

Summary

A View from Brussels

Secret NATO Reports about the East European Transition,
1988–1991

“It is not easy to predict the future course of events, which will depend to a large extent on the overall political situation in the USSR” is the cautious evaluation of the confidential expert report for the North Atlantic Council in October 1989. In 1988-1991, the relationship was fundamentally transformed between the Western alliance system led by the United States and the East European socialist bloc dominated by the Soviet Union. The military, political, cultural and ideological confrontation – with the weakening of Moscow and the collapse of its empire – was replaced during a few months by a new type of cooperation of the parties separated previously by the Iron Curtain. The eight reports (formerly classified confidential) from the NATO Archives, published in the present volume for the first time, illuminate the East European events of these four eventful years from the perspective of expert advisors of the alliance.

The analysis of the situation in the Soviet Union and its allies in Central and Eastern Europe had by 1988 a decades-long tradition in NATO. The Working Group on Trends of Soviet Policy, which was established by the decision of the North Atlantic Council of October 8, 1952, prepared its reports for the sessions of the foreign ministers of the NATO Council. Its activity was taken over on January 1957 by the Political Committee, which was formed originally as the Committee of Political Advisers at the proposal of the Committee of Three established for the reform of the alliance. There were five experts’ working groups belonging to this committee, among them those that examined the trends of Soviet policy and the East European satellite states.

In the elaboration of these analyses about the Soviet Union and the other states of the Soviet bloc a great role was played by the preliminary studies of the national diplomatic organs and the consultative discussions of the experts delegated by the individual states. In the spirit of the decision-making principles of NATO, the purpose of these meetings was to build a consensus. Most of the delegated experts worked in the sections of their respective foreign ministries that dealt with Eastern Europe and/or the Soviet Union.

I found four documents in the Archives of the French Foreign Ministry in which the French participants of the working group reported on the course of these sessions. On the basis of these reports we can form an idea about the nature of these

debates as well as about the methods of analysis employed in the experts' reports. While the reports' conclusions reflected a consensus, sharp disagreements often surfaced during the discussions. For instance, in the course of the meeting of March 1988 the West German expert forcefully requested that a statement from the British draft be removed from the final text according to which the Brezhnev doctrine still was valid in the relations of the Soviet Union and the allied states, and that therefore Moscow might still intervene if some of the East-European communist regimes were threatened by a sudden collapse. But the French delegation, supported by the American and British experts, spoke out against deleting the sentences in question.

The published papers reveal how the situation in the Soviet bloc was evaluated by the foreign ministries of the NATO powers in 1988-1991 on the basis of their internal documentation, the consultations in NATO and among each of the foreign ministries, and other sources. But it should be emphasized that the NATO states, that is, the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany, that played a key role in the elaboration of these reports did not share all available information with their allies. They prepared the summaries for the ministerial sessions of the North Atlantic Council, occurring twice a year. These documents, which review the previous six months of the Soviet bloc, represent an excellent source on the views about Eastern Europe in the important decision-making centres of NATO in a given period.

The eight experts' reports give a comprehensive overview about an Eastern Europe that was experiencing cataclysmic changes in this period. In the reports the summary and the main conclusions are usually included in the introduction. The first chapters generally describe the shaping of Soviet domestic and foreign policy. The parts exploring the situation of the allied states are presenting in the order of importance ascribed to them by the experts, and focusing on the issues considered to be most pressing. Although they were not parts of the Soviet bloc in that period, the analyses examining "Eastern Europe" reported, as in the past, on communist Albania and on Yugoslavia, which was sinking into an increasingly serious crisis in that period.

The introductory essay portrays the relationship of the North Atlantic Alliance and Eastern Europe in the period covered by the documents. The study illuminates the working principles of NATO. It analyses the sweeping changes in the alliance. Lastly, it exposes the circumstances of the origin of the published papers, referring to the antecedents of the experts' work dealing with Eastern Europe that dates back to the 1950's. The documents section presents the reports in chronological order, translated from the French and the English originals, annotated with explanations in footnotes. The Appendix contains biographical notes, a list of abbreviations, and figures about the structure of the political and military organizations of NATO.