Memorandum by E. Bevin entitled ‘Soviet Proposal for a Meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers’ and accompanying Annex C on the proposed reply to the Soviet note suggesting a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, 2 December 1950

SECRET

C.P.(50) 294

2ND DECEMBER, 1950 COPY NO. 32

CABINET

SOVIET PROPOSAL FOR A MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF FOREIGN MINISTERS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs

[1.] My colleagues will remember that in a note of the 3rd November the Soviet Government proposed that the Council of Foreign Ministers of France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics should meet to examine the question of carrying out the Potsdam Agreement on the demilitarisation of Germany.

2. The United Nations General Assembly also passed on the 3rd November a Resolution calling upon the permanent members of the Security Council to meet and discuss, collectively or otherwise, and if necessary with other States concerned, the problems threatening world peace and hampering the work of the United Nations.

[…]

5. Soviet objectives

I think it is important first of all to be clear on the Russians’ reasons for putting forward once again a proposal for such a meeting at this time and for linking it with the proposals in the Prague communiqué. As on previous occasions, when they have resorted to similar diplomatic manoeuvres, they are trying to stop a development in Western policy unwelcome to themselves. Their main purpose now is undoubtedly to delay the progress of plans to strengthen the defence of the West. They realise that these plans will have made a good step forward if agreement is reached on an integrated Atlantic force for Western European defence and on a contribution to that force from the great resources of Germany. They hope therefore to confuse Western counsels while this agreement is being sought and in particular to take advantage of the difference of opinion which is known to exist between the French and their partners in the North Atlantic Treaty on this issue.

6. Before we commit ourselves to inviting the Russians to a discussion with the three Western Powers we must be clear whether there is any basis for fruitful discussion. As I made clear in my statement in the House of Commons, we should not be prepared to enter into discussion on the basis of the Prague communiqué on Germany alone. The United States and French Governments are also agreed on this point.

7. It seems to me that the possible lines of approach to this problem might be briefly described as follows:

Course A We might try to confine any talks with the Russians to the problems of a particular region (such as Germany and/or alternatively, the Far East), on which there might be some hope of achieving a partial settlement and a partial relaxation of tension.

Course B We might, in the same hope, invite the Russians to discuss only the major points of friction throughout the world with a view at least to eliminating them.

Course C We might present the Russians with a full statement of our terms for a global settlement of all our differences with them in order to try to establish an enduring basis for better relations in future.

Course D We might make the Russians some proposal, their agreement to which would be a test of the sincerity of their intentions and on which agreement would therefore be required before proceeding to any wider talks.

Course E We might propose preliminary informal talks at the official level and should set out a selected list of subjects, on which we should require satisfaction from the Russians as a result of any subsequent formal Ministerial talks.

Course F We might say that the existing Russian proposals based on the Prague communiqué did not hold out adequate hope of successful talks and we might therefore call upon the Russians to put forward more attractive proposals if they really desire talks leading to a relaxation of tension.

[…]

Course E

11. The fifth possible line of approach – to hold preliminary talks with a view to defining an agenda for a meeting of Foreign Ministers – is in essentials similar to the approach suggested in a draft reply to the Soviet note which the United States Government have sent to us with a request for our views. I attach the text of this draft reply at Annex C to this paper. If we adopted this course I do not suggest that we should agree with the exact wording of the United States draft. In particular we should wish to define more clearly the subjects which we wished to discuss. It would have to be made clear that these subjects were not necessarily the main existing points of friction but were matters on which the Western Powers required satisfaction from Russia. In addition to such questions as the Austrian Treaty, the violation of the Balkan Peace Treaties, compliance with the United Nations Charter and the cessation of Communist propaganda under Soviet direction (subjects which the United States draft lists), they would, I suggest, have to include an agreement on the use of the veto and better treatment in the Soviet Union and other Communist-controlled states of Western nationals. I do not think that it would be appropriate to bring up Far Eastern questions in any such list of subjects. As I have made clear in Annex A these questions affect particularly the policies of the United States and Chinese Governments. The disadvantage of this line of approach is that it leaves it open to the Russians to raise a list of points of their own and to demand satisfaction on them from us. Nevertheless this line of approach shows a willingness to hold Four-Power talks and widens their scope beyond the narrow basis proposed by the Russians.

[…]

15. The choice is very difficult. I do not find myself prepared to recommend strongly any of the three courses suggested in the preceding paragraph, since I am conscious of the dangers attaching to all of them. Before I make up my mind I should like a thorough discussion with my colleagues.

E[rnest].B[evin].

[…]

ANNEX C

PROPOSED REPLY TO THE SOVIET NOTE OF 3RD NOVEMBER, 1950, SUGGESTING A FURTHER MEETING OF THE COUNCIL OF FOREIGN MINISTERS

The Embassy of the United States has the honour to acknowledge the receipt of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs note of 3rd November, 1950, which enclosed the text of the Praha Declaration and proposed calling the Council of Foreign Ministers of the United States, United Kingdom, France and the U.S.S.R. to consider the question of fulfilment of the Potsdam Agreement regarding demilitarisation of Germany.

The United States Government, together with the Governments of the United Kingdom and France, as always sought to cooperate in finding a plan which would restore German unity and liquidate the tragic heritage of the last war. As late as 9th October, 1950, the three Governments, through their High Commissioners in Germany, urged again upon the Soviet Union a plan for free, open, supervised democratic elections in all Germany for a constitutional convention which could lead to the creation of German Government responsive to the will of the German people. The formation of such a truly democratic and representative Government is a prerequisite to any discussion of a peace treaty with Germany.

The United States Government had already noted, with disappointment, the contents of the Praha Declaration which, far from offering hope for a new and constructive approach to the settlement of the German Problem, was a step backward to old discredited proposals which meet none of the facts or principles drawn to the attention of the Government of the U.S.S.R. at the last Council of Foreign Ministers. Thus the U.S.S.R. has again disappointed the hopes of the world that the threats to peace, inherent in the present division of Germany, might be lifted by the one Government which is responsible therefore, namely the U.S.S.R.

The United States Government can see in the Praha Declaration and in the Soviet proposal for a new Council of Foreign Ministers no assurance of a sincere desire on the part of the Soviet Government for an equitable and lasting solution to existing problems. At the last meeting of the Foreign Ministers in May-June, 1949, agreement was reached on the essential elements for the prompt conclusion of an Austrian State Treaty. Yet since that time the Soviet Government, far from carrying out the decisions reached at the Council of Foreign Ministers, has, by repeated introduction of new and irrelevant issues, made it impossible to conclude that treaty and restore to the Austrian people full sovereignty in accordance with the Moscow declaration of 1943. The Government of the United States would be more hopeful of the fruitfulness of a new Council of Foreign Ministers if the Soviet Government were to give effective implementation to the decisions of the last Council of Foreign Ministers.

The United States Government notes that the Government of the U.S.S.R. specifically proposes that the Council of Foreign Ministers consider the question of fulfilling the Potsdam Agreement regarding the demilitarisation of Germany. This proposal seeks to ignore the long history of Soviet violations of the demilitarisation provisions of the Potsdam Agreement and in particular the already well advanced rearmament taking place in Eastern Germany. This rearmament is particularly ominous in the light of the words of such a well-known spokesman as Walter Ulbricht, Deputy Head of the East German regime, who said on 3rd August that the Government of the Federal Republic would share what he hoped would be the fate of the Republic of Korea. Against whom are those threatening preparations being made? The West Germans, who lie disarmed at this moment as a result of Western fulfilment of the Potsdam Agreement, and all other free people have a right to ask this question with profound misgiving. They have seen peace shattered by Communist aggression under all too similar circumstances in Korea.

The proposal of the Soviet Government for a Council of Foreign Ministers must therefore be considered in the light of aggressive actions and threats throughout the world by Communist groups, Governments and individuals, and in the light of the continued maintenance of heavily mobilised Soviet and other Communist forces, including the so-called “alert troops” in Eastern Germany. It is these actions and threats which have compelled the free nations of the world to plan for an improvement of their common defences and to examine the ways in which the German people could legitimately participate without creating an aggressive military force such as has been built up in the Soviet Zone. Under these circumstances the United States Government can only conclude that the intent of the Praha Declaration was to attempt further to confuse world opinion as to where the blame lies for the failure to solve the German problem and to deflect the West from its resolve to build real strength in a free world as the best means of safeguarding the peace, to the maintenance of which all members of the United Nations are pledged. The Declaration and the Soviet Government’s note of 3rd November seek to delude the world by callously playing upon the heartfelt desire of all peoples for true and lasting peace. Until Soviet-inspired Communist actions around the world hear testimony to the sincerity of Soviet words, there would seem to be little basis for a successful resolution of fundamental problems such as Germany in the Council of Foreign Ministers.

Yet Germany and Austria are not the only areas of international tension which will have to be considered if these tensions are to be removed or at least lessened sufficiently to permit the world to live in peace and hope for the future. Other international difficulties must be discussed and solutions found if a real settlement is genuinely sought by the Soviet Government. If conversations were to be agreed upon between the representatives of the Soviet, United States, British and French Governments, the United States Government would desire to discuss a variety of matters not all of which properly fall within the jurisdiction of the Council of Foreign Ministers. These matters would include questions such as the Austrian State Treaty, the Soviet-supported violations of the peace treaties by Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania, compliance with the United Nations Charter with especial regard to the elimination of the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any nation, events in Korea which threaten peace and other problems causing international tensions, such as the activities and declared objectives of the Soviet-directed international Communist movement. The United States Government is ready, as it has been and always will be, to cooperate in genuine efforts to find peaceful settlements of all these questions.

Recognising the gravity of these issues which threaten the peace of the world, the […] Plenary Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted on 3rd November, 1950, several resolutions, one of which, introduced by the delegations of Iraq and Syria, called upon the permanent members of the Security Council to “meet and discuss, collectively or otherwise and, if necessary, with other states concerned, all problems which are likely to threaten international peace and hamper the activities of the United Nations”. If the Soviet Government should desire, the United States Government would be willing to examine along with the British, French and Soviet Governments whether there exists a mutually acceptable basis for reaching a settlement of certain outstanding issues. It would appear that the presence of representatives of the above named Governments at the seat of the United Nations in New York presents the most convenient opportunity to conduct such a preliminary examination. For its part the United States Government would be willing to authorise a representative to explore the issues at hand with similarly authorised representatives of the Soviet, British and French Governments.

[TNA, CAB 129/294]

Keywords: Post-war order, Post-war Western Europe, great - power relations