Cabinet conclusions on Trusteeship of Tripolitania, the future of Indonesia and withdrawal from Austria, 1 January 1946

TOP SECRET

C.M.[[1]](#footnote-1) (46) 1st Conclusions, Minute 1

Confidential Annex

1 January, 1946

In the course of his account of the proceedings at the recent meeting of Foreign Ministers in Moscow, the Foreign Secretary referred to exchanges of views which had taken place on the following subjects in informal conversations with Marshal Stalin and M. Molotov[[2]](#footnote-2): -

(i) Marshal Stalin had referred to the suggestion, put forward at the first meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers, that the Soviet Government might be invited to undertake trusteeship of Tripolitania. He had expressed regret that the United Kingdom Government had not felt able to support this suggestion, and suggested that we had distrusted their intentions in this matter. The Foreign Secretary had said that it was not a question of mistrust: we preferred to avoid competition with the Soviet Government in this area.

Marshal Stalin had then said that he was anxious that the British should not leave Egypt. The Foreign Secretary said that we should shortly be undertaking a revision of the Egyptian Treaty, and he hoped that he could rely on sympathetic support from the Soviet Government in our negotiations with the Egyptian Government[[3]](#footnote-3) Marshal Stalin had promised such support.

(ii) Marshal Stalin had spoken with sympathy and understanding of our policy towards India. He had referred to the dangers of a separatist movement in India, and he expressed the hope that India would remain within the British Commonwealth. It was clear that he was more apprehensive of trouble from India and the Far East than from the Balkans.

(iii) Both Marshal Stalin and M. Molotov had evidently feared that it might be our intention to incorporate Indonesia within the British Commonwealth. The Foreign Secretary had given them a clear assurance that we had no such designs. He had, however, explained that the Dutch had claims to these territories which we could not ignore and it was our policy to promote an amicable settlement between the Dutch Government and the Indonesian leaders. There had been a frank exchange of views, which should have removed any possible source of misunderstanding between ourselves and the Soviet Government on this question.

(iv) The Foreign Secretary said that he had tried, without success, to secure some agreement about the withdrawal of allied troops from Austria. When he sought to raise this question, M. Molotov had evaded the issue by bringing forward allegations that the British military authorities were supporting Fascist elements in Austria. Similar charges had been made about the attitude of the British military authorities in Germany. The Foreign Secretary had disposed of these imputations against British Commanders, but he had not been able to bring the discussion back to the question of withdrawal of Allied troops from Austria.

The Foreign Secretary said that it was clear that the Soviet Government were not yet ready to discuss this question. It was his impression that they were anxious, for domestic reasons, not to bring any more of their troops back into Russia during the coming winter[[4]](#footnote-4). The internal position in Russia was not, he thought, very satisfactory. War damage was extensive; and the administration were finding great difficulty in arranging for an industrial machine highly geared for war to be turned over to peace-time production. It was doubtful whether the Soviet authorities would be able to enforce in future the same rigid control over labour as they had exercised before the war. Food was also short, and from that point of view also the Soviet Government found advantages in keeping large numbers of troops in occupied territory[[5]](#footnote-5).

It seemed likely, however, that the Soviet Government would wish to propose large-scale withdrawals of Allied forces of occupation, as a gesture, in connection with the proposed Peace Conference – possibly in the spring or early summer of 1946. If so, they would probably propose the simultaneous withdrawal of Allied Armies of occupation throughout the world – including the withdrawal of British troops from Greece and of United States troops from China.

[TNA, CAB 128/7]

Keywords: inter-Allied relations, post-war Middle East, Tripolitania, Indonesia, Austria

1. “Cabinet Minutes” – minutes of a Cabinet session. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the record of Bevin’s conversation with Molotov dated 18 December 1945 and the records of Bevin’s conversations with Stalin on 19 and 24 December 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Reference to the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 26 August 1936 which established a twenty-year alliance between Great Britain and Egypt. Amongst other things, it gave Great Britain the right to station armed forces and construct bases on Egyptian territory, as well as wide ranging rights of interference in Egyptian internal affairs. Talks about re-examining the treaty began in December 1945, initiated by the Egyptians. One of the main points of contention (alongside the question of the future of the Sudan) was whether the British would be able to maintain bases and troops in Egypt under the terms of a new treaty. A memorandum from the Chiefs of Staff on 28 December 1945 summarised the minimum troop requirements. It indicated the potential for conducting military operations with Egyptian support and the necessity both of having at their disposal on Egyptian territory the same capabilities as during the Second World War, but also of supporting peace-time communications across Egypt (C.O.S. (45) 699 (O), Report by COS, 28/12/1945 // TNA, CAB 80/98). A compromise treaty of October 1946, agreed by Bevin and the Egyptian Prime Minister I. Sidqi proposed the formation of a joint Anglo-Egyptian defence arrangement for the Suez Canal Zone in place of unilateral British responsibility, but it never came into force. The Egyptian authorities insisted on the examination of the issue in the UN Security Council where they enjoyed Soviet support. For more detail see: *Demise of the British Empire in the Middle East: Britain’s Responses to Nationalist Movements, 1943 – 55* / ed. by. M.J. Cohen, M. Kolinsky. (London, 1998), Pt. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also Attlee’s opinion on this issue in the record of the Cabinet meeting of 5 November 1946. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Such ideas also figured in earlier Foreign Office documents. In a letter to the Chiefs of Staff dated 10 October 1945, it was noted that ‘certain recent telegrams seem to indicate that Russian troops are being moved from one country to another, not for the reasons of security or defence, but in order to ease the problem of supplying these troops’. British diplomats, having information on the stationing of 920,000 Soviet troops in Hungary in the winter of 1945/6, associated this with problems of food supply. (Copy of a Letter from FO to COS, 10/10/1945 (in: C.O.S. (45) 615 (O)) // TNA, CAB 80/97). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)