From First Secretary of the Soviet Embassy in Great Britain, V. Khramelashvili, a summary of British commentaries on formation of Atlantic Bloc, dated 28 February 1949

No. 113

A summary of British commentaries on the discussions held by Lange[[1]](#footnote-1) with the

British Government over the formation of the Atlantic Bloc.

Even before Lange’s meeting with Bevin the British press had been publishing reports on the direction in which the talks between the foreign ministers of Britain and Norway were presumed to be going, as well as on the nature of Bevin’s responses to Lange’s questions.

The striking unanimity of the reports by the bulk of the press and their categorical tone render it possible to suppose that these reports were to a certain degree based on information from official sources.

The main press statements amount to the following points:

1. The agenda of these discussions between Lange and Bevin covered in the main the same range of issues that was discussed with Acheson[[2]](#footnote-2), namely, the responsibilities bestowed by the Atlantic Pact on its participants.

Bevin too, like Acheson, displayed a “complete understanding of Norway’s situation”, but also expressed the opinion that for Norway it was not essential to adopt a decision on participating in the Atlantic Pact until such time as the mutual obligations arising from this pact were clearly defined.

The press expressed an assumption that Norway would go back on its intention to participate directly in the establishing of the Pact, merely accepting an invitation to sign the Pact once it had been drawn up. As is common knowledge, however, these proposals were dismissed by Lange himself, who in the Storting on 24February declared Norway’s intention to participate in the setting up of the Atlantic Pact.

The British press asserted that no pressure would be put on Norway to sign up to the Pact quickly insofar as this would enable Norway to avoid irritating Russia. Overt pressure might also place the other Scandinavian countries in a difficult position.

At the same time, the better-informed press attempted to emphasise that the Atlantic Pact should not be hurried.

It was pointed out that during the talks with Lange the British position in general terms was based around the premise that “insofar as any aggression against any one member of the Atlantic Pact would carry with it the risk of a world war, for Norway and other Scandinavian countries it would be better from a security standpoint to join the Atlantic Pact”. The example of Western Europe, “which now, after the organisational measures were adopted, feels more secure and safe than it did one year ago,” was presented to strengthen the argument.

It was noted that, although under the United States Constitution no automatic obligations may be assumed, it is patently clear that even an obligation formulated as “rendering assistance” to (a member) under attack would mean that a participant in the Pact would adopt all measures deemed necessary by the circumstances. (The Times, 14 & 15 February; News Chronicle, 17 February.)

1. Lange was interested in ascertaining what material assistance and guarantees Britain might offer Norway were the latter to join the Atlantic Pact.

It is supposed that Bevin assured Lange that Britain would consider itself obliged to come to Norway’s assistance “in the event of an unprovoked attack”, even if such an obligation were not enshrined in the Atlantic Pact, and if this were to be required even prior to the signing of the Atlantic Pact. Bevin allegedly informed Lange that the British Government did not doubt that the United States would quickly offer military assistance to any participant in the Atlantic Pact.

It was held that the United States had assured or would assure Norway that “in the event of an attack” it would come to Norway’s aid prior to the signing of the Pact.

It is assumed that Bevin had stated that, in spite of the fact that Britain was not at that time capable to affording Norway any substantial assistance in terms of military supplies, it could nonetheless offer Norway something: for example, within six months it could send a limited quantity of Vampire jet fighters.

Bevin allegedly also told Lange at that stage staff talks with Norway were of greater significance than the issue of using bases in Norway.

It is considered that this statement was to encourage Norway to participate in the Atlantic Pact. (Sunday Chronicle, 13 February; Evening News and Star, 14 February; News Chronicle, 17 February).

1. Lange stated in an interview with the diplomatic correspondent of the Daily Telegraph that if the Scandinavian Bloc[[3]](#footnote-3) did not join the Atlantic Pact, it was perfectly obvious that the United States would refuse to supply the Scandinavian countries with weapons and military hardware. Lange also said that “the main goal of the Atlantic Pact was to prevent Russia from starting a war. If Russia attacks anyone, that will mean war; it should be made clear to Russia that any military adventure on the part of Russia would mean war”.

It is alleged that Lange considers his talks with Bevin and McNeil[[4]](#footnote-4) to have been “entirely satisfactory” and that there exists complete mutual understanding between Norway and Britain.

It was announced in Oslo that Lange had come back from Washington and London with “a gentlemen’s agreement”.

It is assumed that Lange reached agreement in both Washington and London that “any threat to Norway or Finland posed by Russia would elicit a serious reaction by the USA and Britain”. The United States and British governments ostensibly agreed to view any attempt to hinder Norway’s joining the Atlantic Pact as a serious threat to world peace. (Daily Telegraph, 15 and 16 February; Daily Graphic, 17 February).

1. The press remarked that Lange’s talks with Bevin were “exploratory in nature”, and that no official decisions were expected.

The situation did not change after Lange’s talks with Acheson.

It would not be surprising if, after Lange’s trip to Washington, the inclination of the Norwegian Government to return to a policy of a neutral Scandinavian bloc were to be strengthened.

In spite of this, Lange will continue to insist upon Norway’s participation in an Atlantic Pact. If Lange receives Bevin’s assurance that Britain, if necessary, will afford Norway rapid and effective military assistance, then it may be assumed that the Norwegian Government will agree with Lange.

The British position vis-à-vis the Scandinavian bloc has never been officially declared. What is known is that London would prefer that Norway and Denmark join the Atlantic Pact, whilst at the same time realising the situation these countries are in; it therefore does not intend to exert any overt pressure upon them. It is completely out of the question that Britain on its own – without the United States – might give Norway any guarantees. (Observer, 13 February; Daily Graphic, 14 February).

1. The United States committed a grave error in proposing that a small, perilously located country enter into a military agreement in which the United States itself is not a participant, thereby turning Lange’s visit into a widely-publicised campaign.

As a result of this, Norway has stumbled into an even more difficult situation than it was previously in. Russia is applying pressure on it for a non-aggression pact. America is threatening to exclude Norway from receiving military supplies if it does not sign up to the Atlantic Pact, whilst at the same time Sweden refuses to participate in the Scandinavian defence agreement if other (Scandinavian) countries join the Atlantic Pact. As far as is known Bevin is concerned over the difficult situation Norway has fallen into.

Whilst criticising the USA for its hesitation in giving military guarantees, the press at the same time has remarked that the USA has “serious intentions”, as can be witnessed by the fact that Eisenhower has been appointed Chief of Staff. However, if obligations to render military assistance are not written into the Pact, some doubt will always remain over the actions the USA will consider appropriate when such are required.

The Scandinavian countries are in a difficult and delicate situation. If Western diplomacy wishes to help them, this must be done in a careful and considered manner; otherwise, “the Scandinavian countries may be dealt a serious blow before the Western states would be actually able to come to their aid. If Soviet troops were to occupy Finland tomorrow, the Western states could do very little to prevent this. However, there are signs that in such circumstances Sweden would probably decide to act in concert with the West”. (Tribune, 18 February; Manchester Guardian, 15 February; Daily Mail, 15 February).

1. The press confidently reported that Lange will convince the Norwegian parliament to continue its policy as it was laid out in the Norwegian response to Moscow only if it knows that its coastline is not as unprotected as it was in 1940. (Sunday Times, 13 February).
2. It is thought that there is a possibility of establishing an equilibrium between American constitutional difficulties, the neutrality goals of Sweden and the desire of Norway and Denmark to be defended, given the following conditions:
3. The Scandinavian countries establish a military union.
4. Sweden, as it has already proposed, will render arming assistance to the countries into which it has entered into this union, while at the same time not objecting to Norway’s and Denmark’s importing of weapons from the USA under a lend-lease scheme. Sweden itself may retain its neutrality, acquiring weapons on the open market. (Sunday Times, 13 February).
5. It has been stressed that an Atlantic Pact without Norway, not to mention Greenland, would be at very best incomplete. (Daily Telegraph, 14 February).
6. It has been noted that talk of the threat of war (being used in Russian propaganda) is of no benefit to any “sober assessment” of the situation by the Western world. (The Times, 14 February).
7. The conservative press has called upon Britain to seize the initiative and issue the guarantees required by Norway, considering that Britain is sufficiently strong on its own to do this. In this regard, the press has demanded a “strengthening of military power, which will constitute the most convincing argument for anyone doubting the Atlantic Pact”. (Daily Mail, 14 February).
8. It has been reported that the Norwegian Cabinet has decided at a secret session “politely, but firmly” to decline the Soviet proposal for a non-aggression pact[[5]](#footnote-5), and to prepare to join the Atlantic Pact. Approval has ostensibly been given to Lange’s proposal that a communication be sent to Washington within 14 days indicating Norway’s willingness to accept the invitation to participate in the Atlantic Pact.

These decisions are seen as a “fatal blow” to the Swedish and Danish project to establish a Scandinavian defence union along neutral lines. (Daily Express and News Chronicle, 18 February; Daily Telegraph, 19 February).

1. The Economist remarked on 19 February that in Europe the old fears over the instability of American relations with the outside world have recently resurfaced. These fears arise mainly out of the following three considerations:
2. The obviously fruitless nature of Lange’s visit to Washington;
3. The debates over the Atlantic Pact in the US Senate, and;
4. Rumours of discussions in the US over the withdrawal of troops from Japan on the grounds that, in the event of war, Japan will be a burden to them rather than an asset.

. /.

Apart from a Foreign Office communiqué issued on 14 February after the conclusion of the talks between Bevin and Lange, there have been no further official statements. The communiqué stated that during a visit to Bevin by the Foreign Minister of Norway, Mr Lange, accompanied by the Norwegian Ambassador and Oscar Torp[[6]](#footnote-6), Leader of the Norwegian Labour Party, “a general discussion took place of issues relating to the security of the countries of the North Atlantic region and a defence pact within the framework of Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This discussion was very valuable for establishing further a full understanding of the respective points of view of the both governments”.

The British press is trying very hard to create the impression that the Soviet Union threatens Norway, issuing provocative reports on the concentrations of Soviet troops along the Finnish border.

Besides, two contradictory tendencies are slipping into the press. On the one hand, given the refusal on the part of the United States to assume any definite military obligations, there is a desire not to arouse public opinion which is being guided in the direction of the formation of military blocs directed against the Soviet Union, and to present the issue as if the flexible wording proposed by the United States satisfied the British Government.

On the other hand, the press asserts the opposite. The Yorkshire Post of 17 February announced that London is unperturbed that the United States Congress wishes to retain its constitutional rights, although Britain together with other European states wants Article 5 of the Atlantic Pact, concerning the implementing of urgent military action, to be couched in the strongest possible wording. It has been proposed that this article be worded in the same way as the corresponding articles in the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance concluded in Rio de Janeiro.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Well-informed journalists have usually expressed opinions in private discussions on the issue of the Atlantic Pact, the main thrusts of which may be summarised as follows:

1. There is nothing new in the so-called United States constitutional difficulties over the Atlantic Pact. As far back as 1948 when drafts of the Pact were being discussed in London, sharp differences of opinion were generated between the European states (those of continental Europe, in particular) and the United States.
2. It is generally considered that the British Government really has no doubts that the United States would rapidly enter into a war with the Soviet Union in the event of serious conflict in Europe or Asia, irrespective of the wording adopted in the Atlantic Pact, for at least as long as American occupying forces remain in these continents.
3. The British Government is minded, however, to use the United States constitutional difficulties for its own ends. By continuing to insist on precise wording in respect of military assistance that the United States cannot accept, Britain is attempting to delay the formalisation of the Pact, which, according to reports, is due to be signed this March. This delay appears desirable for the British Government for it now considers that for tactical reasons it would be of greater benefit to Britain were the creation of a network of military and political blocs embracing Europe and Asia to precede the Atlantic Pact. These blocs should be established on the same principles as the Treaty of Brussels[[8]](#footnote-8), and should include articles on military obligations. The refusal of the United States to embrace any formal military obligations, whilst not rejecting these outright, would appear to place Britain in a more advantageous position politically and force smaller countries and British dominions to focus more on Britain. This is as if in the opinion of the British Government such circumstances might strengthen Britain’s role and reduce the direct political dependence of the countries of the Atlantic Pact – and Britain itself – on the United States.

Rumours circulate over the existence of a project to create an “effective Eurasian bloc” that would be a constituent part of the Atlantic Pact, with Britain at its head.

It is believed, however, that the United States will attempt to prevent Britain from joining various blocs and, as their leader, becoming ruler of the Eastern Hemisphere. To this end the USA will probably agree to a maximum increase in guarantees to countries lying within its political sphere of influence.

First Secretary

USSR Embassy in Great Britain

[signature] V. Khramelashvili [[9]](#footnote-9)

4 copies

1 – Comrade A. Ya. Vyshinsky

2 – Comrade F. T. Gusev

3 – 2nd European Section

4 – To file, 28 February 1949

[FPARF, f. 69, inv. 69, fold. 9, file 9, pp. 5-13]

Keywords: Post-war order, Post-war Western Europe, Norway, NATO

1. Lange, Halvard Manthey (1902-1970) – Norwegian diplomat, Norwegian Foreign Minister (1946-1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acheson, Dean Gooderham (1893-1971) – US Secretary of State (1949-1953), considered one of the “founding fathers” of NATO. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The “Scandinavian Bloc” – the plan for a neutral military bloc of the Scandinavian nations. On the eve of Norway and Denmark’s joining NATO in 1949, at the initiative of Sweden a proposal was made to attempt to form an independent Scandinavian Defence Union that would remain outside the North Atlantic alliance. The USSR’s view of the formation of such a bloc was largely negative – See Komarov А.А. Khrushchev i Shvetsiia // Severnaia Evropa: problemy istorii. Byp. 6. М.: Nauka. 2007. S. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. McNeil, Hector (1907-1955) – Scottish Labour politician, at the time in question he was Minister of State at the Foreign Office under E. Bevin and a member of the Privy Council. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Officially, such a proposal was never made, although this topic (by analogy with the Agreement of Friendship between the USSR and Finland) has been raised in various circles more than once. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Torp, Oscar Fredrik (1893-1958) – Norwegian statesman and political figure, a social-democrat. Minister of Defence in the Norwegian Government-in-Exile in London. Chairman of the Norwegian Labour Party (1948-1951), Prime Minister of Norway (1951-1955). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Rio de Janeiro Pact 1947 – The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, signed by the majority of nations in the Americas. It is well known in the scholarly literature as the “Rio Pact”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Western Union – The Treaty of Economic, Social and Cultural Collaboration and Collective Self-Defence, signed on 17 March 1948 in Brussels by Great Britain, France and the Benelux countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Khramelashvili V.N. – Soviet diplomat, later worked at the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD). In 1949 he was secretary of the Embassy of the USSR in London. In 1953 he was a Senior Inspector at the Control Inspectorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR. He was arrested during the Beria affair. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)