Memorandum recording a meeting between Prime Minister, C. Attlee, Foreign Secretary, E. Bevin, and the Chiefs of Staff Committee, dated 4 February 1948

THE PRIME MINISTER said that previously the Staff Conference had accepted the fact that the whole of Europe might be overrun by the enemy – for they had been informed that the Western Powers would be very weak – and he was disturbed at this new idea that we might send land forces to the Continent. He had understood that our conception had been to develop a counter-offensive from the Middle East. Considerable land and air forces would be required in the Middle East to do so and he did not see how we could support forces on the Continent as well. Previous experience had shown how Continental commitments, initially small, were apt to grow into very large ones. In any case he did not think that the countries of a Western Union would be much encouraged by the offer to help them with land forces if it transpired that our contribution was to be limited to only one or two divisions.

He was also disturbed at the suggestion in the paper by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that we ought to build up the strength of Germany once again. He thought it dangerous to hold that Russia was the only potential enemy, and he suggested that the Chiefs of Staff might have expressed the same view in 1922. Our defence policy should not be too rigid; a future world war need not necessarily begin in Europe, for it might break out in the Far East between Russia and America; nor did he like the conception of holding a specific line on the Continent. For all these reasons, he was opposed to giving any definite assurance as to how we should participate in a future war: in any case he would like to know what American intentions were.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS said that he had held up the projected talks in Washington for the time being because the Americans had not yet made up their minds as to what their own policy would be and he did not want to begin discussion on any false assumptions. Our aim must be to prevent war; he did not want to repeat the mistake that had been made before the last war when the Government of the day had failed to provide forces either to prevent war or for proper defence. When war had broken out we should not again have a breathing space in which to build up our strength so we must be ready beforehand and America must be prepared to come in at once. He intended to make it clear to the Americans that we could not act as a mercenary army or defensive outpost for them. He believed the American military authorities were already aware that their security lay in taking action at once wherever it might be.

His approach to the problem of the creation of a Western Union was somewhat different from that of any of the Chiefs of Staff. He preferred to think of the forces of the Western Union as being one force. He thought the Western Union had sufficient manpower to withstand attack and that the way to work out what forces they could provide should be on a budgetary basis. National pride must be overcome and all their resources must be pooled. He believed in fact that there was already a close link between the French and British navies and he would like to see the same with the air forces. An approach on those lines would lead to the result that the continental countries would provide the bulk of the manpower for the land forces [...]

Defence arrangements however formed only one facet of the Western Union as he saw it. He was trying to arrange for close links between the countries concerned in banking, finance and currency, and for economic links with Africa and with the Commonwealth. Collaboration in defence would be complementary to all these.

The future of Germany caused him much concern for both east and west were now being forced into a position of courting Germany and we might find it impossible to avoid building her up again until once again she became a menace. This was another reason for organising some sort of regional defence organisation in Western Europe which might perhaps be framed within the Charter of the United Nations. […]

In the discussion that followed, the following points were made: -

(a) The Chiefs of Staff had always held that immediate and full military support by America was essential in any future war. Furthermore we ought to look to the Dominions for greater contributions. The idea that the United Kingdom could bear the main burden was no longer tenable.

(b) The timely announcement of our plans for a Western Union had probably turned the scale of American public opinion in favour of Marshall Aid. The growing mutual support among the Western Powers would very likely cause Russia to hesitate before the end of this year but it would be fatal to give the idea that collaboration would be confined only to defence matters. The emphasis must be placed on financial, economic and cultural co-operation.

(c) We should not count on including the Scandinavian countries in the Western Union, though Norway was showing a firmer attitude than Sweden or Denmark. Norway might be defensible against an attack from the East and was most important strategically both from the point of view of the Baltic sea communications end of the Atlantic sea communications.

(d) The advent of modern weapons might make Continental countries less willing to defend themselves against an aggressor for they might be reluctant to see the devastation of their cities. The argument that the holding of the Rhine was essential to British morale was open to question; for if British morale was likely to crack under attack from across the Channel presumably the morale of France, Belgium and Holland would crack under attack from across the Rhine.

(e) The great difficulty in arranging for a number of countries to pool their resources to provide combined forces, was that each country would hesitate to assign the protection of any of its own vital interests to another country; for if that country subsequently fell out of the Union, the vital interest would be left unprotected for some time while other arrangements were made for its protection. Therefore all countries would tend to cling to their own conception would tend to cling to their own conception of balanced national forces and allowances in masterminding the role and contribution of the European powers to a Western Union Defence Force, must be made for leaving them sufficient of all arms to protect their vital interests and to fulfil their commitment.

(f) It must not be forgotten that France and the Benelux countries also had considerable overseas positions and might therefore oppose our claim to be the main provider of naval and air forces in the combined Western Union forces.

(g) Although to hold the enemy on the Rhine would assist our own defence, the overrunning of France would prove a very heavy drain on the Russians since they would be operating at great distances from their centres of production east of the Urals. On the other hand, they would alter absorb and develop some of the European centres of production. It was suggested that the use of modern weapons might make the defence of a front in Europe difficult. On the other hand it was pointed out that we should have great preponderance of such weapons.

(h) We must not confine Western Union defence arrangements to a campaign in Western Europe: such arrangements must incorporate the Middle East from where we should ultimately develop the offensive. The initial approaches to the Arab states had not gone well to date.

[TNA, FO 800/452/18]

Keywords: post-war order, great power relations, post-war Western Europe, post-war Germany