Report of Meeting in Sir Orme Sargent’s Room, 18 March 1946

Report of Meeting in Sir Orme Sargent’s Room on the 18th March, 1946[[1]](#footnote-1), to Brief Sir Maurice Peterson

 In the course of a general discussion of Russian policy and the British attitude towards it, the following points were made: -

 (1) The extent to which we should be prepared to go in countering Soviet policy in various areas would depend on how vital the Chiefs of Staff considered those areas for the security of the British Commonwealth. The Chiefs of Staff had not yet considered this question, though they might be expected to do so in the near future[[2]](#footnote-2). It was probable, but not certain, that they would regard the Middle East as less vital than Western Europe and the Western Mediterranean. The Middle East is admittedly of great economic importance in time of peace and of strategic value in counter offensive purposes in the events of a war with the Soviet Union, as the USSR is most vulnerable from the South-East. But the Chiefs of Staff might hold that the Middle East was not an area of absolutely vital importance to us from the point of view of defence. Sir Orme Sargent commented that the Secretary of State rated the importance of the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean very high and wished this question to be looked into most carefully.

 (2) There was a long discussion of the aims underlying Soviet expansion in the Middle East. Were they only after oil, or were they hoping to establish a defensive glacis, or were they pursuing an offensive and expansionist policy[[3]](#footnote-3)? It was agreed that a paper ought to be prepared about the future trends of Soviet oil production and consumption in order to ascertain whether the Soviet Union would be genuinely unable to produce enough for its future requirements within its own borders. The opinion was expressed that the Soviet General Staff had not yet been able to work out the desirability of a glacis in the light of modern weapons, or the optimum depth of the glacis if one were desirable. Mr. Warner pointed out that the Soviet Government was actively favouring the development of Communism outside the borders of the Soviet Union. It was not just a question of Turkey or Persia. They were pushing much further afield. The probability was that their aim was not either economic or defensive or ideological, but all three combined.

 (3) The discussion then turned to the question of how we were to counter the spread of Communism. It was agreed that we should have great difficulty in finding effective means of counter propaganda, particularly in the Middle East. Moreover, most of the Social Democrat leaders who headed resistance to Communists abroad were old and feeble. Feeble governments in the Middle East also encouraged the spread of Communism. We could not count on steady support from the United States in any policy designed to oppose Communism. Nor was public opinion in this country to be relied on as the Communists would have little difficulty in making people believe that in the disputes which would inevitably arise as a result of our following such a policy, the British Government and not the Communists was in the wrong. On the other hand, the Russians were incensing public opinion throughout the world by their present aggressive tactics, and support for our taking a tougher line would presumably increase.

(4) It was agreed that we could not hope to secure Soviet acquiescence in the establishment of politically neutral buffer States in the Middle East between the areas of vital concern to the Russians and ourselves.

(5) There was some discussion of the question of spheres of influence, and it was agreed that it was unlikely that the Russians would be content with a sphere of influence in Northern Persia. They would want to control the South as well if they could.

(6) The question was also discussed whether the Russians were playing from strength or from weakness. If from weakness, the probability was that they would not resort to armed force. If from strength, the position was much more dangerous. Reference was made to the conclusion of the JIC paper that the Russians would not be prepared to engage in a major war within the next five years[[4]](#footnote-4). Mr. Warner pointed out that whether the Russians were playing from strength or from weakness, the result was equally embarrassing. Whatever their motives the Russians were completely unconstructive in their approach to international relations. The accusations made against British policy were not put forward with a view to the welfare of the people said to be suffering under our rule, but solely to help the extremist parties in those countries. […]

 (9) After a discussion of the aims of the Communists in Germany, in which it emerged that the Chiefs of Staff had never been asked to prepare a paper on Central Europe. It was contended that it would be unrealistic for us to try to hold Western Europe if the whole of Germany were under Communist control. For this reason Mr. Caccia thought that the Chiefs of Staff would probably want to place the line that we ought to hold in Germany as far East as possible. Mr. Vyvyan[[5]](#footnote-5) expressed the view that since the Western zones of Germany contained two thirds of the population and four fifths of the industry, we need not be as much on the defensive against the Eastern zone as we were at present.

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1. This report had the aim of orientating the new British Ambassador to the USSR M. Peterson before his posting to Moscow. The British historian M. Kitchen notes that ‘his appointment was seen by some as a calculated insult to the Soviets as he was not particularly highly regarded and had been Ambassador to Franco’s Spain’ (Kitchen M. British Policy towards the Soviet Union 1945–1948 // Soviet Foreign Policy 1917 – 1991: A Retrospective / Ed. by G. Gorodetsky. 2nd. ed. London, 2013. p. 123). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The first wide-ranging review of the strategic needs of the British Empire was prepared under the title of The Security of the British Empire by the Post-War Planning Staff back on 29 June 1945. However, British planners considered it an inappropriate basis on which to adopt detailed measures in the post-war period. Prepared by those very same planners, the report Strategic Position of the British Commonwealth was completed on 31 March 1946 and approved by the Chiefs of Staff on the following day. As the British historian J. Lewis has noted, the report was deemed ‘to establish where British vital interests lay as a prelude to the development of plans to protect them. They were examined in the context of a war between the Soviet Union and ‘her satellites’ on the one hand and the Commonwealth and United States on the other.’ (Lewis J. Op. cit. p. 255). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Describing this conversation, the British historian M. Kitchen writes that it reflected the ‘confusion’ of British policy in the Middle East (Kitchen M. Op. cit. p. 133n32). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See the report of the Joint Intelligence Committee of 1 March 1946. The assessment remained similar at the end of March as well. The Joint Intelligence Committee, emphasising the long-term Soviet threat to the British position in the world (especially in the Middle East), noted alongside this that over the duration of the coming 5 years the USSR would not be ready for a major war in view of the need for reconstruction, but also in view of the gradually evolving nature of Soviet strategy: ‘It is agreed that the long term aim of the Russian leaders is to consolidate around her boundaries a belt of states subservient to Russia so that she may build up strength without fear of attack. It is considered, however, that such an aim implies the gradual but continual broadening of the belt.’ (JIC report, 23/03/1946 // TNA, FO 371/56831; цит. по: Kitchen M. Op. cit. p. 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Vyvyan, Michael (1907 - 1991) – British diplomat and historian. Vyvyan spent seven years in the diplomatic service (1931 - 1938) before resigning to pursue academia. By then a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, Vyvyan spent three years on secondment to the German Department of the Foreign Office (1944 - 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)