

Letter from Jean Chauvel to Antoine Pinay (London, 14 June 1955)

Caption: On 14 June 1955, Jean Chauvel, French Ambassador in London, writes a letter to Antoine Pinay, French Foreign Minister, in which he sets out his opinion on the reasons for the developments in Soviet policy and the abandonment of Stalinist opposition to change.

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In my dispatches No 770 (1) and No 903 (2) of 2 and 18 May last, I informed Your Excellency of the remarks made by the Russian Ambassador and some of his staff.

I have seen Mr Malik again since then, and, quite naturally, he spoke to me about dates and future meetings. I have also met my Yugoslav colleague, Mr Velebit, who has an interesting lateral view of Russian affairs. I believe that certain inferences may be drawn from those discussions and some others with regard to the facts reported in the press.

Much has been said and written about Russia's intentions. In particular, it has been claimed that Moscow has only changed its tactics and that Soviet policy is the same as it has always been.

I think that this is true if one takes it to mean that the Soviet leaders have never stopped believing that Communism will eventually triumph in the world, hoping for that outcome and making every effort to achieve it. Indeed, I think it is a truism. It would be equally true, unoriginal and pointless to repeat that, in the United States, to refer to that country alone, a number of people want to see Communism crushed in the world, are working towards that and see this occupation as the most important task. Without casting doubt on those basic truths, we have to try and gain a clear picture of how far tactics have changed and the extent to which it might affect the general situation and progress of what we have agreed to call the Cold War.

It seems to me, in fact, that this change is far-reaching.

Over the years, we have become accustomed to Soviet refusals, whatever we were offering. We were used to seeing the USSR representatives putting forward proposals that appeared positive but were actually unacceptable to us, and were known to be so, but were nevertheless made again in the same or virtually the same form at regular intervals. In the very cases where a real concession might have hampered our own movements, Moscow did not move, thus taking negative, but only negative, risks. That established a pattern of exchanges of declarations essentially intended by both sides as propaganda, under the guise of which the Western powers conducted a sort of siege war, pushing their positions towards the Soviet frontiers whilst, in the United States, the strength and number of the weapons for radical intervention was increasing.

That Cold War process is now being reversed. The Russians are taking the initiative in Austria, Yugoslavia and Germany. They are accepting Western disarmament proposals and putting forward further proposals themselves. These changes are not — or at least not merely — propaganda moves. They have a practical impact that we are already seeing in Austria, we shall no doubt soon see in Yugoslavia and the surrounding countries and would see in Germany, judging from the response to the invitation to the Chancellor and the overtures in the Russian note of 10 May in particular. These are intended to be acted upon and, unlike earlier proposals, are no longer presented as a 'job lot' that one can take or leave. Whilst they were being drawn up, wordings were circulated unofficially. In the case of Austria, the question of support bases and points was already raised last October. Since the response was unfavourable, the Russians moved on to something different. Similarly, with regard to Germany, we heard talk recently of a neutrality that could extend to a strip of territory across Europe from Sweden to Yugoslavia. That term appeared to go out of use. The approach at future meetings will, no doubt, be different.

In short, the USSR is now taking positive risks. It is coming out of its shell and openly offering us a meeting that we cannot refuse. From what I see here, the public in our countries would not understand if we were to refuse. We are, therefore, going to be faced with surprises. In the game that is starting, our opponents will have the advantage of the totalitarian system that protects its leaders' secrecy and allows them to change position suddenly without being exposed to public sanction. We saw that in another place at another time.

But these initial conclusions are automatic. They are sufficient to indicate a major change. They do not allow us to determine the reasons for the change, its implications and the trend to which it is a response.

I believe that those reasons fall into two categories, the more immediate and, possibly, others that are less direct.

Mr Malik told me the immediate reasons quite plainly. Russia has to do everything within its power to avert the threat from a rearmed Germany that possesses the American atom bomb. Consequently, immediately after the total failure of the internal manoeuvres in various countries to prevent ratification of the Paris Agreements, the Russian Government diverged from its original course and opened negotiations. The denunciation of the Franco-Soviet and Anglo-Soviet treaties appears to be a formal gesture covering that inconsistency. It is very clear that it is in fact formal, if one also considers the good humour, cordiality and readiness for discussion to which we are not accustomed from the USSR's representatives.

The aim, therefore, is to bring about the collapse of the Paris Agreements, apparently by making them irrelevant. To achieve that result, a solution has to be found to three main problems: Germany, European security and disarmament, with the question of China remaining a marginal issue. That sums up precisely the substance of the Russian note of 10 May.

So this time Moscow is taking real risks. Is the aim merely to cause the collapse of the Paris Agreements, in which case we might be dealing with a simple manoeuvre, or was the ratification of the agreements an opportunity to implement a new political programme based on a reassessment of the world situation and East-West relations?

The tendency here is to think that there are deep-rooted reasons, apart from the occasion, for a change that is fundamental and not just a formality. I have heard several hypotheses discussed.

There have been numerous reports of serious economic problems in the USSR and the satellite states, making the Russian Government anxious to gain a breathing space.

It is also said that an improvement in the economic situation would not be compatible with the development of military weapons towards the hydrogen bomb.

Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the Permanent Under-Secretary, suggested another idea to me. He referred to the concerns that Moscow had about China's growing independence and the possibility of Russia being isolated between a hostile West and a Far East over which it had no control. He went as far as to compare Russia's present situation to that of Poland in 1940.

Some people believe that the USSR's leaders, whether or not they have the hydrogen bomb, are fully aware of the effects of the bomb and have decided, as Mr Churchill once did, that it will be impossible to go to war if that will, in future, entail the use of such weapons.

Finally, I propose to report here what I was originally told in Paris: that the Russians have a deliberate plan to raise their people's standard of living up to and then above the level in Western countries, using all the means at their disposal, nuclear included. It would no longer be a question of warding off the effects of a widespread but short-lived economic crisis. The aim would be different and would have different implications. It would entail making the USSR a focal point, whereas, at the moment, at least for those who are not believers, it is precisely the opposite.

I personally believe that all those possibilities might be true. The USSR, facing economic problems both in Soviet territory and in the satellites, realising the cost of nuclear military equipment, aware of the pointlessness of weapons that cannot be used, concerned about its relations with China and, finally, anxious to make Russia a focal point for the workers of the world, has decided to take competition with the West into new territory. The emphasis will be shifted from developing a larger and more effective bomb to improving the standard of living. The aim, which is to take over the world, would still be the same, but through peaceful means rather than war.

That hypothesis has no more of a factual basis than many others. However, I believe that, even if we do not adopt it to the exclusion of any other, we should at least consider it. We are accustomed to Russia being inactive. We are prepared to a certain extent for Russian manoeuvres. We must not be taken off our guard by a Russian Government determined to bring matters to a conclusion, especially if that conclusion removes the military content from our familiar subjects and raises other issues to be dealt with in quite a different manner.

In the light of those general observations, my recent discussions with Mr Malik have indicated to me that, because of the Paris Agreements, dealing with the German issue is the priority for the Soviets. It is not my impression that Moscow has opted for any one of the possible solutions; in fact, it seems to me that the possibilities are very open. It ranges from maintenance of the present separation, which should be accompanied by special provisions of the kind set out in the memorandum of 10 May, to reunification. My Soviet colleague does not seem to believe that we genuinely want unity or that Mr Adenauer is ready to see it achieved. He told me that, if we are willing to go that far, his government would no doubt go along with us, provided, however, that we do not make it a condition that the unified Germany remains within NATO.

But it seemed to me that Mr Malik was acknowledging one problem that will arise in any future discussion, namely that, West Germany having been fully emancipated by the West and East Germany by the East, Germany as a whole is not something that can be dealt with by the four powers as it was in April 1946. Germany is now a partner with which the Four have to deal in some form.

My colleague seemed no less conscious of the threat that a unified Germany would present if it were to be left free and not subject to control. In his view, the neutrality of that large country does not appear to safeguard East or West against the consequences of dangerous ventures. Germany, whether it is kept in two parts or becomes a single country, needs to be kept under control. If the situation is such that Germany cannot accept discrimination, the only solution will be to make the various parties involved subject to the same restrictions and control. Accordingly, settling the German problem, security and disarmament are merely, as set out in the 10 May document, different aspects of the same thing.

I do not have sufficient information here to be able to elaborate on this analysis. The conclusions might seem exaggerated or premature. It seems to me that, at all events, it would be worth bearing them in mind in our future dealings with partners who, in their wish to alter the substance of our joint problems, might, if I may say so, take us into different territory.

(1) This might in fact be Dispatch No 776 of 2 May, which appears as No 243 above.

(2) Not reproduced. The document included the Ambassador's comments on the proposal presented by the Soviet Union to the Disarmament Subcommittee on 10 May (for the proposal, see No 267 above, note). Mr Chauvel was reporting on a recent meeting with Mr Malik on the forthcoming Four-Power Conference and the Soviet document referred to above. Mr Malik had complained at the lack of response to the document and said that he had no idea of his government's intentions regarding Germany. In his view, however, the main obstacle to agreement was the condition imposed by the West that a unified Germany should remain in WEU and NATO. The choice left to Germany, he said, was expressed in terms of war, whereas it should be in terms of peace. According to Mr Chauvel, 'it seemed to me at the time that the uncertain way in which he expressed himself made his thinking more confused'. The Chinese Chargé d'Affaires was also present at the meeting. The Ambassador noted that the Russian proposal of 10 May assumed that the Chinese Government was admitted to the UN and commented that it was 'odd that Moscow, putting forward disarmament proposals that appeared useful in several respects, at the same time referred, in the document presented to us, to two issues as contentious and difficult as the German and the Chinese questions.'