

Address by Paul-Henri Spaak (Washington, 4 April 1949)

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[American presenter] I now have the honour to present the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belgium, his Excellency Monsieur Paul-Henri Spaak. Monsieur Spaak.

[Paul-Henri Spaak] Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, in signing the North Atlantic Pact we will be taking part in the most important political event to have taken place since the creation of the United Nations. The great defensive alliance which is going to be created is a vital stage along the path leading to the consolidation of peace. Our peoples therefore have every right to be delighted. The North Atlantic Pact is in keeping with the spirit and the letter of the San Francisco Charter. As it is inspired solely by defensive sentiments, it is likely, because of the size of the forces it brings together, to discourage any possible aggressor and to give Article 51, the one which proclaims the right to individual and collective self-defence, a practical and effective form, without which it would just be a mockery. The new pact is purely defensive. It is not directed against anyone. It threatens no one. So it should not worry anyone, except of course any person or persons harbouring the criminal notion of resorting to war. To be convinced of this, one need only read it, but of course read it without any preconceived notions. The peoples represented here hate war, and their governments share their feeling. War is an absurd and loathsome thing. It solves nothing and the consequences of it are almost as hard for the victors to bear as they are for the vanquished. Democracies are, of their essence, peaceful. Where people are allowed to speak their mind, where views can be expressed without hindrance, where people's minds are not enslaved and opposition is not gagged, the idea that anyone could pursue a policy of aggression is unthinkable. If the whole world accepted and practised the democratic principles we espouse, there would be no more war. But so long as that is not the case, we have the right, indeed we are duty-bound, to be cautious and prepared. Twice in the last 25 years, the Western European democracies, the United States and Canada have had to face terrible dangers. Twice, the civilisation they represent, their way of living and thinking have been put in jeopardy; twice, it has taken military miracles to save them; twice, they were almost lost to unwarranted, blind trust. It would be unforgivable to fail to learn the repeated lessons of History. Those who, at the present time, are indignant or saddened because the principles of universal collective security laid down by the Charter of the United Nations have to be bolstered by a system which, though more restricted in scope, has the same object in view and is governed by the same principle, will find a number of matters to think about in the signing of the Pact. Perhaps they will be sorry to have seen the podium of the United Nations being turned into an instrument of propaganda where vehemence and the trading of insults have too often taken the place of that desire for cooperation without which nothing is possible. Perhaps they will also be sorry that the misuse of the right of veto and a refusal to work together with others have so often rendered the Security Council's decisions or the General Assembly's recommendations ineffective. The United Nations is still our great hope. We still wish, and believe, that one day all the world's peoples will find security in that global organisation and that all governments, having at last acknowledged that international law takes precedence over their own wishes, will make the United Nations into the powerful instrument we have always hoped for. But until that day, no one can dispute our right to rally and organise, in one corner of the world, all the forces of those who, having finally and utterly renounced all ideas of aggressive war, do not intend to find themselves one day defenceless against any attack that might be launched on them. The North Atlantic Pact is an act of faith in the future of Western civilisation. Based, as it is, on the practice of civil and political liberties and on respect for humankind, it cannot die. The North Atlantic Pact places the most powerful means of defence ever conceived of at the service of that civilisation and of peace. That is why, on behalf of the huge majority of the Belgian people, I shall shortly sign it with confidence and pride.