Cabinet conclusions on British foreign policy in Europe, 5 March 1948

SECRET

C.M. (48)

19th Conclusions

CABINET 19 (48)

[…]

Foreign Policy in Europe

The Cabinet had before them memoranda by the Foreign Secretary on the Czechoslovak crisis (C.P. (48) 71) and the Soviet threat to Western civilisation (C.P. (48) 72).

*The Foreign Secretary* said that the past actions of the Soviet Government, culminating in the recent events in Czechoslovakia and Finland, showed beyond any doubt that there was no hope of reaching a satisfactory settlement either by agreement among the four Great Powers or through the United Nations Organisation, and that resolute action must be taken to counter the Soviet threat to Western civilisation. He accordingly proposed that we should aim at completing, as a matter of urgency, the current negotiations for economic, cultural and defensive pacts between the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg. Simultaneously, we should seek to strengthen the defence of Western civilisation by enlisting the cooperation of Commonwealth countries and all other friendly countries, including those in the Western Hemisphere; and special efforts should be made to strengthen parliamentary government in Italy, which was at present the weakest link in the chain of non-Communist States. A further step towards economic cooperation in Europe would be taken at the meeting of the Committee of European Economic Cooperation which was to be held in March but, in addition, there would have to be discussions with Commonwealth Governments and, through diplomatic channels with the Governments of foreign countries in order to bring about cooperation in other fields. If the Cabinet gave general approval to the policy which he had outlined, he would report from time to time on the action taken to give effect to it.

In discussion there was general support for the policy proposed by the Foreign Secretary, special emphasis being laid on the urgent need to strengthen the forces of democratic socialism in France and Italy and so prevent the weakening of the Commonwealth through the secession of India, and possibly Pakistan. Resistance to further Soviet expansion could not be successful unless we could secure a high standard of living both at home and in those countries which were ranged on our side; but it would also be necessary to base our campaign on the higher moral and spiritual values of Western civilisation. In present conditions no country could afford the degree of mobilisation of man-power and resources attained during the late war, and a greater pooling of defence resources seemed inevitable. Meanwhile, however, it was desirable that the Cabinet should have an appreciation of the military strength needed to support diplomatic action under the policy proposed by the Foreign Secretary and of the defence measures needed if that policy failed to prevent war. The weapon of propaganda must be used to the full and it would probably be necessary to set up special machinery for this purpose. Propaganda must vary according to the country to which it was addressed, and it should be such as to avoid creating embarrassment for the Foreign Secretary in his dealings with foreign Governments through diplomatic channels.

In further discussions, the following points were made: -

(a) The financial measures of the French Government had proved ineffective, and the economic situation in France was very serious. The Government’s position was insecure and, if it fell, it was likely to be succeeded by a Government of the extreme Right or the extreme Left.

(b) Should India and Pakistan secede from the British Commonwealth, their example might well be followed by Ceylon and, in due course, Malaya[[1]](#footnote-1). Difficulty in retaining these countries within the Commonwealth would arise mainly from constitutional forms, the dominant political Parties being committed to an abstract republicanism which made it difficult for them to accept allegiance to the Crown. It might be possible to meet this situation by devising some fresh constitutional form of association which would enable these and similar countries to attain a new kind of independence within the Commonwealth. The possibilities of giving India and Pakistan special assistance for economic development should also be examined.

(c) Experience in the war had shown the value of political warfare, and the Soviet Government and their satellites made exhaustive use of it. The primary object of any propaganda campaign should be to provide the people of Europe with the leadership in Western Europe which Governments had so far failed to provide, but its scope should be world-wide. It might be desirable to establish some organisation on the lines of the war-time Political Warfare Executive[[2]](#footnote-2), which would work under Ministerial direction and in close touch with the Foreign Office.

(d) There were certain directions in which the Labour Party, rather than the Government, might be found to be the most effective instrument for conducting propaganda and strengthening and advising the social democratic Parties in Western Europe.

(e) There was some prospect that the Christian Churches might be prepared to take common action in defence of Western civilisation, and it might be possible to secure this through the International Council of Christian Churches. In recent years there had been a significant growth of sympathy with the principles of social democracy in the Roman Catholic Church.

(f) Communism had prospered in primitive conditions. There was reason to suppose that it might not be equally successful in retaining a hold over the peoples of more highly-developed countries. It was therefore important that every effort should be made to concentrate propaganda on the Eastern European countries which were nearest to Western Europe.

(g) Bilateral trade agreements had hitherto been made with Eastern European States in the light of purely economic considerations. Was there now a case on political grounds for conceding more generous terms or for adopting more aggressive methods?

(h) The possibility of affording greater economic assistance to Scandinavian countries, possibly by long-term agreements, ought to be considered.

The Cabinet –

(1) Gave general approval to the proposals made in paragraph 7 of C.P. (48) 72 for countering the Soviet threat to Western civilisation;

(2) Took note that the Prime Minister would consider what interdepartmental machinery was required to enable full effect to be given to some of these proposals;

(3) Took note of C.P. (48) 71.

[TNA, CAB 128/12/19]

Keywords: post-war Eastern Europe, post-war Western Europe, great power relations, post-war Asia

1. None of the countries listed above left the Commonwealth of Nations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Political Warfare Executive was a British propaganda organisation that existed between 1941 and 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)