Minutes of a Chiefs of Staff Committee meeting discussing future strategy of war with Russia, dated 2 February 1948

Confidential Annex

CHIEFS OF STAFF COMMITTEE

FUTURE STRATEGY

THE COMMITTEE had before them: -

1. A memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff setting out his views on the strategy of a war with Russia[[1]](#footnote-1).
2. A report by the Joint Planning Staff examining the strategic importance of Western Europe in relation to our own defence policy and stating a tentative conclusion on the strategic policy recommended for Western Europe.

LORD TEDDER[[2]](#footnote-2) said that he had read the memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff with great interest. He thought that the views expressed in the memorandum were similar to those already agreed by the Chief of Staff in their report on the future of defence policy, excepting in one important difference, namely, that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff advocated our participation with land forces in a Continental War from the commencement of hostilities. This, he though, was the crux of the problem before them. […]

SIR JOHN CUNNINGHAM[[3]](#footnote-3) said it appeared that the Memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff was based on the assumption that unless we produced land, sea and air forces in support of the Western European countries to fight the Russians on the Rhine or Elbe, the conception of a Western union would fall. He was not altogether convinced that this assumption was a correct one.

It had been our traditional policy in the past to avoid Continental commitments. Twice in the past we had given a guarantee to assist a continental nation to the limit of our power by the provision of land forces. On both instances we had suffered severely, first at Mons[[4]](#footnote-4) and more recently at Dunkirk[[5]](#footnote-5). […]

In discussion, THE CHIEFS OF STAFF were all agreed that they attached the greatest importance to preventing a Russian advance into Western Europe, and that for this purpose our policy must be to give the fullest support to the Western European Union.

The divergence of opinion lay in whether or not the strategy to implement this policy could be adopted now, even in principle, and consequently what assurances could or should be given the Western European powers about armed assistance.

On the one hand, LORD TEDDER and SIR JOHN CUNNINGHAM thought that no details of strategy could be stated, particularly any which committed us to a land campaign on the Continent, until an assessment had been made of the effects to be expected from the use of weapons of mass destruction and until the Americans had indicated what contribution in armed forces they were likely to make in a war with Russia. It had already been decided that the Commonwealth alone, without the assistance of the United States, could not expect to defeat Russia and her satellite powers. Their opinion was that no strategy could be decided in advance of knowing whether or not it was capable of fulfilment from the resources at our disposal.

On the other hand, LORD MONTGOMERY said the Western Union Powers alone would not be able to prevent the Russians from overrunning Europe. The Western Union must, therefore, have the full assistance of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth and that one of the requisites to creating and supporting a Western Union was to give a guarantee to support these countries to the limit of our power by the provision of land, sea and air forces.

It was agreed that this difference of opinion must be settled by reference to Ministers, since there were considerable political implications.

THE COMMITTEE:

Invited Sir Leslie Hollis[[6]](#footnote-6) to consult the Minister of Defence and to ask for a Staff Conference with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of Defence, as early as convenient to them.

[TNA, FO 800/452/16]

Keywords: great power relations, post-war Western Europe

1. See the preceding document in this chronology, Memorandum by General Montgomery for the Chiefs of Staff Committee meeting on the prospect of a future war and the strategy of war with Russia, dated 30 January 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tedder, Arthur William, 1st Baron Tedder (1890–1967) - British military, Marshal of the Royal Air Force. Participated at the signing by Germany of the act of unconditional surrender. Chief of Staff of the Royal Air Force (1948). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cunningham, Sir John Henry Dacres (1885–1962) - British military, Admiral of the Fleet. First Sea Lord (1946–1948). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Battle of Mons took place on 23 August 1914 at the very beginning of the First World War, when British troops were unable to consolidate their hold on Belgium and forced to retreat. The withdrawal of these troops became part of the so-called Great Retreat of 1914. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Dunkirk Operation (26 May – 4 June 1940), the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk in northern France. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hollis, Sir Leslie Chasemore (1897–1963) - British military, General. Senior Assistant Secretary in the War Cabinet Office (1939 - 1945), Deputy Secretary (Military) to the Cabinet (1947 - 1952), Commander-in-chief of the Royal Marines (1949–1952). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)