Minute from the Prime Minister, C. Attlee, to the Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, concerning British policy in the Mediterranean and the Middle East, 5 January 1947

PRIME MINISTER’S PERSONAL MINUTE

TOP SECRET

FOREIGN SECRETARY

I have set down for the purpose of clearing my own mind some considerations which have occurred to me on reading the papers on our policy in the Near East. I enclose a copy in order to inform you of what is in my mind.

C.R.A

[Attlee summarizes positions laid out in COS papers…]

6. Our position is, therefore, made very difficult before the world and our own people. We shall constantly appear to be supporting vested interests and reaction against reform and revolution in the interests of the poor. We have already had difficulty in Greece. The same position is likely to arise in all these other countries.

We can only gain the position we require by military agreements as in Egypt and Iraq[[1]](#footnote-1). We have no base of our own except in Cyprus.

We have the difficult position in Palestine where we have either to offend the Arab States and probably Turkey and Persia as well or offend world Jewry with its powerful influence in the U.S.A.

7. We, therefore, endeavouring to keep our influence over this congeries of weak, backward and reactionary States have to face the U.S.S.R. organised under an iron discipline, equipped with the weapon of a revolutionary doctrine liable to attract the masses, strategically well placed for penetration or attack and with only a limited number of its key points open to our attack.

8. In order to gain this advantage we shall be committed-

1. To the maintenance of considerable forces overseas. Two divisions in Palestine. Powerful Air Forces somewhere in the area for a striking force.
2. The control of the Mediterranean with naval forces and with air forces sufficient to keep the route open. We should have to try to keep the Dardanelles closed. We should have to watch for the development of naval forces in Jugo-Slavia and Albania. We should have only Malta and Cyprus of our own to depend on. We should have to be on good terms with Spain.
3. In the event of failure which I consider possible if not indeed probably we should have to supply these forces from round the Cape. It is unlikely that we shall be able to use India as a base.
4. We shall have to spend large sums of money in bolstering up these weak States. Even if we can provide the resources it will take a long time for them to fructify. Meanwhile the U.S.S.R. will not be idle.

9. For the reasons set out above I regard the strategy outlined above as a strategy of despair. I have the gravest doubts as to its efficacy. The deterrent does not seem to me to be sufficiently strong. I apprehend that the pursuit of this policy so far from preventing may precipitate hostilities.

10. Unless we are persuaded that the U.S.S.R. is irrevocably committed to a policy of world domination and that there is no possibility of her alteration, I think that before being committed to this strategy we should seek to come to an agreement with the U.S.S.R. after consideration with Stalin of all our points of conflict.

11. I recall that at the end of the nineteenth century we were in conflict with France all over the world. There were points of friction in Egypt and elsewhere in Africa, in the Newfoundland fisheries and in Asia yet in a short time we had the Entente Cordiale and were able to clear up all outstanding points. I remember similarly that at that time our relations with Russia were very bad following the Russo-Japanese War[[2]](#footnote-2) and the Dogger Bank episode[[3]](#footnote-3). We were constantly alarmed at Russian designs on Afghanistan. Yet in a few years these were smoothed out and we fought alongside of her in the First World War.

It is, of course, true that a common fear of Germany was a powerful factor in bringing us together, but today there is a common fear of what another world war may bring to us all.

12. What are the chances of success in such a negotiation? The answer depends on a number of imponderables –

1. How far is the ideology of the present rulers of Russia committed to the conception of the necessity of world revolution?
2. It is possible to convince the U.S.S.R. that we have no offensive intentions against her?
3. What prospects are there of changes in the Russian mentality? If it is agreed that the U.S.S.R. is not prepared for a major war for some years, what likelihood is there than an easing of her internal economic situation will cause her to be less ready to throw away what she has gained.
4. Is she persuaded that war with the U.S.A is inevitable and can she be persuaded to the contrary?

13. If satisfactory answers can be given to these questions, it does not seem to me to be too difficult to deal with points of friction.

1. We had trouble in Persia before but overcame it. Could we not get an agreement as to oil rights in Persia?
2. We ought to be able to settle the Dardanelles on principles applicable to all major international waterways.
3. Can we not deal with Germany on the basis of our mutual interest in seeing that the German nation does not again get into position to threaten either of us?
4. Can we co-operate in trying to get some degree of unity and economic co-operation in Europe?
5. Could we not assist in dispelling the fear of the U.S.A. which seems to be the mainspring of Russia’s policy in the Far East?

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1. This refers to the British-Iraqi Agreement of 1930 and the British-Egyptian agreement of 1936. A new agreement with Iraq was signed in Portsmouth on 15 January 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The war between the Russian and Japanese Empires over the control of Manchuria and Korea from 1904 to 1905. It ended with the defeat of Russia and the signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. An attack of the Second Squadron of the Russian Pacific Fleet on fishing vessels during the night of 22 October 1904 in the Northern Sea not far away from Hull. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)