Cabinet conclusions on the role of Communist imperialism in the invasion of South Korea, 27 June 1950

SECRET

C.M.(50) 39th Conclusions

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The Cabinet’s discussion turned mainly on the question whether it was expedient publicly to attribute responsibility for this aggression, as the United States Government proposed to do, to “centrally-directed Communist imperialism” and to link it with Communist threats in other parts of Asia. It had not been proven that, in carrying out this aggression on South Korea, the North Koreans had been acting on instructions from Moscow; and it was suggested that there might have been advantage in seeking to isolate this incident and to deal with it as an act of aggression committed by the North Koreans on their own initiative. This would have enabled the Soviet Government to withdraw, without loss of prestige, any encouragement or support which they might have been giving to the North Koreans. The announcement which the United States Government were proposing to make, by linking this up with Communist threats in other parts of Asia, would present a major challenge to the Soviet Government; it would bring into controversy other issues which had not yet been brought before the Security Council; and its reference to Formosa might embarrass the United Kingdom Government in their relations with the Communist Government of China and might even provoke that Government to attack Hong Kong or to foment disorder there.

On the other hand, it was pointed out that the action which the United States Government proposed to take, and the form of their proposed statement, had probably been influenced by the consideration that the whole of South Korea was likely to be overrun before any effective assistance could be given by the United States or any other member of the United Nations. In that event, if action had to be limited to Korea, it might have to take the form of an offensive against North Korea. The Cabinet were informed that the Foreign Secretary, who had been consulted that morning, doubted whether it would be wise for us to try, in any public statement, to isolate the Korean incident from the other matters mentioned in the announcement which the United States Government proposed to make; for we would not wish to discourage that Government from helping us and the French in resisting the Communist encroachments in Malaya and Indo-China. In the Security Council, however, it was important that the resolution which the United States representative was to move should be confined strictly to events in Korea; and we should certainly advise the United States Government that, whatever form their own public announcement might take, they should not include in the preamble to their resolution any reference to Communist threats in other parts of Asia which had not yet been brought before the Security Council.

In further discussion it was recognised that, by the terms of their proposed announcement, the United States Government were deliberately taking the major risk of making it clear to the Soviet Union that they were resolved to put a stop to armed aggression. In this they were doubtless influenced by the consideration that, as had been amply demonstrated by the events preceding the Second World War, it would be easier to make such a stand in the earlier, rather than the later, stages of imperialist expansion by a totalitarian State. Though major risks were involved, it was arguable that there would be even greater risks in allowing the Soviet Government to conclude, as Hitler had done, that aggression would succeed if its victim could be over-powered sufficiently quickly. The point was also made that the United States Government were doubtless taking steps to strengthen their hold on Formosa in order to forestall any Communist attempt to advance there while their attention was concentrated on Korea. The action which they were proposing to take there could not be concealed; and they were not therefore likely to be willing to refrain from referring to it in their proposed announcement, particularly as its terms had already been communicated to so many friendly Governments. It would, however, be worthwhile to suggest to them that they should refrain from including in their announcement the statement explicitly attributing to “centrally-directed Communist imperialism” the responsibility for the aggression against South Korea: it would be preferable that they should leave their proposed action in other parts of Asia to speak for itself. The Minister of State read to the Cabinet the draft of a telegram in this sense which had already been prepared by the Foreign Office; and the Cabinet endorsed the terms of this draft.

The Cabinet’s conclusions were as follows:

(1) The United Kingdom Government should in principle support the action which the United States Government were proposing to take to halt Communist aggression in Asia.

(2) The United Kingdom representative on the Security Council should be instructed to support the resolution, to be proposed by the United States representative, calling on “the members of the United Nations to furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack”.

(3) The United States Government should, however, be urged to refrain from including in the preamble to the resolution any reference to Communist encroachments in other parts of Asia which were not before the Security Council; and it should also be suggested to them that they should refrain from including in the public announcement which they proposed to issue the statement explicitly attributing to “centrally-directed Communist imperialism” the act of aggression against South Korea.

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