdrawal from the Treaty.

Well before last summer, NATO had adjusted to the withdrawal of French forces from the integrated command structure. In a businesslike and professional manner, the French and the other fourteen members worked out procedures which permitted France to opt out of military affairs, but continue to participate in the political business of the Alliance. Through quiet, patient diplomacy this was accomplished without serious friction between the Fourteen and France, or among the Fourteen. These procedures have given the French a legitimate voice in the political business of the Alliance but do not permit France to obstruct important

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business that the other Fourteen wish to conduct on defense matters. At the same time, NATO and United States bases and headquarters were removed from France and relocated to other countries.

This was a substantial diplomatic feat. There was by no means unanimity at the outset among the Allies as to how they would handle French withdrawal. Some members wanted a punitive policy; others wanted to accommodate to the French at virtually any price.

NATO also confronted in 1967 the issues raised by a growing desire to improve relations with Eastern Europe. For some years it has been clear that the societies of Eastern Europe were, in varying degrees, undergoing changes both internally and in their relations with Moscow. This has been most evident in Romania for several years and became dramatically evident in Czechoslovakia over a year ago. One manifestation of these changes was growing cultural, economic and political contacts between Eastern and Western Europe. Quite naturally there was strong sentiment in all the NATO countries to expand these contacts, to break down the barriers that had been erected during the cold war and to create a new relationship with the East on which could be built a stable and durable peace. These trends posed two major questions for NATO. First, there were many, particularly the younger people in Europe, who had no memories of the Cold War, who saw no need for a military alliance in a period when relations appeared to be warming between East and West. In fact, they saw NATO as a major obstacle in the path of further progress toward relaxation of tensions in Europe. Such a policy soon acquired the handy label of "detente." The second issue was whether NATO should have a common policy toward the East, and if so, what specific steps could be taken to give further impetus to detente.

In the fall of 1966 Pierre Harmel, the Belgian Foreign Minister, began to urge his colleagues to address these issues. The result was the so-called Harmel Study on the Future Tasks of the Alliance. The Harmel report, which was completed in December 1967 and unanimously approved by all Fifteen members of NATO, stated that NATO had two basic functions:

"Its first function is to maintain adequate military strength and political solidarity to deter aggression and other forms of pressure and to defend the territory of member countries if aggression should occur. . . ."  
"In this climate the Alliance can carry out its second function, to pursue the search for progress towards a more stable relationship in which the underlying political issues can be solved. Military security and a policy of detente are not contradictory but complementary."

These conclusions were not dramatic; they did not set NATO off on a major new course because no such course was needed. The Harmel Report did not result in instant new understanding of or enthusiasm for NATO. Such dramatic changes seldom occur in politics. However, the Report did chart for NATO a sensible course which avoided the extremes of clinging to a cold war policy on the one hand or of weakening deterrence on the other. Furthermore, it was a policy on which all Fifteen members of the Alliance -- including France -- were able to agree. Thus, the unity on fundamental lines of policy -- so essential to the continued vitality of NATO -- was maintained. This was not easy as there were some members who wished to emphasize defense more strongly; others who wished greater emphasis on detente. Yet there remained a willingness to find common ground for the sake of unity. This desire to achieve consensus demonstrated that all of the members -- even before Czechoslovakia -- placed a high value on the maintenance of the Alliance.

The third issue with which NATO was grappling prior to the Czech affair has been a continuing one for the Alliance. This is what strategy and what forces NATO should maintain. While the issues are too complex to discuss in detail here, the point should be made that the force planning procedures of the Alliance have not only continued to function, but have been improved in the past several years. Furthermore, the members are able to discuss frankly among themselves conflicting views on strategy; particularly in the field of nuclear strategy, there has been a much fuller exchange of views in the last several years than there was in the past. The significance of force planning and strategic discussions should not be exaggerated, but neither should their importance be minimized. Ultimate decisions on forces are always made by the individual countries as these decisions involve financial determinations that only a national government can make. However, each member's defense programs are annually subjected to careful scrutiny and criticism by his allies, and there is an opportunity to bring significant international pressures to bear to improve forces and coordinate strategy. This could not occur in the absence of an Alliance.

In sum, NATO was a functioning, far from moribund, organization prior to Czechoslovakia. It had sensed the changing political environment, come to grips with it, and enunciated a doctrine to deal with change. It had begun its planning for a period of possible expanded detente. Yet it had also sounded a warning against excessive optimism about the pace of detente and continued its efforts to strengthen and modernize the deterrent forces. There were many who thought this was too timid a policy, still mired in the rhetoric and thinking of the Cold War. However, the events of August 20 demonstrated

the essential wisdom of those who insisted that NATO was still essential and that the Allies should not permit any degradation of their deterrent capabilities.

### NATO Since Czechoslovakia

There are two stories one sees frequently about NATO's reaction to the Czech events. On the one hand, NATO has been criticized for impotence because it could do nothing to forestall the Czech invasion or force the withdrawal of Soviet troops once this occurred. On the other hand, NATO is accused of over-reacting and of placing too much emphasis on military rather than political responses. These accusations reflect the complexities of a large alliance, but both criticisms, while they have some seeds of truth, reflect a misunderstanding of NATO's role and what NATO has done to carry out that role in the light of the events in Eastern Europe.

First it is frequently reported that NATO was taken by surprise by the Czech invasion. This is only partly true. It was certainly no surprise that relations between the Czechs and the Soviets had been deteriorating for some time; the Soviets were clearly displeased with the Dubcek-Svoboda government and its reform programs. It was no surprise that Soviet troops had been conducting maneuvers on the Czech border in a menacing fashion for some weeks. What could not be predicted was whether these troops would be used to invade Czechoslovakia or to put pressure on the Czechs in more subtle ways, and if they were used to invade the country, just exactly when this would occur. Some observers in the West did engage in some wishful thinking. Many Westerners simultaneously held two contradictory views: that the Soviet Union would never use force against Czechoslovakia and that the continuation of the liberal trends in Eastern Europe would lead to the disintegration of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. Obviously the Soviets could see this too, and they saw the threat to their interests in Eastern Europe to be greater than the risk of using force. NATO did recognize correctly that whatever threat there was to Czechoslovakia did not constitute a direct military threat to the countries of NATO, i.e., that the Soviets would not move into the NATO treaty area.

In the days following August 20 there were two major concerns around the NATO Council table in Brussels. One was to make sure that the military action in Eastern Europe did not spill over into the West. The second was to avoid any acts that would provide a pretext for further repression by the Soviets in Eastern Europe or further justification for the actions already taken. (Moscow had tried, rather lamely, to

sense of realism that pervaded that meeting. Gone was some of the wishful thinking of earlier years. But neither was there panic nor over-reaction. Several of the European members saw more clearly than they had a few months earlier the need to maintain strong NATO defenses. But they also perceived the need to keep open the door for future contact with the East. It was further recognized that change in Eastern Europe could bring both new hope and new problems and that NATO was still essential in a Europe that had still not solved postwar problems.

### The Lesson of the Czech Affair

First, it appears clear, and certainly the United States Government thinks it is clear, that NATO is still very much needed. There is complete unanimity on this score among the Fifteen members including the French. NATO is needed because there is still a threat to Western Europe from the East. This threat takes a somewhat different form today than it did twenty years ago when NATO was founded. Then there was a very real possibility of a military attack against Western Europe by Soviet armies that were far superior in strength to those of the NATO countries. Today that threat is judged by most people to be far more remote. But it is remote precisely because NATO has created the military strength and the unity of purpose which makes it perfectly clear to the Soviet Union that an attack on Western Europe would not serve Soviet interests. The deterrent depends heavily, but by no means solely, on United States nuclear forces. It also requires sizable and modern non-nuclear forces and a unity of purpose among the states of the North Atlantic area.

Today the threat to Western interests stem much more from the rapid change which is occurring in Eastern Europe, the Soviet willingness to use force to resist change when it threatens their interests, and the risk that the use of force by the Soviets could spill over into the West. The principal danger spot in Europe remains Berlin, where the United States, Great Britain and France have a firm commitment to maintain the freedom of that city. But there are also potential risks in the so-called "grey areas", where the use of force by the Soviets would certainly create serious tensions in Europe.

Second, while the prospects for improved relations between Eastern and Western Europe have received a temporary setback, there is no question that in the years ahead efforts will be renewed to improve relations between East and West. While NATO is primarily a defensive alliance, it is also in the business of seeking a peaceful resolution to the problems which divide Europe. NATO must adapt to the changing environment in Europe. It can serve as a useful clearing house to assure that the

claim that Western interference in Czechoslovakia had prompted their intervention.) Thus, the initial NATO response was cautious: strong disapproval of the invasion both by actions and words and a clear indication that NATO would not stand by if the Soviets extended their aggression to other countries. At the same time, it was agreed to avoid military actions of any sort that could give the Soviets any sort of excuse for further military action themselves or for repressive political acts against the Czechs. Thus, if the initial reactions by NATO appeared modest, they were intended to be so, but the political representation by all of the Western powers made perfectly clear their disapproval and served strong warning to the Soviets against taking any actions against Western interests.

The second phase of NATO's response was a careful joint appraisal of the events in Czechoslovakia, how they affected the interests of the NATO members and what actions needed to be taken to serve NATO's objectives, particularly the maintenance of an effective defense posture. This took some time as the assessment was complex and it was important to arrive at a consensus as to the appropriate response. The assessment was complex because the new threat posed to the Alliance was not solely or even primarily military. True there were now more Warsaw Pact divisions close to the borders of NATO countries. But more important was the greater uncertainty as to future Soviet actions. This was hardly clarified by an article which appeared in Pravda proclaiming what appeared to be a new Soviet doctrine of "Socialist Commonwealth" and purporting to justify military intervention in any Socialist state. Perhaps most difficult was the need to readjust the hopes that many had harbored that we had already entered a new era of peaceful relations in Europe.

The NATO assessment was not too dissimilar from that reached in the Harmel Study a year before. While hopes for early progress toward improved relations with the East had received a sharp setback, there was no disposition to return to the sharp confrontation of the earlier years of the cold war. There was now a greater willingness to undertake some of the measures for the common defense that had long been needed - particularly measures to improve the capability for rapid mobilization of forces. The invasion of Czechoslovakia had dramatized the need for a more rapid mobilization capability and qualitative improvements in the armed forces in the West.

When the Ministers met in November they agreed to take a series of steps, undramatic but militarily important, to improve the defense capabilities of NATO. These steps, while in themselves important, were not as significant as the new

various members in their relationships with Eastern Europe are not operating at cross purposes. It can also do some useful preparatory work as part of the efforts to reduce tensions. For example, the Alliance is continuing its study of mutual force reductions in Central Europe. If such reductions can ever be negotiated with the East, this will concern NATO as a defense alliance for it will bear on the relative military capabilities of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. If at some future date force reductions can be negotiated, these reductions could contribute to stability rather than instability in Central Europe.

Finally, we face a period of great change in Europe on both sides of what used to be called the Iron Curtain. In the West there is a strong desire to be rid of the tension of the Cold War and to form a new relationship with Eastern Europe. At the same time, far-sighted statesmen in the West continue to search for new ways to bring greater unity to Western Europe. To some extent these two desires conflict, and ways will have to be found to accommodate both desires.

In Eastern Europe the process of change poses both problems and opportunities for the members of the Atlantic Alliance. Certainly we favor the process of liberalization that has occurred in Eastern Europe over the last several years. In the long run, a secure peace in Europe can be achieved only by a simultaneous process of self-determination in the East and accommodation between the East and West. But as the recent events in Czechoslovakia have shown, the process of change is likely to be punctuated by periods of tension since liberalization in Eastern Europe is a clear threat to the leaders of the Kremlin. They have shown that they recognize this threat and that they are prepared to use force to shape change to their design of the future. Thus, there seems to be many more uneasy years ahead. The goal of the United States, however, is clear -- a secure and lasting peace not only in Europe but in the other troubled spots of the world. Securing peace is a tedious business, occasionally fraught with great dangers, but it is a task worthy of the nation. It is the only course that it can follow for there are no acceptable alternatives that would assure its survival as a free society.