Foreign Office memorandum by O.G. Sargent considering the post-war prospects for British foreign policy, 11 July 1945

STOCKTAKING AFTER V-E DAY

SECRET

THE end of the war in Europe leaves us facing two main problems, neither of which has any resemblance to the problems with which we were faced at the end of the last war. They are (a) military occupation by Soviet troops of a large part of Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Government’s future policy generally; and (b) the economic rehabilitation of Europe so as to prevent a general economic collapse.

2. Our own position, too, in dealing with these problems is very different from what it was at the end of the last war, when we and France shared and disputed, and eventually lost, control of Europe. This time the control is to a large degree in the hands of the Soviet Union and the United States, and neither of them is likely to consider British interests if they interfere with their own and unless we assert ourselves.

3. For this very reason it suits us that the principle of cooperation between the three Great Powers should be specifically accepted as the basis on which problems arising out of the war should be handled and decided. Such a co-operative system will, it is hoped, give us a position in the world which we might otherwise find it increasingly difficult to assert and maintain were the other two Great Powers to act independently…in the minds of our big partners, especially in that of the United States, there is a feeling that Great Britain is now a secondary Power and can be treated as such, and that in the long run all will be well if they – the United States and the Soviet Union – as the two supreme World Powers of the future, understand one another. It is this misconception which it must be our policy to combat.

…

4. To take the Soviet Union first. It is particularly dangerous to assume that the foreign policies of totalitarian government are opportunist and fluctuating, like those of liberal governments… It is true that in the case of Nazi Germany Hitler kindly explained in *Mein Kampf* both his objectives and methods…But in the case of the Soviet Union Stalin is not likely to be as obliging. We shall have to try and find out for ourselves what is his plan of campaign and to anticipate the tactics which he intends to employ from time to time to carry it through. And this is not going to be easy, nor shall we always be able, even among ourselves in this country, to agree on the conclusions to be reached.

7. At the present moment the Soviet Union has been so weakened by war that Stalin is hardly in a position to force through ruthlessly his policy of ideological penetration against definite opposition. For instance, in the case of Greece, Venezia Giulia, and to a certain extent Poland, he has not pressed matters to extreme and has actually compromised, through it may well be that he has only made a temporary retreat. But at the present moment it can surely be assumed that he does not want and could not afford another war in Europe, and it is also doubtful whether he aims at further territorial expansion. At Annex I will be found a memorandum by Sir R Bruce Lockhart on Soviet policy and the best means of reacting to it.

8. The economic strength of the United States has certainly impressed Stalin no less than the potentiality of the Western Air Forces. He has seen what has happened to Germany from the air and what is happening to Japan. No doubt Stalin feels that now, before his troops have been withdrawn from the countries which they are now occupying and before their demobilization has begun, he must seize the opportunity to reap the fruits of victory to the full,[[1]](#footnote-1) since if he delays or hesitates there may be some which later on he will no longer be able to grasp. As for ourselves, though economically we shall grow stronger as time goes on, militarily our strength in Europe will soon decline from its present peak – even quicker than the Russian strength. For this reason we must take a stand in the immediate future if we are to prevent the situation crystallizing to our permanent detriment. This means in practice that we must keep our foot firmly in Finland, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, even though we may have to abandon perhaps for the moment Romania and Hungary as beyond our reach[[2]](#footnote-2).

9. If there is to be a trial of strength between us- that is to say a diplomatic trial of strength – now is the time for us take the offensive by challenging Russia in these six countries, instead of waiting until the Soviet Government threatens us further west and south in Germany, in Italy, in Greece, and in Turkey. This is what inevitably will happen if we let Stalin pocket for good these six countries which at present he controls by a combination of political force and military pressure…

10. We must, of course, also be prepared for the Soviet Government to make an effort to establish their influence in Germany, Italy, Greece, and Turkey. In the three latter countries we ought to be bale to maintain our position, and our object must be to build them up as bastions of “liberalism,” even though this may involve us in responsibilities and commitments of which we otherwise would be only too glad to be rid. But the struggle for Germany, if it is engaged, will not only be much harder, but the result will be decisive for the whole of Europe, for it is not overstating the position to say that if Germany is won over to totalitarianism this may well decide the fate of liberalism throughout the world[[3]](#footnote-3).

16. To sum up:

(a) We must base our foreign policy on the principle of co-operation between the three World Powers. In order to strengthen our position in this combination we ought to enroll the Dominions and especially France, not to mention the lesser Western European Powers, as collaborators with us in this tripartite system.

(b) We must not be afraid of having a policy independent of our two great partners and not submit to a line of action dictated to us by either Russia or the United States, just because of their superior power or because it is line of least resistance, or because we despair of being able to maintain ourselves without the United States support in Europe.

(c) Our policy, in order not to be at the mercy of internal politics or popular fashion, must be in keeping with British fundamental traditions and must be based on principles which will appeal to the United States, to the Dominions, and to the smaller countries of Europe, especially in the West. It must be definitely anti-totalitarian, and for this purpose be opposed to totalitarianism of the Right (Fascism &c.), as much as to the totalitarianism of the Left (Communism, &c.). In pursuance of this policy of “liberalism” we shall have to take risks, and even live beyond our political means at times. We must not, for instance, hesitate to intervene diplomatically in the internal affairs of other countries if they are in danger of losing their liberal institutions or their political independence. In the immediate future we must take the offensive in challenging Communist penetration in as many of the Eastern countries of Europe as possible, and we must be ready to counteract every attempt by the Soviet Government to communise or obtain political control over Germany, Italy, Greece or Turkey.

(d) We must not desist from this course or be discouraged even if the United States give us no help and even if they adopt a policy of appeasement towards Russian domination, as well they may[[4]](#footnote-4).

(e) We must exert every effort to grapple with the economic crisis in Europe – not only in our own interests (a prosperous Europe is Great Britain’s best export market) but in order to use the material resources at our and America’s disposal as a makeweight throughout Europe against Communist propaganda, which the Soviet government will use for their own ends wherever possible.

O.G. Sargent

[TNA, FO 371/50912]

Keywords: inter-allied relations, post-war USSR, post-war Eastern Europe, post-war Western Europe, post-war order, post-war Germany

1. Rumours to the effect that Soviet troops could, for different reasons (such as problems with food supply, tensions with local populations, instances of indiscipline, etc.), be quickly withdrawn from the territory of a number of Central European states (Czechoslovakia, Hungary), continued to circulate around the Foreign Office as late as autumn 1945. See: From FO to COS, 10/10/1945 (in: C.O.S. (45) 615 (O)) // TNA, CAB 80/97. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In Sargent’s case this was a departure from the more hardline position he formulated in a memorandum of 2 April. Then, proceeding from the possibility of striking ‘a bargain’ with the USSR, Great Britain would, as part of this bargain, probably be able to ‘save Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Turkey at the cost of sacrificing Poland, Romania and Bulgaria’. Sargent proposed that the taking of such a course ‘is inconceivable’ in as far as it would entail not only a moral cost, but ‘would represent the abdication of our right as a Great Power to be concerned with the affairs of the whole of Europe’ (Memo by Sargent, 02/04/1945 // TNA, FO 371/47881; cited in: Putꞌ k Velikoi Pobede. S. 766–772). On the evolution of Sargent’s position see also: Kent J. The British Empire and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944-49 // Britain and the First Cold War / Ed. by A. Deighton. Basingstoke, 1990. P. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Such thinking by Sargent evidenced a significantly higher level of tension in Soviet-British relations by summer 1945 in comparison to those of a year earlier when Eden had warned Duff-Cooper about the threat of a Europe divided into two camps ‘with Germany in a position to throw her weight on either side’. See Eden’s dispatch of 25 July 1944. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The uncertainty surrounding the duration of the American military presence in Europe found clear reflection in Sargent’s position. Earlier, in May 1945, he was more optimistically disposed: ‘perhaps events may keep them [the Americans] longer than the late President expected (Copy of a Letter from the FO to COS, 04/05/1945 (in: C.O.S. (45) 307 (O)) // TNA, CAB 80/94). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)