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Speech by Dr. Joseph M.A.H. Luns

Secretary General of NATO

at the Opening Session of the

NATO Ministerial Meeting, Ottawa

Ottawa,
18th June, 1974

ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL AT THE
OPENING SESSION OF THE MINISTERIAL MEETING IN OTTAWA

Mr. Prime Minister, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted that this meeting has given us an opportunity to be here in your fine capital to enjoy the hospitality extended by the Canadian Government, for which we are most grateful.

At a time when the international situation, fraught as it is with much uncertainty, is putting to the test Western determination, the history of your country stands out as an example of what can be achieved when strength of character comes up against harsh reality. By dint of effort, this country has developed from a virgin land into one of the world's leading commercial and industrial powers. Building on the individualistic traditions of its two founding peoples, Canada has succeeded in bringing together groups of differing origin and outlook and imbuing them with a strong sense of national identity. This enduring habit of seeking unity through diversity has led your country quite naturally to open itself extensively to the world at large, affirming thereby - and so strikingly - its international vocation. Strongly aware of its historical ties, Canada did not hesitate to demonstrate what this common destiny meant by its involvement in the two World Wars.

Today's meeting here in Ottawa is a particularly important occasion since it marks the 25th Anniversary of the Alliance. This is the appropriate place and setting in which to assess the Alliance's unique achievement in forging links between peoples on both sides of the Atlantic that share the same attachment to a system of values based on common interests. On this 25th Anniversary, the Alliance can look back and contemplate with legitimate pride the long era of peace and unprecedented economic and social progress that it has ensured for our peoples. Having fully succeeded in its essential task of holding the external threat at bay it has gone on to constitute a major stabilizing factor in international relations. As the prime-mover of Allied cohesion, it has been instrumental in getting East-West negotiations under way, whilst in Europe itself old rivalries have died away, giving place to the growing assertion of European solidarity.

However, nations are readily inclined to become complacent in times of peace such as that which we have the good fortune to enjoy and - whether wittingly or unwittingly - they overlook the fact that the preservation of peace is something that calls for constant effort and unremitting vigilance. There are some, and not only among the younger generation, who all but hold the comfortable conviction that Europe has, as it were, an inalienable and, in a sense, a privileged right to peace. As the external threat has seemed to recede, so there have emerged centrifugal forces which, by exaggerating certain misunderstandings, have seemed on the verge of wearing down our will to co-operate, while at the same time questioning the justification for our defence policy.

In this connection, the Yom Kippur war had a salutary impact in many quarters, for it demonstrated the fragility of the foundations of world peace and the present limits of detente. It became clear that the Soviet Union does not hesitate to use force if, by so doing, it feels that it can secure advantages without taking disproportionate risks and that consequently it is the West's clearly-expressed determination to resist which alone imposes limits on Soviet ambitions. The primary lesson to be learnt from the war in the Middle East is that the Soviet threat still exists. This casts a somewhat disturbing light on the continuing growth of the Soviet military capability, which it is difficult to reconcile with the USSR's solemn affirmations in other quarters to the effect that it wants to promote detente.

It is therefore important to avoid being over-optimistic by asserting that detente has already been achieved. The reality is different. Detente is not yet an established fact; it is simply the goal of our policies and hopes. At the same time, it must be firmly reasserted that detente, like peace, is indivisible and that it cannot be established in Europe if there is a constant risk that conflicts will break out or worsen in other areas - and here, of course, I am thinking first and foremost of the Middle East. Any detente in which international problems were artificially separated and tackled as though each were enclosed in a watertight compartment would be fragile and indeed deceptive.

In other words, detente is not an end in itself but must exercise a positive influence on the lives of our peoples in the form of tangible measures for the improvement of East-West relations. This is the purpose of the different sets of East-West negotiations which are now in progress and which cover a vast area: CSCE, MBFR and SALT. We can but admit that by and large, and even if the climate of East-West relations is healthier, the genuine progress which we hoped to achieve by means of these negotiations has yet to materialize.

This being said, we must remind ourselves that when we set out on our quest for more stable international relations, we considered from the very start that negotiations with the East, whatever their nature, would test the sincerity of Soviet intentions. The truth of the matter is, and it would be unrealistic to deny this, that to Moscow, detente is a one-way process serving the exclusive interests of the Soviet Union. I trust that the confidence we have placed in the Soviet spirit of compromise will be justified.

In any event, since serious doubts continue about Moscow's policy, it is more necessary than ever for the Atlantic countries to close their ranks. It must once again be emphasized that the link between the preservation of an overall NATO defence capability - in other words a balance of forces - and the success of the policy of detente is an indissoluble one.

In parallel with their military effort, the Alliance countries must be able to buttress their cohesion by satisfactory political consultation. In this connection, I draw great encouragement from the fact that the North Atlantic Council in Permanent Session is now able to submit to Ministers in Ottawa a text for a Declaration on Atlantic Relations. I also welcome the fact that on 26th June, there will be an opportunity for exchanging views between President Nixon and other NATO leaders at the highest level before he flies to Moscow.

The Alliance must function for the mutual benefit of the partners. A close Alliance in the field of defence without which the security of Europe could not be assured, is inconceivable unless there is at the same time co-operation in other areas of common interest. The path taken by the process of Europe's unification will quite obviously be a decisive factor in the effective functioning of trans-Atlantic consultations. But for this enterprise to be of benefit to the West, it should be conducted in a spirit of co-operation with Canada and the United States.

It goes indeed without saying that this procedure for consultation does not only affect relations between the Europe of the Nine and the United States. Atlantic problems are of equal concern to all the Atlantic countries and we are extremely conscious of the special position of Canada. I should like at this point, Mr. Prime Minister, not only to stress the value which member countries attach to the carefully balanced views which come to us from your country but also to pay tribute to the unceasing efforts made by your great statesman, the late Lester Pearson, to forge closer links between the Atlantic partners.

When it comes to determining our line of conduct, I have no doubt that member countries will, in the light of events and their repercussions on the international scene, have appreciated the inestimable importance of solidarity in facing the future together. It is by drawing fresh strength from the lessons to be learnt from the 25 years of their Alliance that they will show once again that it constitutes the basis for the security of the Atlantic countries and the appropriate political framework within which to promote a better climate in international relations.