Cabinet Conclusions on the international control of Trieste, 13 May 1946

SECRET

C.M. (46)

45th Conclusions

13 May, 1946

CABINET 45 (46)

*The Prime Minister* said that on the previous day he had had a long consultation with the Foreign Secretary about the stage reached in the discussions at the Council of Foreign Ministers in Paris.

Towards the end of the previous week there had been indications that the earlier deadlock might be resolved. The Soviet Delegation appeared to have withdrawn their claim for the trusteeship of Tripolitania, and seemed to be ready to accept the French proposal that the Colonies should be handed back to Italy in due course. The Foreign Secretary had, therefore, thought it wise to assert a claim to Cyrenaica, especially in view of our pledge to the Senussi[[1]](#footnote-1) that they should not be put back under Italian rule. So far as concerned the Italian colonies, the way might now be open for further constructive discussion. The two main questions on which a deadlock was still likely were the future of Trieste and the basis for summoning the Peace Conference. The Soviet Delegation were strongly supporting the Yugoslav claim to Trieste; and the Foreign Secretary considered that this claim should be resisted, both on general political and economic grounds, and also because it would be difficult to persuade an Italian Government to accept a Peace Treaty providing for the cession of Trieste to Yugoslavia. On the second point, the Soviet Delegation were likely to insist on their narrow interpretation of the Moscow decision, which would prevent the Peace Conference being held until the Council of Foreign Ministers had reached final agreement on the draft Treaties. Acceptance of this interpretation would not only delay the holding of the Conference, but would imply that its purpose was merely to endorse agreements already reached by the Governments represented on the Council of Foreign Ministers. It would not, therefore, be welcomed by Governments, including the Dominion Governments, which were not represented on the Council. At the same time, the Foreign Secretary was reluctant to see this second meeting of the Council break down, as had the first in London, on a point of procedure – particularly as on this occasion the Soviet Delegation were on firm ground on a strict and literal interpretation of the Moscow decision. The Foreign Secretary therefore proposed to proceed on the basis that, if the Paris meeting was to break down, it should break down on the question of Trieste rather than on the basis for convening the Peace Conference. In the further discussions on Trieste he proposed to indicate that we were willing to agree to the partition of Venezia Giulia on the basis either of the proposals of the French Delegation or of the United States members of the Boundary Commission. If the French Delegation suggested putting Trieste under some form of international regime and the Soviet Delegation were willing to consider such a solution, he would suggest that the matter should be referred for consideration by the Deputies.

Discussion showed that the Cabinet attached the greatest importance to avoiding the acceptance of an interpretation of the Moscow decision which would prevent the Peace Conference from being held until final agreement had been reached on all points by the Council of Foreign Ministers. The issue here involved was whether the nations which had made a substantial contribution to the victory should be enabled to play an effective part in the negotiation of the Peace Treaties. This was an issue on which Dominion Governments held strong views and were entitled to the support of His Majesty’s Government. It was, in fact, a point of principle rather than procedure; and, if the present meeting of the Council broke down on this issue, it could not reasonably be said that it had again failed to reach agreement on a minor point of procedure.

It was also the view of the Cabinet that it would not be expedient to allow the present meeting to break down because of British insistence that Italy should retain the sovereignty of Trieste. There was, after all, some substance in the Yugoslav claim, and at an earlier stage at least one of the Dominion Governments had favoured that claim. So long as suitable safeguards were applied to secure the free passage of international trade through Trieste to Central and South-East Europe, it need not be a matter of primary concern to us whether sovereignty over Trieste was exercised by Italy or by Yugoslavia. There was in fact a strong case for putting the port and the city of Trieste on an international basis.

The Cabinet –

(1) Invited the Prime Minister to communicate to the Foreign Secretary, for his guidance in the further discussions in Paris, the views expressed by the Cabinet on the relative importance of the two main issues still outstanding, viz., the future of Trieste and the arrangements for the convening of a Peace Conference, the Cabinet’s broad conclusion being that, while they would prefer a solution under which the port and city of Trieste would be put on an international basis, they did not attach overriding importance to the rejection of the Yugoslav claim to Trieste; on the other hand, they did regard it as essential that His Majesty’s Government should not acquiesce in a decision which implied that the main belligerent Powers not represented on the Council of Foreign Ministers would be denied an opportunity for playing an effective part in the negotiation of the Peace Treaties.

[TNA, CAB 128/5]

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1. The Senussi were a political and religious order in Cyrenaica, the eastern province of Libya with the Senussi dynasty at its head. They concluded a political alliance with the British, who considered Cyrenaica a key base for projecting influence in Mediterranean affairs. See: William Roger Louis, “Libya: The Creation of a Client State,” in Louis, *Ends of British Imperialism,* 503-528. Supporting friendly relations with the Senussi was also an important consideration for London in the context of the situation in Egypt. The then head of the order Muhammad Idris as-Senussi enjoyed a certain influence in Egypt; in September 1945, Bevin called on his Cabinet colleagues to remember this. (See: C.M. (45) 32nd Conclusions, Conf. Annex, 15/09/1945 // TNA, CAB 128/1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)