Cabinet memorandum by Secretary of State for Defence, E. Shinwell, on trade restrictions against the Soviet bloc and China in response to the Korean War, 31 August 1950

SECRET

C.P.(50) 201

31 August, 1950

CABINET

RESTRICTION OF EXPORTS TO EASTERN EUROPE AND CHINA

[…]

3. I have no intention of recommending any change in our general policy, which is reasonable in the circumstances of the “cold war” in view of our need to balance defence with trade considerations; but it does permit the export to China, or Eastern Europe of a variety of goods which, although not strictly of war potential, could be of direct and immediate use in sustaining military operations, and is not therefore suitable to the state of “hot war” now existing in Korea. It would be unfortunate, for instance, if it were to be shown that the communication and transport systems in China and oriental Russia were being heavily reinforced with British exports to assist in the maintenance of the North Korean forces. It would also be embarrassing politically, since the American system of security controls, which they have urged us to adopt, covers most goods of the kind in question.

[…]

[TNA, CAB 129/201]

Keywords: Post-war USSR, Korea, China

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Foreign Office memorandum on Sino-Soviet relations in Korea, 28 September 1950

Foreign Office Minute on Sino-Soviet relations in Korea by G. Buzzard[[1]](#footnote-1)

28 September, 1950

Sino-Soviet Relations and Korea

[…]

4. Mr. Hutchison likewise knows no conclusive evidence indicating that the invasion was either instigated by or undertaken with effective support from the U.S.S.R. We are unfortunately never likely to see the minutes of the secret council’s operation in which it was finally decided upon, so it will perhaps never be possible to obtain conclusive evidence in the strictest sense of the word. We do, however, know that the North Koreans have been supplied with very large quantities of goods and some up-to-date Russian arms such as heavy tanks, self-propelled guns and a variety of modern and excellent Russian artillery which the Russians look upon as one of their best if not their senior military arm. It is true that there has been no air support, but there may well be reasons which we cannot at the moment fathom for this and in the meanwhile the fact of a great volume of other war supplies is tangible evidence of very effective Russian support. The Russians are not in the habit of supplying arms merely as a rearmament precaution to their satellites. There is, I believe, no evidence to show that the Czechs, Hungarians or Poles have received large quantities of modern Russian arms like tanks and self-propelled guns. The Russians probably have not sufficient quantities of these arms to spare them just as equipment, and the almost inescapable conclusion in a case where they have been supplied on the scale of which we have good evidence in North Korea is that they were supplied for a definitive purpose, in other words, in connexion with the invasion of South Korea.

5. It would seem then that there are fairly strong, cogent arguments to show that the invasion of South Korea was worked out by the U.S.S.R and China in fairly close collaboration and that if the policy decisions emanated in all probability in the Kremlin rather than in Peking (since the Kremlin is hardly likely to risk large quantities of valuable military supplies [itself] the decisive voice). Chinese collaboration was close at all stages (particularly in respect to combing out the Koreans for transfer to the North Korean army from the Chinese Communist army while it was still engaged in operations).

6. The increasing volume of comments on the Korean question in Chinese official propaganda to which Mr. Hutchison refers, seems to have arisen at least during the first three weeks of September from increasing confidence in the outcome of operations in Korea and was a result of the apparently increasingly critical position in the bridgehead at Pusan before the Inchon landings. Such “increasing prominence” would not then necessarily indicate any fundamental change of policy but merely reflect the mood which one usually feels when one’s side looks almost certain to win. In just the same way the very cautious and restrained bulletins which appears in the earlier days of the fighting were not necessarily any indication of the extent to which China was committed in Korea, but merely the natural caution of the man who, however deeply committed, withholds comment until it is possible to see clearly how successful his action is being. I would then feel very nervous of connecting changes in the volume of comment by New China News Agency and Chinese official propaganda on the Korean war with fundamental questions of Sino-Soviet relations.

[…]

8. Korea, because of its position in relation to vital Soviet strategic points in the Far East is a paramount Russian interest and it seems not unreasonable in the light of the arguments set out above that it was primarily Russian decision to get the whole country under Communist control. There seems to be every reason for believing that the Chinese Communists were in the picture from the beginning and have collaborated closely. The Chinese Communists, like other Communists elsewhere, identify themselves very closely with the aims of Communist policy and; although this results in subservience to the policy of the Kremlin, undoubtedly in their own eyes they see an identity of interests which we fail to detect. The failure of the Berlin airlift has not materially affected the solidarity of the German Communist leaders with Moscow, and as the men who direct Chinese policy and make all the final decisions, Mao, Chu and Chou, are avowed Communists, the setback which they have received is hardly likely to “strengthen their inclination to [their own]” with less deference to Russian policy. There is room for a great deal of speculation on the likely outcome on Sino-Soviet relations of a number of serious setbacks in Communist policy but I cannot [believe] that the identity of interests which existed and undoubtedly still exists in these men’s minds, the policy formulated in the Kremlin, [is] likely to be shaken by the one setback. The Communists’ expectations insist much too categorically upon setbacks being merely a check along the road to success.

[TNA, FO 371/1023/8]

Keywords: Korea, China

1. The minutes is a response to a telegram received from Peking the same day, and likewise found in FO 371/1023 1023-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)