

Response of the NATO countries to the invasion of Czechoslovakia (Washington, 4 November 1968)

Caption: On 4 November 1968, the NATO countries give an official response to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops.

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Washington, November 4, 1968

The response of the NATO countries to the invasion of Czechoslovakia

Summary

The Czechoslovak crisis has been the effect of stalling the slow process of disintegration that has beset NATO since the late 1950s. For the first time in several years all the allies (save France) accept the necessity of preserving an effective alliance beyond its 20th anniversary next year.

What this will mean in terms of increased individual country contributions to NATO is still unclear. So far the European allies have responded to the events in Czechoslovakia with far more promise than performance. Among the four or five that have pledged concrete new contributions, only Greece has offered anything approximating a clear net gain for the alliance. Belgium, for its parts, has offered only to “postpone” impending troop cutbacks in West Germany; Britain has pledged further commitments which represent almost nothing new for the common defense; and West Germany, with most to fear from the Soviets, has refrained from making any substantial gesture that might reinforce charges of German revanchism.

Introduction

1. Whatever the initial reaction to the Soviet action in Czechoslovakia, none of the European NATO allies seems to have been sufficiently moved to put aside the frugal attitude toward defense spending or to rush to the support of the “flexible response” strategy, on which the argument for increased conventional forces has been based. This strategy, although officially adopted by NATO last year, continues to be regarded suspiciously as a prelude to US nuclear disengagement. Under current circumstances it is likely to attract even less favor among the European allies, especially since one of its basic tenets — the concept of “political warning time” — appears to have been brought into question. Judging from the rapid airlift of Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia, it is no longer certain that NATO would have sufficient lead time — after the first signs of a Soviet build-up — to “rotate” back into Europe the US and British forces earmarked for allied defense. Hence there is little incentive for the Europeans to add further resources to NATO’s conventional arsenal, since in the event of a Soviet attack it might have to be quickly superseded by a resort to nuclear weaponry.

2. Against these rather melancholy realities, however, a few encouraging facts may be arrayed. For one thing, the allies are once again talking seriously about strengthening the organization. On the eve of the Czechoslovak crisis, the 15-nation grouping was in a state of disarray. France had pulled its military forces out of the integrated command structure in 1966, thus severing land communications between NATO’s northern and southern tiers. More recently Belgium had decided to recall two of its six brigades from West Germany. In the last five years Britain’s Army of the Rhine had been reduced from 53,000 to 48,000. The US force in Europe had been cut by 25 percent over the same period. Even the West Germans had been unable to field their 12th division before 1965. Amid this growing confusion, the shock of the Czechoslovak tragedy has galvanized new interest and support for the alliance although not to the degree that some of the allies would prefer.

3. Perhaps most importantly, the crisis has led to renewed emphasis on the idea of solidarity. For the first time since the Soviet invasion of Hungary, all 15 NATO allies seem equally sensitive to the threat that has always proved the best catalyst to allied unity. Meeting in special session in early October, they were able to agree on a series of statements, together with action recommendations, underscoring the importance of a common front in the face of the new imponderables in East-West relations. Of particular value was their “political assessment” of the “post-Czechoslovak” situation, which brought into clear focus the arguments needed by some of the member governments (Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands) to justify new defense commitments to their parliaments and to public opinion. The assessment established in unequivocal language that the invasion had demonstrated the unpredictability of Soviet behavior, that it had importantly affected, if not radically changed, the military and security balance in Europe; and that a new

strategic threat had been posed by the Soviet build-up in the Mediterranean. With the threat thus identified, the allies should be in a better position to cooperate in checking it.

4. As a corollary to the drafting of the NATO “assessment,” the Soviet action has stimulated the entire process of interallied consultation, which has long been a sticking point in relations between the US and the other 14 allies. Even the French were able to bring themselves to take part in the deliberations leading to the political and military papers on the situation. In the seven-nation nuclear planning group, moreover, the British and West Germans took a leading role in discussions on strategy and agreed to work together on future strategic guidelines for the alliance. This could lead to greater involvement by the Europeans in an area of allied concern traditionally monopolized by the US — a development which in turn could make them more responsive to the demands of NATO defense.

5. As still another consequence of the Czech crisis, the European allies seem to have been made more conscious of what they must do to preserve the US guarantee on their behalf. The British in particular have begun to talk of creating a European defense grouping in NATO as a means of heading off any further cutbacks in the US presence on the continent. In part this is an effort to enhance Britain’s credit as a European power, but it also reflects growing awareness that the European allies must work together to relieve the US of some of its defense burdens.

6. Through the work of the Harmel committees last year, the alliance tried to identify itself with the movement toward “peaceful engagement” with the East and specifically to develop a common program on mutual troop reductions vis-à-vis the Soviet bloc. Whether or not these efforts would have given new purpose to NATO is, at least for the moment, beside the point. The Soviet actions in Eastern Europe have shifted emphasis back toward the more basic problem of defense. To allies, such as Denmark and Norway, which have insisted that the search for détente be continued, the NATO “political assessment” grants only a conditional mandate. Détente should be pursued, it states, only so long as it does not jeopardize allied solidarity.

7. Viewed against the high ideals of Atlantic partnership, these alternations in NATO’s prospects seem rather minor. They do not prefigure the quantitative improvements in the allied defense system that could steel it against an all-out Soviet assault. But in terms of what is needed to keep the alliance alive for the next few years, they do offer some grounds for optimism. At the very least the alliance is more cohesive than before and the European allies are more aware of their responsibilities under the collective defense concept.

8. In the attached annex are details of the response to the events in Czechoslovakia for each of the US’ 14 NATO allies.