Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, E. Bevin, 13 March 1946

CABINET

DEFENCE COMMITTEE

Annex

13 March, 1946

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

I have been giving considerable attention to the whole problem of defence in the Mediterranean, Middle East and the Indian Ocean. The first comment I should like to make is on the Prime Minister’s paper (D.O. (46) 27)[[1]](#footnote-1). Looked at purely from the point of view of communications, it is quite true that if the Mediterranean in time of war is given up, then so far as our communications with the other parts of the commonwealth and Empire are concerned, they could, as indeed they were in the last war, be maintained. On the other hand, a very great political issue is involved which affects us more from the peace-time point of view. Our presence in the Mediterranean serves a purpose other than a military purpose which is vital to our position as a Great Power. The Mediterranean is the area through which we bring influence to bear on Southern Europe, the soft underbelly of France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey. Without our physical presence in the Mediterranean, we should cut little ice with those States which would fall, like Eastern Europe, under the totalitarian yoke. We should also lose our position in the Middle East (including Iraq oil, now one of our greatest economic assets), even if we could afford to let Egypt go.

2. If we move out of the Mediterranean, Russia will move in, and the Mediterranean countries, from the point of view of commerce and trade, economy and democracy, will be finished. We have a chance of holding Italy in the Western civilisation, and although Yugoslavia is really under Russian control at the moment, the position there is very uneasy and one wonders how long as a Mediterranean people Yugoslavia will put up with Russian control. There is also the question of Greece. It is essential from our point of view that Greece remains with us politically. Without forces and bases of defence in the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to the East it will be impossible to maintain a foreign policy in Southern Europe on a democratic basis.

5. There is in addition the question of whether we shall be compelled to develop within the United Nations Organisation a “Western Zone”. At present there are two realities in Europe, the “Eastern Bloc” created and dominated by Russia, and the “Mediterranean Zone” controlled by Great Britain. We talk a lot about a “Western Group”, but shall we be able to bring it into existence or maintain it once we abandon our position as the Mediterranean Power[[2]](#footnote-2)? I doubt it. We are entitled to construct a “Western Zone” if we can. It would be in keeping with the Charter. It has been denounced by Russia as a “Western Bloc” directed against her, but we are entitled to build up good neighbours and a defensive area from Scandinavia to France and thus construct a “Western Zone”. If this country showed signs of leaving the Mediterranean and of giving up any idea of maintaining a “Western Zone”, the Russians, as I have said, would enter the Mediterranean and they would inevitably be challenged by the Americans who would have to come in and try to take the place which we had abandoned. This situation would produce a collision between the great conflicting powers, on whom we, having forfeited our position, should lack the power to bring conciliatory influence.

6. The other point which influences me in the European scene is that we are the last bastion of social democracy. It may be said that this now represents our way of life as against the red tooth and claw of American capitalism and the Communist dictatorship of Soviet Russia. Any weakening of our position in the Mediterranean area will, in my view, lead to the end of social democracy there and submit us to a pressure which would make our position untenable. The alternative proposals I will now proceed to develop are therefore inspired not by any idea of weakening our position in the Mediterranean but rather of strengthening it.

[TNA, CAB 131/2]

Keywords: post-war order

1. In this memorandum from 2 March, Attlee presented a critical report from the Chiefs of Staff entitled Future of the Italian Colonies (dated 13 February 1946); it was permeated with the idea of upholding British supremacy in the Mediterranean and forestalling the emergence of hostile states on the flanks of British Mediterranean communications. The Prime Minister pointed to the reduction of British military resources, the impossibility of projecting the necessary naval and air presence in the region to ensure complete control of the Mediterranean, and finally the “Soviet factor”: ‘The argument that we must have control of the Mediterranean route is a two-edged weapon If Russia desires to be able to unite her Fleets, as she did in the Russo-Japanese war, she may claim that the Baltic and the Suez Canal are as important to her as the latter is to us. She may claim to occupy Bornholm, just as we hold Malta, and to dominate politically Denmark, just as we do Egypt. She may claim not only the control of the Dardanelles, but passage through the Suez Canal in order to keep sea communications between her Black Sea, Baltic ports and Vladivostok.’ On the whole, Attlee called on his military planners to reject ‘sentimental reasons based on the past’ and to consider the British Isles as the 'easterly extension of a strategic area, the centre of which is the American Continent, rather than as a Power looking eastwards through the Mediterranean to India and the East.’ (D.O. (46) 27, Memo by Attlee, 02/03/1946 // TNA, CAB 131/2). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The British historian J. Kent emphasises the fact that strategic conceptions connected with maintaining the British position in the Mediterranean played a key role for British diplomats in working out approaches in respect of the USSR. Summarising the view of the Foreign Office, he noted that ‘the preservation of Britain’s Middle Eastern position was deemed essential to the long-term goal of regaining equality with the United States and the Soviet Union’ (Kent J. Op. cit. p. 169). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)