

REITH LECTURES 1957: Russia, the Atom and the West

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Lecture 6: Strengthening Nato: To What End?

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When these talks were first conceived some months ago it was my thought to speak, on this last occasion, not of the issues confronting our respective Governments at this moment, but of the impact which you in England and we in America have on each other as peoples. I wanted to talk about the similarity of our problems, domestic and foreign; about the foolishness of regarding each other's concerns as something external to ourselves, and about the much greater foolishness of supposing that either of us might stand anything to gain from the reverses and misfortunes of the other. In thinking to talk of these things, I had in mind, of course, the unfortunate psychological effects of Suez.

Today, after four months in England, I find it no longer necessary to speak of these things. A new combination of circumstances and preoccupations has come into being, which has made us all feel, I think, that Suez as an episode is now very far away deed. The heads of our respective Governments are at this moment convening in Paris to reaffirm the purposes of the North Atlantic alliance and to see what can be done to make it a stronger instrument for resisting aggression and everyone senses the extraordinary importance that attaches to these meetings. It will not be useful now for an outsider to speak of the specific questions that our leaders will have before them.

But the occasion is, perhaps, not an unsuitable one for reflecting on the ultimate goal that underlies whatever we do within the framework of Nato. What is it specifically that this organisation, and the other Western efforts to meet the Soviet challenge (for Nato is only one of them) are supposed to achieve? To what end are they tending? To read recent statements of the Soviet leaders, one would think that the only purpose behind the entire Nato operation was the preparation and eventual unleashing of a preventive war. For years it has been standard propaganda practice in Moscow never to refer to this alliance except as the 'aggressive Nato pact'.

There may be a few people here and there in the Western countries who would welcome the idea of another war, as a means of dealing with world Communism, and who would think it our business to start it. I cannot recall ever meeting one. Their number, in any case, would scarcely include a single person whose opinion carries weight. The Soviet leaders could make no more useful contribution to the cause of peace, and none that would cost them less, than the abandonment of this absurd and dangerous suggestion. There may be much bewilderment and some real confusion of thought behind the operations of Nato there may have been statements, here and there, that were subject to misinterpretation. But there is certainly no desire in any responsible Western quarter for another world war, or any intention to unleash one if it can possibly be avoided. If people in Moscow do not already know this, they have ample means of finding it out.

A much more understandable concept of Nato's purpose, though also unsound and incorrect, is that entertained by those who have permitted themselves to view another war as inevitable, either because they expect that the Russians will themselves start it, or because they believe that governments will be carried into it, whether they so desire or not, by the dynamics of political conflict and the weapons race. Having resigned themselves to the inevitability of war, these people tend to say: let us put aside all other considerations; let us arm to the teeth, with greatest urgency; let us see whether we cannot make our military dispositions such that when the moment does come, we may at least survive. And it is to Nato that these people naturally look, as one of the major instruments of survival.

Of this view, which ignores the destructiveness of modern weapons and exaggerates the significance of relative changes in military capabilities in this age of nuclear plenty, I have said what I had to say in previous talks. Suffice it to observe here that if the end of our present course were plainly an all-out nuclear war, then any other course would be better.

Sense of Moral Righteousness

A third concept of Nato's purpose might be called the cultivation of military strength as a background for an eventual political settlement on our own terms, and without the necessity of compromise. Those who entertain this concept are generally people who have a strong sense of moral righteousness about Western purposes. They believe that once it has been demonstrated to Moscow that successful aggression in Western Europe is not militarily feasible; the Soviet leaders will either appreciate the merit of Western desiderata or understand the futility of opposing them, and will retract generally from the U.S.S.R.'s present international posture. The West will thus be spared the necessity of compromising its aspirations or of negotiating about matters which, as these people see it, are too important in principle to be the subject of negotiation. I hope I do not do too much injustice to the views of these people by this sketchy summary.

This is, from the standpoint of the number and influence of those who entertain it, a much more serious concept than the other I have mentioned. So far as I can see, it has recently had currency in wide and influential circles of Western opinion.

But this view, too, has weaknesses, the recognition of which is vital to the present discussion of Nato policy. It seems to rest, in the first place, on an assumption that Soviet unwillingness to accept Western proposals and particularly the proposals for Europe's future and for general disarmament, arises from the fact that the Nato forces are not as strong as they might be. I see little evidence for this reasoning. The Soviet reluctance to withdraw from Eastern Germany and to give full freedom to the Eastern European peoples is based partly on political considerations that would not be in any way affected by a stronger Nato, and partly from the existence of precisely that Anglo-American military position on the Continent, which it is now proposed that we should reinforce.

And it is difficult to believe that a stronger Nato, particularly one that would include missile-launching sites on the Continent or the presence of atomic weapons in the arsenals of the continental countries, would increase the inclination of the Soviet

Government to accept recent Western disarmament proposals. It might conceivably have this effect if the West were able to offer to withdraw these dispositions as part of an eventual bargain. But elaborate military arrangements of this nature, once put in hand, have consequences. They produce counter-measures on the other side. People come to depend on them as essential elements of their security. In the end it becomes difficult to consider their withdrawal or to make them the subject of negotiation. Besides, it is not easy to see what quid pro quo Moscow could be expected to extend in the specific matter of atomic weapons in Europe beyond the offer it has already made to refrain from stationing nuclear weapons in Eastern Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. If this offer is not acceptable today, is there reason to suppose it would be more so tomorrow?

Weapons and Our Negotiating Position

I suspect that this view of Nato's purpose, which sees in the alliance a device for avoiding political compromise rather than for facilitating it, rests on the same illusions of relative advantage in the weapons race to which I had occasion to refer in an earlier talk. People think, that is, that if our weapons could only be made a little stronger than those on the other side, our negotiating position would be just that much better. But if the relative size of the capacity for destruction is becoming increasingly questionable as a military advantage, is it probable that it will have any greater political significance?

How, then, should Nato's purpose be conceived? When I ask myself this question, my mind goes back to the days in 1948 when the Nato pact was in process of negotiation. I was myself for a time chairman of the working-level sub-committee in which the recommendations for the terms of the Pact were thrashed out. Those were hopeful and exciting days. The European Recovery Programme, enthusiastically supported on both sides of the water, was then just yielding its first constructive results. There were, of course, even at that time, problems and complications. Europe's economic difficulties were still bitter. The attitude of the Soviet Government was not one whit less disturbing than it is today; on the contrary, Stalin was very much alive, and Moscow was just then preparing the political offensive against Western Europe which culminated in the Berlin blockade. And if Russia did not yet have atomic weapons, there was no reason to suppose she would not have them, sooner or later.

Yet we were not downhearted; and our eyes were not riveted, as I recall it, on the military balance in Europe, which was actually much less favourable at that time than it is today. I cannot speak here for my friends and colleagues on that subcommittee, but I certainly had no idea at that time that the military instrument we were creating was to be the major vehicle of Western policy in the coming years. It seemed to me that we were setting up a military shield, required less by any imminent actual danger than by the need for a general stabilisation of the situation in Europe and for reassurance of the Western European peoples in the light of Soviet military superiority and of their own somewhat traditional and subjective anxieties about land invasion. Behind this shield, I supposed, we would go ahead confidently to meet the Communist danger in its most threatening form—as an internal problem, that is, of Western society, to be combated by reviving economic activity, by restoring the self-confidence of the European peoples, and by helping them to find positive goals for the future. The Marshall Plan, some of us thought, would be only the beginning: it would

lay the foundation for a new sense of purpose in Western society—a sense of purpose needed not just for our protection against an outward threat but to enable us to meet a debt -to our own civilisation; to become what we ought to be in the light of our traditions and advantages; to accomplish what we would have owed it to ourselves to accomplish, even had such a thing as international Communism never existed.

Concept behind Marshall Plan

In this vision we saw a new ordering of international relations generally in the Atlantic and European areas, designed to provide an alternative for peoples who stood at the crossroads in a Europe where the old values had lost their relevance; and it was our hope that this alternative could be made so patently worthy and inspiring in itself, and so wholly without menace to anyone anywhere, that peoples could safely repair to it without raising military issues, without raising questions of great power prestige.

This was the concept around which, outstandingly, the Marshall Plan was built. Only by this means, it seemed to us, could one loosen the great political cramp by which post-war Europe was already beginning to be seized. Only by this means was there any hope that the confused termination of one great war could be prevented from growing imperceptibly into the origins of another, and this time one in which all European values would finally perish.

In all of this Nato had, as a military alliance, its part to play; but I think every one of us hoped that its purely military role would decline in importance as the curse of bipolarity fell from the Continent, as negotiations took place, as armies were withdrawn, as the contest of ideologies took other forms. The central agency in this concept was not Nato but the European Recovery Programme; and none of us dreamed at that time that the constructive impulses of this enterprise, which looked to everyone so hopeful in those days, would be overtaken and swallowed up in the space of a mere two or three years by programmes of military assistance based on a wholly different concept of the Soviet threat and of Europe's needs.

I am not attempting to assign blame for this transformation that has come over the general idea of what we were attempting to accomplish as we approached international Communism. I do not mean to belittle the real changes introduced into our situation by the Soviet acquisition of the nuclear capability and by the appalling advances achieved in the frightfulness of atomic weapons. I do not wish to suggest that the problems faced by our statesmen in this intervening period have been light ones or that the alternatives to this deterioration would have been easy ones to discover and to adopt. Least of all do I mean to absolve the Communists from their share of responsibility for this militarisation of thinking about what should never have been regarded at all as a military conflict. Few decisions have ever caused more psychological damage or produced more dangerous confusion than that which started the Korean War in 1950. And this was only one instance of the damage they did from the Moscow line.

But I should like to raise here the question whether anything has really happened to invalidate this original concept on which both Marshall Plan and Nato were founded, whether the positive goals of Western policy have really receded so far from the range of practical possibility as to be considered eclipsed by the military danger, whether we

would not in fact be safer and better off today if we could put our military fixations aside and stake our safety, at least in part, on the earnestness of our effort to do the constructive things, the things for which the conditions of our age cry out and for which the stage of our technological progress has fitted us.

Sterile Competition

Surely everyone, our adversary no less than ourselves, is tired of this blind and sterile competition in the ability to wreak indiscriminate destruction. The danger with which it confronts us is a common danger. The Russians breathe the same atmosphere we do. They die in the same way. Problematical as I believe the psychology of the Soviet leaders to be, I cannot warn too strongly against the quick assumption that there is no kernel of sincerity in all these messages with which they have been bombarding the Western chanceries in recent weeks. Their idea of peace is of course not the same as ours. There will be many things we shall have to discuss with them about the meaning of this term before we can agree on very much else. But I see no reason for believing that there are not, even in Moscow's interpretation of this ambiguous word, elements more helpful to us all than the implications of the weapons race in which we are now caught up. And I refuse to believe that there is no way in which we could combine a search for these elements with the pursuit of a reasonable degree of military security in a world where absolute security has become an outmoded and dangerous dream.

Let me just mention—because this seems to be the heart of the difficulty—what such a concept would not mean. It would not imply, first of all, that military strength would not continue to be cultivated on our side until we have better alternatives. The Soviet radio claims that to recognise, as I have done in these talks, that Russia is not yearning to launch an attack on Western - Europe means—and I quote their words—' to give up the whole of Nato, the United States bases, and the enormous military expenditure', in short, the entire Western military structure. What utter nonsense! As though we did not know that any sudden and unilateral Western disarmament would create new political situations and new invitations to aggression where none existed before. Armaments are important not just for what could be done with them in time of war, but for the psychological shadows they cast in time of peace. No one here has forgotten, I trust, the basic hostility borne us by world Communism, the never-ending abuse of our institutions, the shameless distortion of our realities before world opinion, the cynical principles of political struggle, and the sharp, ruthless political tactics that have marked the Russian Communist movement since the moment of its inception. We know what we are up against. Let no one suppose that a recognition of the horrors of nuclear war is going to lead logically to a political and military capitulation on the Western side, any more than it will on the other.

What flows from what I have said is not that one should give up unilaterally the nuclear deterrent, or even that one should desist from the effort to strengthen the Nato forces in Europe. What flows from what I have said is only that war must not be taken as inevitable; that one must not be carried away by the search for absolute security; that certain risks must be assumed in order that greater ones may be avoided; and that Nato must not be strengthened in such a way as to prejudice the chances for an eventual reduction, by peaceful negotiation, of the danger of an all-out war.

Achieving the Immediately Possible

Under the concept I have outlined, the military dispositions of Nato would not be an end in themselves but only the means to an end. This end would not be the achievement of any total solution in the sense of a sudden removal of the political rivalry between the Communist system and our own. It would be the piecemeal removal, by negotiation and compromise, of the major sources of the military danger, particularly the abnormal situation now prevailing in Central and Eastern Europe, and the gradual achievement of a state of affairs in which the political competition could take its course without the constant threat of a general war. There is no use looking any further than this. Our first concern must be to achieve what is, or might be, immediately possible. After that, we shall see.

Not only can the strengthening of Nato not be a substitute for negotiation, but Nato cannot itself provide either the source of authority or the channel for the negotiating process. The governmental structures of the individual Nato members are already of such ponderous and frightening complexity in themselves that it sometimes seems to me questionable whether they would be capable of providing the imagination, the privacy of deliberation, the speed of decision, and the constancy of style necessary to the pursuit of any delicate diplomatic undertaking, even if they were not encumbered with obligations to allies. What will the situation be if we multiply the ponderousness by a factor of fifteen? A negotiating position into which there is assiduously inserted every last inhibition of every one of fifteen governments will never be one sufficiently bold and generous to serve as a proper basis for composing issues as complex and stubborn as those that must now be cleared away between Russia and the West. This task will have to be tackled first by individual governments, within the limits of their competence and with reference to those objects of controversy which lie within their control. The main outlines of settlement will then have to find, at the proper time and in the proper way, the understanding and acquiescence of those whose responsibilities are less directly involved.

It is also idle to suppose that the strengthening of Nato could alone provide the necessary climate and background for negotiation. It cannot be too often reiterated that our contest with Soviet power is of so pervasive and subtle a nature that our purpose cannot be served by any single agency of policy, such as the military one. It is the sum total of our performance that counts; our effort must embrace all facets of our national behaviour. Moscow fights with all the political and psychological means at its command; and it will know how to take advantage, as indeed it already has in many ways, of any one-sided concentration of effort on our part. This is why we cannot afford to put all our eggs in the military basket and neglect the positive purposes—the things which we ought to be doing, and would be doing, if the military threat were not upon us at all. The fortunes of the Cold War will begin to turn in our direction as and when we learn to apply ourselves resolutely to many things that, superficially viewed, have nothing whatsoever to do with the Cold War.

Exciting Progress on the Continent

Let us, then, while keeping our guard up and while never ceasing to explore the possibilities for progress by negotiation, not neglect those undertakings that are necessary for the spiritual and economic advancement of Western society. There is so much to be done. Our friends on the Continent have recently made exciting progress,

despite all military danger, in welding the economic and technological efforts of the Western European peoples into a single competitive yet collaborative whole, and in moderating the sharp edges of that absolute sovereignty which is one of the anachronisms of our time. All power to them; and all admiration for having had the steadfastness to get on with these things while at the time when the sputnik was whirling overhead. Surely there is room for something of the same courage and vision in the ordering of the relationships between England, Canada, and the United States: for the overcoming of the pound-dollar division and the establishment of common policies in those areas where our concerns and responsibilities are common. This, too, was envisaged in the original Marshall Plan concept; but it was one of the things that got lost somewhere in the military shuffle. Can it not today be recovered?

There is nothing in all this that need worry our Continental allies. It changes nothing in our military commitments and arrangements. Is it not perfectly clear that Nato will never be stronger than the degree of intimacy and collaboration that prevails within its English-speaking component?

This is only an example of the things that await doing on the international level. But beyond this there is the whole great area of domestic affairs. Let us not forget this, precisely in the present connection. Many of us dislike to think of domestic problems as battlefields on which, again, our contest with Soviet power is transpiring; but that is exactly what they are. In a thousand ways, the tone and spirit that characterise our internal life impinge themselves on our external fortunes.

Our diplomacy can never be stronger than the impression we contrive to create on others, not just by virtue of what we do but rather—and even more importantly—by what we are. What greater error could there conceivably be than the belief that weapons, however terrible, could ever protect selfishness, timidity, short-sightedness, and lassitude from the penalty that awaits them, over the long run, in the general competition of international life? What greater error than to suppose that such things as courage and vigour and confidence cannot assert themselves in world affairs without the aid of the hydrogen bomb? Russia confronts us not just with a foreign policy or a military policy but with an integrated philosophy of action, internal and external. We can respond effectively in no other way.

Let us not look, therefore, to the council tables of Nato to provide the basic strength on which the security of the Western world must rest. The statesmen there can work only with what they have. Of this, the armies and weapons are only the smaller part. The greater part lies still in what we of this generation are first of all to ourselves, secondarily to others. If it is really a new wind that needs to blow through our lives, to enable us to meet successfully the scorn and hostility brought to us by world Communism, then let us open our windows to it and let us brace ourselves to the buffeting we must expect.

In the conclusion of the 'X-article', to which I referred at the outset of these talks, I cited a passage from the American writer, Thoreau. Today, under the shadow of the hydrogen bomb and of all the materialism and faint-heartedness of our time, I am going to recall this passage to mind once more. It is, unfortunately, even more relevant today than it was ten years ago. Thoreau wrote:

There is no ill which may not be dissipated, like the dark, if you let in a stronger light upon it... If the light we use is but a paltry and narrow taper, most objects will cast a shadow wider than themselves.