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Address by the President d'honneur

of the North Atlantic Council,

His Excellency Mr. Matthias A. Mathiesen,

Minister for Foreign Affairs of Iceland

Halifax, 28-29 May 1986

Mr. Prime Minister, Your Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of NATO's Foreign Ministers, gathered here in Halifax, I would like to express gratitude to the Canadian Government, as well as the Government of Nova Scotia, for bringing us to this beautiful maritime province for our Spring 1986 meeting.

As an Icelander I am particularly pleased to be here, since Canada is home to the largest concentration of Icelandic emigrants, many of whom have gained positions of influence and respect in this country. Furthermore, Icelandic seafarers, at the end of the 10th century, were familiar with these parts of Canada and gave exotic names to them as they recorded their adventures. Wineland the Good and Wonderstrands were probably not very far from Halifax. This was almost a thousand years ago. Five hundred years later Giovanni Caboto passed Newfoundland and entered the Gulf of St. Lawrence, re-establishing the link that today means so much to all our nations.

Canadians have over the years demonstrated their unstinting support for NATO membership. An opinion poll commissioned by the Canadian Department of External Affairs two years ago revealed that more than four out of five Canadians (85%) advocate NATO membership. The poll also showed that the issue Canadians are most concerned about in international affairs, along with Third World poverty, is peace and security. It is my opinion that NATO has served and will continue to serve our nations as the most effective means to attain these ends.

Allow me to begin by describing in general terms my personal view of the principal objectives of the Atlantic Alliance. I should then like to address briefly some of the challenges facing us at the present time.

Western nations found themselves obliged in the aftermath of the Second World War to unite in order to stave off the threat posed by an expansionist dictatorship. The Atlantic Alliance was established to protect and uphold such basic values as democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law. From the outset, therefore, the Atlantic Alliance was dedicated not only to peace as such but to the safeguarding of fundamental ideals. The subordinate status of peace to goals like the preservation of sovereignty and the independence of individual states is reflected, I think, in the phrase "peace and security" which occurs both in the U.N. Charter and the NATO Treaty. The coupling of the two terms in the Charter and the Treaty reflects the judgement that the requirements of security may conflict with those of peace and that in this event the latter will not necessarily take priority. It has been the policy of the Atlantic Alliance not to engage in unprovoked military action, whether with nuclear or conventional weapons. Yet a strong defensive capacity is a clear demonstration of our willingness to protect what is our own and a precondition for sustaining the peace we desire.

By deterring aggressors NATO has enabled all nations in our region to enjoy the freedom necessary for their economic and social well-being. We should, furthermore, bear in mind that free international trade and cooperation of other nature, has been established within the framework of Western defences. The Western European nations that are not members of NATO have also benefitted from this defence cooperation.

Another function, expounded in the Harmel Report of 1967, is the search for stability in East-West relations to enable us to manage the underlying political issues. On the basis of this double function, the one military, the other diplomatic, NATO seeks to ensure stability at the lowest possible level of all forces.

What are the foremost challenges facing our Alliance today? At present, the NATO countries have to deal with two challenges to their security, the one internal, the other external.

Internally, political terrorism poses an increasingly serious threat to Western democracies. There are many types of political violence, but terrorism, aided and abetted by states hostile to the West, constitutes without a doubt a grave danger to our internal security interests.

The recent wave of international terrorism has led to speculation within NATO concerning suitable and justifiable measures.

It is necessary that democracies show restraint in dealing with this problem. We do not turn our societies into police states when crimes are committed. We must live with the condition that democracies, when compared to authoritarian states, are at a natural disadvantage in their dealings with internal enemies.

In one of the Icelandic sagas, Njal's saga, a hero is hideously attacked and incinerated in his home. Facing imminent death, he reminds his folk not to wail or do anything inappropriate, "... for we will be judged", he says, "by stricter standards than that of our adversaries." I am not implying that Western nations are confronted with their destiny in the terrorist threat. The problem is fortunately not of that magnitude. Western nations are, however, faced with a multitude of cowardly acts which they cannot respond to in kind, for they will be, and should be, judged by stricter moral standards than their adversaries.

What, then, are the means available for democratic states to defend themselves against political terrorism? In 1949 they responded in a proper manner to communist expansion. They concentrated their efforts in a defensive alliance. The essence of the Alliance has from the very start been the close and extensive cooperation between the nations of North America and Europe. Time and again our adversaries have made attempts to weaken this bond but they have not been successful to this date.

Western democracies must unite in their approach and work out specific guidelines for coordinated action to meet this scourge. Strict and effective political and economic sanctions must be undertaken against states that overtly or covertly support terrorism. The task is to hold this threat at bay without wrecking the traditions of civility integral to the West.

Externally, the NATO countries are persistently threatened by the ongoing build-up of the Soviet military machine. Experience shows that the Soviet Union is willing to threaten or use force outside its own frontiers. Afghanistan being the latest example. A large part of the Soviet Union's resources are devoted to the military sector, far in excess of its defence needs. This demonstrates the global aspirations motivating Soviet power. The ultimate goal of world dominance continues to inspire Soviet endeavours to divide the West and increase Soviet influence in the Third World.

All of us, not least we Icelanders, have witnessed Soviet naval expansion in the Northern regions as part of this enormous military build-up. The Soviet fleet has developed from being a relatively weak coastal defence force 20 years ago to becoming a formidable global maritime power. It is for this reason, among other things, that Icelanders have begun in the past few years to take part in the military activities of NATO in Brussels and have undertaken greater participation in analysing the Defence Force role in Iceland.

During the past few months, the Soviet leader Mr. Gorbachev has made several proposals which many have taken as signals of a changing mood in the Soviet leadership. But the Soviet's handling of the nuclear accident in the Ukraine has undermined these hopes. The Soviet reaction shows that little has changed in their attitude towards the needs and sensitivities of individual lives. An attempt was even made to cover up the accident. The question which such a behaviour inevitably invites is this: How can a regime which manifests so little respect for the lives of its own citizens be trusted in its dealings with other states?

The Soviet leadership finds itself in distress. Aside from the setback caused by their handling of Chernobyl the Soviet's are confronted with serious social and economic stagnation, unless they are prepared to make significant changes in their traditional creed. But the regime is faced with a dilemma: The huge economic problems in the Soviet Union will not be solved unless the regime is willing to loosen its control over the economy. But that would in turn diminish the power of the Party. For this reason the new leadership is likely to focus on piecemeal rather than drastic changes. There will be campaigns against various social ills that are the consequences but not the sources of the basic problem. They will never accept that the system itself is at fault.

The question which concerns the Alliance is how the foreign policy of the Soviet Union will be affected by these changing circumstances. Will it become more accommodating or will it be used to an increasing extent as a means to divert attention from domestic ills?

Questions like this are the stuff of international politics. Albert Einstein is supposed to have been asked once why men had the wit to make bombs of unimagined power, but could not use their ingenuity to put their political affairs in order. The answer is simple, the great scientist is said to have replied: "Politics is more difficult than physics."

It is true that politicians cannot rely on the laws of science in trying to explain things of state. Instead they must proceed with prudence, and examine each case independently. At no time has statesmanlike prudence been more needed than in the nuclear age, which, incidentally, is an offspring of both politics and physics. Efforts to stabilise relations between East and West are a foremost priority in world politics. Last year there was a breakthrough in this regard when the Soviets finally agreed to resume the INF-talks in Geneva and when the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States had their first summit meeting since 1979. At its Ministerial Meeting last December the North Atlantic Council expressed the hope that the summit would lead to more extensive contacts and broader cooperation across the whole range of East-West questions. That hope has not yet been extinguished.

I believe that the West is today in a strong position to negotiate with the Soviet Union. This position should be used to induce the Soviets to limit nuclear stockpiles, to negotiate reductions in conventional forces and weapons, including chemical weapons, as well as to fulfill their commitments to human rights. This will not be an easy task and will demand a great deal of patience and skill. It is a challenge that will also require the Atlantic Alliance to sustain its resolve and unity. I should like to conclude by expressing the hope that our meeting here in Halifax will strengthen the ties that bind us together and will help us prepare for the difficult times ahead.