

CONSEIL DE L'ATLANTIQUE NORD
NORTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL

EXEMPLAIRE N° 369
COPY

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH
8th March, 1956

NATO UNCLASSIFIED
and
PUBLIC DISCLOSED

~~NATO CONFIDENTIAL~~
~~DOCUMENT~~
~~C-M(56)25~~

PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECTS OF POLITICAL
CONSULTATIONS IN NATO

Note by the Secretary General and
Vice Chairman of the Council

At its meeting on 1st March, 1956⁽¹⁾, the Council recommended that the conclusions set out in the attached paper should be used as a guidance by the NATO Information Division, national information services and official spokesmen, in public statements relating to political consultation within NATO.

(Signed) ISMAY

Palais de Chaillot,
Paris, XVIe.

(1) C-R(56)9

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PUBLIC RELATIONS ASPECTS OF POLITICAL
CONSULTATIONS IN NATO

The purpose of this paper is to outline how, in the context of public relations, appropriate emphasis may be given to the highly significant development of political consultation within NATO.

2. In this connection, note should be taken of the terms of the "Resolution on Political Consultation" adopted by the Council on 23rd April, 1954 (1):

"THE NORTH ATLANTIC COUNCIL

HAVING REGARD to the obligations assumed by the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty

RECOGNISING

(A) that the security and unity of the Atlantic Community depend not only on collective defence measures but also on co-ordinated diplomatic policies; and

(B) that developments in the international situation affect each of the Parties;

REAFFIRMS the views of the Committee on the North Atlantic Community (2) endorsed by the Eighth Session of the Council at Rome;

AGREES that the Council should be used when appropriate for exchanges of views on political questions of common concern;

RECOMMENDS

(A) that all member governments should bear constantly in mind the desirability of bringing to the attention of the Council information on international political developments whenever they are of concern to other members of the Council or to the Organization as a whole; and

(B) that the Council in permanent session should from time to time consider what specific subject might be suitable for political consultation at one of its subsequent meetings when its members should be in a position to express the views of their governments on this subject."

3. The North Atlantic Treaty, especially the Preamble, and Articles 2, 3 and 4, provides the general background for the development of political consultation within NATO.

(1) C-M(54)38
(2) C/8-D/6

4. The following paragraph from "NATO: the First Five Years" (1) is also relevant to this question:

"The Council have no written rules of procedure; nor has the need for such rules ever been felt when governments hold divergent views, negotiation continues until unanimous agreement has been attained. There is no question of say, ten nations forcing four to do what they do not want to do. The Council are no supranational body; their members are representatives of sovereign states. It is true that unanimity is not achieved without considerable patience and a good deal of give and take; but it has always been reached in the end. That is because the interests and objectives of all NATO countries are fundamentally the same, and because the habit of thinking alike and acting alike for the common good is growing daily."

5. The following paragraphs are suggested as forming, in the context of public relations, an appropriate body of "doctrine" respecting political consultation within NATO:

(a) A direct method of bringing home to public opinion the importance of the habit of political consultation within NATO may be summed up in the proposition "NATO is a political as well as a military alliance". The habitual use of this phraseology would be preferable to the current tendency to refer to NATO as a (purely) military alliance. It is also more accurate. To refer to NATO as a political alliance in no sense denies, depreciates or deprecates the fact that the alliance is also military.

"NATO is a political alliance" may, at first, strike some sections of public opinion as a paradoxical statement. But this merely measures the degree to which a corrective is needed to public assumptions about NATO. For the statement, so far from being a paradox, is an accurate and indeed an obvious statement of fact, whether one considers the Treaty itself, the development of the alliance, or its current practice and standing.

To keep referring to NATO in purely military terms has long been, and still is, standard Communist terminology ("military bloc"), for well-considered propaganda reasons. It helps Soviet purposes to use a terminology consistent with depicting NATO in purely military terms, as an aggressive military organization, based on the threat of armed force. But the real aim of Soviet policy is the destruction of a political alliance with teeth, because its unity diminishes the chances of applying the classical procedure of first isolating a victim before intimidating him and finally engulfing him.

Historically speaking, it was necessary when NATO was first developed to emphasise the military potentialities of the alliance in order to reassure a somewhat demoralised Western public opinion. It is now necessary to emphasise that this military potentiality is based on a political alliance which is of the first importance, without being aggressive. The need for such a shift of emphasis is in part a measure of the success of NATO, but it is also necessary to consider the effects of Soviet "peace" propaganda techniques, and the dangerous complacency and ignorance of some elements of Western public opinion.

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(b) The value of the alliance as a deterrent to a potential aggressor depends not only on the maintenance of appropriate integrated military forces, but also on an effective political alignment of its member states in respect of the basic security purposes of the Treaty. Political consultation within NATO is therefore of key importance in maintaining and developing this necessary unity of outlook and action in questions of general security, which present both political and military aspects.

(c) Political consultation is a natural development of the continuing association within NATO of "like-minded nations", sharing common attitudes, traditions, interests and objectives. Emphasis should be given to the uniqueness (apart from the British Commonwealth) of this association of "like-minded nations", particularly as linking together North American and European countries in a way which may eventually tend to even closer association.

(d) This development has been an organic growth responsive to the circumstances with which the members of the alliance have been confronted. The common arrangements set up for defensive purposes, and the annual review process are posited upon a basis of continuing general consultation and agreement on the political circumstances which make them necessary, and these defence arrangements in turn tend to enlarge the field in which political consultation is found to be fruitful.

(e) For the proper development of political consultation it is necessary to maintain secrecy, because full and frank discussion of sensitive questions -- in which large, medium and small powers can participate on an equal footing -- is possible only on this basis. From the point of view of public relations it is therefore necessary to emphasise the general "constitutional" aspects of political consultation, and to make it clear that, being held in private or restricted session, these consultations will not be the subject of news releases. The emphasis should be on the habit and practice of political consultation, on the "harmonisation" of policies thereby produced, and on the informal nature of the exchanges of views and information.

(f) Under Article 4 of the Treaty, "the Parties will consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened." It can be pointed out, moreover, that any government can give information to other members or raise any question at any time it thinks this to be in the common interest, but equally that no sovereign government can be compelled to submit a particular question to the NATO Council, which is neither a supranational body nor a judicial authority (as, for example, the International Court of Justice). The political consultation developed within NATO is directed towards maintaining the unity of outlook necessary in respect of the central aims and objectives of the Treaty. In emphasising this it should be pointed out that the development of political consultation is on an ad hoc and pragmatic basis in the light of development circumstances. It would not be helped forward by a conception of NATO political consultation as being constrained

by a list of fixed or automatic obligations to consult together on specified types of questions or by a concept of omnicompetence on the part of NATO to discuss or decide any or all issues which may arise. To do so, it may be argued, is to do a disservice to NATO and to the development of political consultation within it, because the value of consultation lies not in the activity itself, but in the results which grow from it. These results are not necessarily directly visible as stemming from the Council itself, although its activity may have facilitated steps taken by individual governments or in other international bodies.

(g) In support of this outline, it should be possible, for public relations purposes, to present a picture, in general terms, of the marked development in the past year, of the habit and practice of regular political discussions in the Council. The consultations held with respect to various Soviet notes, and before, during and after, the Geneva Conferences, should be mentioned not as constituting the main field of political consultation in NATO but as being obvious examples which can be cited, and which are not necessarily typical of the consultations which take place each week.

In short, it is to the practice of these regular discussions, and to the increasing unity of purpose of the NATO countries which flows from them, that attention should be drawn.