Report from the Minister at the British Embassy in Moscow, P. Grey[[1]](#footnote-1), to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Lord Salisbury, on Soviet foreign policy, dated 8 October 1953

CONFIDENTIAL

CONSIDERATIONS ON SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY

My Lord Marquess,

I have the honour to submit some general considerations on Soviet foreign policy, in view particularly of the speculation which the “new look” since Stalin’s death has naturally aroused. It seems valuable to review the basic principles of Soviet foreign policy and diplomacy from time to time, in order that we may not only judge Soviet actions against the background of these principles, but estimate where “Malenkovism” can be expected to diverge from “Stalinism” and where it is likely to continue on the same lines. There seems no room to doubt that, so long as communism remains the goal of this country, the basic principles cannot change. At present, in fact, the evidence suggests that, where Malenkovism departs from Stalinism, it is in the direction, not of innovation, but of a reaffirmation of traditional principles neglected or believed to be neglected or wrongly applied by Stalin in his latest years.

[…]

4. In other respects, however, the considerations which determine the main lines of Soviet policy remain unchanged. Given the rough equality of the opposing sides, the Soviet Union, as was the case in the inter-war period, cannot afford to go to war. Therefore peace between the major Powers remains the first requirement of Soviet policy. The period of peace must be used to increase the economic and military strength of the Communist bloc. It is assumed by Communist theory that the non-Communist States will be weakened by the operation of the laws of social development, but policy requires that the operation of these laws should be expedited. The general lines of foreign policy remain what they were under Stalin until he made the mistake of conniving at the invasion of South Korea in 1950 – to ensure peace; to create and preserve conditions in which the Soviet Government can proceed with its task of strengthening the Communist bloc; and to work for the weakening of the Governments arrayed against it.

[…]

11. For the new Soviet Government, the problems of foreign policy and the main lines of Soviet diplomacy seem to remain fundamentally what they have always been since 1917. Yet there has been a change, and the change has to be correctly assessed. In the last years of his life, Stalin permitted two departures from the basic principles of Soviet foreign policy. First, having brought about through miscalculation, the establishment of a “focus of war” in Korea, he took no effective steps to liquidate it. Second, he allowed international tension to rise to a point which involved a risk of war and actually led to the creation and strengthening of a coalition of the non-Communist Powers. These were grave errors, and an effort is now being made to correct them. The fighting has been stopped in Korea, and an effort, genuine in so far as it has gone, has been made to reduce international tension. But it seems that these reversals of Stalin’s policy are to be interpreted rather as a return orthodoxy than as a departure from it. They may be expected to have three main results in different fields of Soviet policy. First, a reduction of tension and a lessening of the risk of war should make it possible to devote a smaller proportion of the resources of the Communist bloc to defence. This in turn should help to ensure the success of the new internal policy of improving the balance of the economy and achieving a steady improvement of the standard of living. Second, the reduction of tension is expected to weaken the Atlantic alliance and to frustrate the ratification of the Bonn and Paris Agreements[[2]](#footnote-2). Third, the abandonment of Stalin’s more extreme policies is expected to improve the efficacy of Soviet propaganda.

12. To sum up, therefore, what it seems safe to conclude. Because it promises such obvious advantages, and because it is consistent with orthodox teachings, the expressed desire of the new Soviet Government for a reduction of tension can be assumed to be genuine. But it would not be consistent with their basic teachings for them to enter into negotiations for a genuine and lasting settlement between the Communist bloc and the non-Communist Powers. The idea of a lasting settlement in incompatible with their concept of the relationship of inescapable hostility between the two camps into which the world is, in their view, divided. It also seems inescapable that, on the more restricted question of a settlement of the German question, the reunification of Germany or the abandonment of the Oder-Neisse frontier in exchange for guarantees from non-Communist Powers would demand the sacrifice of the most cherished principles of Soviet defensive diplomacy as above analysed. Despite our ignorance of the workings of the Soviet Government, which makes certain forecasting impossible, it seems difficult to hope for any radical departure from these past principles. The present policy of the Malenkov Government seems based on the recognition that for the time being there is no alternative to peaceful co-existence, and that a certain reduction of tension is desirable. But, in speaking of co-existence, the new Government also speak of rivalry; and they make no secret of their efforts to change the balance of power still further in their favour, or of their faith in the ultimate triumph of communism throughout the world. To quote the editorial of the latest issue of Questions of Philosophy, “In our age, all the paths of historical development lead inevitably to the downfall of capitalism and the triumph of communism.” [[3]](#footnote-3) Tactics have changed a little since the death of Stalin, but so far as can be judged, the underlying doctrine has not. It is hard to see how this doctrine can be reconciled with negotiations for a genuine, comprehensive and lasting settlement. Only within the strictly defined field of Soviet “defensive” diplomacy, as outlined above, can we have any legitimate hope of achieving understanding or agreement. But for that very reason it will, if attained, be limited in scope and duration, since it will be restricted not only by theory but by the practical limits set to it by strict Soviet self-interest.

[TNA, PREM 11/540]

Keywords: Post-war USSR, post-Stalin leadership, Post-war order

1. Grey, Paul F. (1906–1990) - British diplomat, Counsellor in British Embassy in Lisbon (1949–1951), Minister in British Embassy in Moscow (1951–1954). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Bonn and Paris agreements formed the basis of relations between the states of the West and the FDR, but they also guaranteed recognition of the FDR’s sovereignty. They were ratified on 5 May 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A similar formulation also appeard in the magazine *Nauka i zhiznꞌ* after 1950. See Belov М. \Velikie vozhdy Lenin i Stalin — osnovateli pervogo v mire Sovetskogo gosudarstva // Nauka i zhiznꞌ. 1950. №4. S. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)