

British Proposals for Solution of the German Problem (Geneva, 18 July 1955)

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Proposals for Solution of the German Problem Made by Prime Minister Eden at the Heads of Government Conference, Geneva, July 18, 1955

This Conference is unique in history because the conditions in which we meet are unmatched in human experience. We all know what unparalleled resources the scientific and technical discoveries of our age have placed within our reach. We have only to stretch out our hand and the human race can enter an age of prosperity such as has never been known. It is equally clear how utterly destructive must be the conditions of any conflict in which the Great Powers are engaged.

There was a time when the aggressor in war might hope to win an advantage and to realize political gain for his country by military action. The more overwhelming the military power the more tempting was the prize and the less might the aggressor expect to have to pay. We can each one of us think of examples of this in history. Nothing of the kind is possible now. No war can bring the victor spoils; it can only bring him and his victim utter annihilation. Neutrals would suffer equally with the combatants.

These are stern facts out of which we can perhaps win enduring peace at last. The deterrent against warlike action holds up a warning hand. But the deterrent cannot of itself solve international problems or remove the differences that exist between us. It is in an attempt to make progress with these problems and differences that we are met here today. And at this Conference we have to deal with them mainly in the context of Europe.

What is the chief among them? There can surely be no doubt of the answer. The unity of Germany. As long as Germany is divided, Europe will be divided. Until the unity of Germany is restored there can be neither confidence nor security in this continent. Within the limits of our Western Zone we have done all we can to unify Germany. We have broken down the barriers between our zones. We have treated the three Western areas as an economic unit and given them a federal Government. We have brought the occupation to an end.

Quite apart from the larger issues of German reunification it would mark a real advance if, pending our negotiations for German unity, the Soviet Government felt able to relax the physical restrictions which now aggravate the division of Germany, and prevent contact between Germans in the East and West.

Now I must turn to the wider issues of German unification. What is the reason why the Berlin Conference failed a year ago? We must examine this as dispassionately as we can in order to see what progress we can now make from the apparently fixed positions which the Great Powers on both sides then felt obliged to take. At the Berlin Conference the West proposed the unification of Germany with free elections and the free right of Germany to choose her own foreign policy. Under the so-called Eden Plan, Germany could have chosen either association with the West or association with the East or neutrality. But the Soviet Government was unable to accept that plan. Yet we all know in our hearts that Germany must be united and that a great country cannot be permanently prevented from freely deciding its own foreign policy.

The reason why the Berlin Conference failed was because one of the Powers there believed that a united Germany, rearmed and exercising its choice to join the NATO alliance, would constitute an increased threat to its safety and security. I am not now going to argue whether those fears are justified. In these last ten years there have been plenty of occasions for suspicions and alarms. These have found expression in heavy armament programmes. To try to deal with these issues in their wider aspect we have all agreed to work through the Disarmament Commission of the United Nations. We welcome the substantial progress which has recently been made there and the important measure of common thinking which has now emerged between the various proposals of the Western Powers and those recently set before us by the Soviet Government. All these discussions will go on, but, as we know, the immediate need is to make a practical start.

The urgent problem is how to begin the process of reducing tensions and removing suspicion and fear. There is also the practical question of how we can devise and operate together an effective control of armaments and of armed forces.

To reunify Germany will not of itself increase or reduce any threat which may be thought to exist to European security. Everything will depend on the conditions under which reunification takes place. I wish therefore now to suggest that we should consider a number of inter-related proposals which are intended to do two things. First, they are calculated to meet the apprehension of increased danger which some at Berlin felt might follow the acceptance of our plan. Secondly, they are intended to make a practical experiment in the operative control of armaments. This, if locally successful in Europe, might, as it were, extend outwards from the centre to the periphery. If we can once establish a sense of security over the continent of Europe — if we can create an effective system to reduce tensions here — can we not hope that this first success will be the preliminary for wider and more far-reaching understanding? We have therefore had in mind certain ideas which we think could be helpful to this end.

As I have said, our purpose is to ensure that the unification of Germany and her freedom to associate with countries of her choice shall not involve any threat to anybody. There are no doubt many ways of doing this. To illustrate what I have in mind let me give some examples. These will consist partly of actions and partly of assurances. Let us take the latter first. We would be prepared to be parties to a security pact of which those round this table and a united Germany might be members. By its terms each country could declare itself ready to go to the assistance of the victim of aggression, whoever it might be. There are many forms which such a pact might take. We would be ready to examine them and to set out our views about them. We would propose to inscribe any such agreement under the authority of the United Nations. It would also be our intention that if any member country should break the peace that country would forfeit thereby any rights which it enjoys at present under existing agreements.

Secondly, we would be ready to discuss and try to reach agreement, as to the total of forces and armaments on each side in Germany and the countries neighbouring Germany. To do this it would be necessary to join in a system of reciprocal control to supervise the arrangement effectively. All those represented here would we hope be partners in this, together with a united Germany. It would be understood that any proposals in this field would not exclude or delay the work of the United Nations Disarmament Commission, to which we attach great importance.

Is there some further reassurance we can give each other? There is one which I certainly think should be considered. We should be ready to examine the possibility of a demilitarised area between East and West.

It is true that these ideas are limited in the first instance to the area of Europe, but I am sure that they could help us here in practice and perhaps as an example. I will sum them up. There is the suggestion of a mutual security pact. There is the prospect of an agreement about the total of forces and armaments of the two groups both in Germany and in the countries neighbouring Germany. This would be subject to reciprocal supervision. There is the concept of a demilitarised area.

If we could start work on these lines we should have a chance of providing a constructive and encouraging plan to ensure peace for Europe. These ideas would give real security; and it is for the lack of that security that Germany is kept divided today. I suggest that they should be further examined. I have given only the summary of them here.

There are other aspects of our work together which I could have mentioned. For instance we would warmly welcome any proposals which would result in a greater freedom of movement and exchange of contacts between our peoples.

But it seems to me that it will be by our success in achieving some practical results about the future of Germany and European security that this Conference will be judged. We want to agree on two things: the urgent need for the unification of Germany and the broad outline of the means by which it can be achieved. I do not pretend that our ideas are anything in the nature of a complete plan but they are the outline sketch which once agreed upon could surely be filled in. If we can draw up something like this before we leave Geneva at the end of this Conference, the peoples of the world will not be disappointed.