11-19-1971

Force Reductions in NATO and the Interests of the U.S.

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001
A significant change has not taken place in the size of U. S.
military forces in Europe for more than a decade. The total has remained
about the same under the policies of four Presidents—Eisenhower, Kennedy,
Johnson and, to date, Nixon. With the passing of time, however, the
advocacy of a substantial reduction of forces in Europe has grown more
emphatic in the Senate. The Senate would appear to be reflecting much
more accurately than the Administration, the sentiments of the American
people.

It is important to note that what is being proposed in the
Senate is not a "complete withdrawal" but a "substantial reduction"
of U. S. forces in Europe. Most recently, the cut-back which is
asked is only 60,000 out of a total of 310,000. However, in translat-
ing the Senate position into public discussion the Administration has
preferred to obscure the difference between reduction and withdrawal.

A world of difference exists between the two concepts. To
bring about a reduction of the U. S. deployment would not depart from
the common interests of America and Western Europe. The same cannot be
said for a complete withdrawal of U. S. forces. In my judgment, the
latter course would be a most serious mistake in present circumstances.
That is because U.S. forces are in NATO, before all else, as an evidence of this nation’s interests in the peace of the European continent. American soldiers are not or certainly should not be in Europe for their health or because, as some say, it is cheaper to maintain them there than in the United States! As a contingent of NATO, the American soldier on European soil is part of a total system of Western collaboration. The system is imperfect, certainly, but it is the cement of the North Atlantic region. Together with commerce, scientific and cultural association and innumerable other links, NATO is an element in a total environment wherein, it is hoped, free institutions may endure and grow more pertinent to the lives of the people who live in the region.

For 20 years, NATO has contributed to safeguarding this basic interest of both Europe and America. The institution is not lifeless and should not be permitted to die. Not only the North Atlantic Treaty but also the basic organizational structure of NATO have continuing value for the Atlantic nations.

The utility of NATO, however, has nothing to do with keeping the present level of U.S. forces on the continent. In what way does the rigid maintenance of these numbers, a figure which was arrived at years ago, add to the strength of the Treaty or the organization? It may even be surmised that the rigidity is tending to weaken the entire structure.
It should be recalled that the North Atlantic Alliance endured the unilateral French adjustments of several years ago. Nor was NATO destroyed by the substantial reductions of the British and Canadian contingents. These adaptations were compelled by national requirements. They were made, without adverse consequences, in the light of altered international circumstances. As a practical matter, the level of U.S. forces or any other NATO contingent should be defined in the same way. National and international circumstances must be the critical considerations, not the urge to preserve an existing bureaucratic structure.

The fact is that current circumstances do differ greatly from those of the past. In the first place, it is apparent that Europe is now in the train of disposing of the last geographic problems of World War II. The borders of the Germanies have been settled officially and the initialed Soviet-German and Polish-German accords attest to the delineation. There is also, now, in the new four-power understanding with regard to the status of Berlin assurance against incidents in the critical corridors to that city. Finally, we cannot ignore the stream of trade, people, art, sports and so forth which flows between East and West Europe in the pursuits of peace. That is hardly the setting in which to expect ideological conflict or war. On the contrary, it lends substance to visions of "one Europe from the Urals to the Atlantic."
Today's Europe is not the same as when the U. S. deployment was established at the present level. That was the period of slow recovery from the shock of the Great War. It was a time steeped in the atmosphere of cold war and Korea and heavy with the fears of another universal conflict.

As the international scene has shifted, so too have the inner national requirements of the United States. It is not necessary to review here the list of our domestic ills. They are many and severe and they demand urgent attention. Burdened with the tragedy of Indochina, this nation cannot afford other extravagances.

The excesses in foreign aid and military involvement have already led the United States into a difficult predicament. After years of inflation, there is now a serious recession with substantial unemployment. The dollar is floating, not in strength but because of loss of international weight.

The European nations are undoubtedly more prosperous than in the past, but recent reports indicate that economic problems are multiplying on the continent. In any event, neither the present uncertainty of the dollar nor the "temporary" surcharge will make matters easier. These "remedies" are designed to meet the economic situation in the United States and they are believed, in Washington, also to be essential in redressing international imbalances.
In all candor, however, the remedies are also necessary to underwrite the cost of existing policies of foreign aid and other overseas commitment. The policies include, of course, U. S. participation in NATO. At last count, the estimated cost was in the vicinity of $14 billion annually. Thus, it can be seen that there is a cause and effect relationship between U. S. participation in NATO and the New Economic Policy.

However necessary, the new economic policy tends to discourage commerce between America and Europe. In so doing, it is bound to disturb the stability of the North Atlantic region. Moreover, it does so in a way which is far more dangerous to the basic relationship than would a substantial reduction in the U. S. deployment.

Unless the United States is encouraged to scale down overseas military expenditures promptly, there is a strong possibility that delayed adjustments will be made in haste and recrimination. The hour is already late. What should be a substantial reduction of U. S. forces in Europe may yet be converted into total withdrawal. The result would be the disintegration of NATO and erosion of the entire North Atlantic environment. That would be a devastating blow to the interests of Europe and, in the end, to the interests of the United States.