

Extract from minutes of the 548th meeting of the WEU Council held at ministerial level (Rome, 16 May 1979)

Caption: At the 548th meeting of the Council of Western European Union (WEU), held at ministerial level on 16 May 1979 in Rome, the delegations discuss the development of East–West relations. The French Junior Minister for European Affairs, Pierre Bernard-Reymond, welcomes the good relations between France and the Soviet Union and expresses his support for détente, which must go hand in hand with disarmament. He particularly mentions the successful conclusion of Soviet–American negotiations on limiting strategic arms. But since détente also depends on a balance of strength, France intends to keep up its defence effort for as long as this seems necessary. The Deputy Under-Secretary of State in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Sir Ewen Fergusson, describes the difficult relations between the USSR and the United Kingdom. He believes that the British Government is generally in favour of détente on condition that it is not a one-way process; it is therefore important to maintain a strong defence capability.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of 548th meeting of WEU Council held at ministerial level on 16th May 1979 in Rome. CR (79) 5. II. Bilateral East-West Relations. pp. [s.p.]; 11-19. Archives nationales de Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954-1987. Foundation and Expansion of WEU. Year: 1975, 01/02/1975-30/12/1982. File 132.15. Volume 5/7.

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EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF 548th MEETING
OF W.E.U. COUNCIL HELD AT MINISTERIAL
LEVEL ON 16th MAY, 1979 IN ROME

FILE NO.
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Chairman: H.E. Mr. A. Sanza, Under-Secretary of
State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Italy.

II. BILATERAL EAST-WEST RELATIONS

Mrs. HAMM-BRÜCHER began by noting that since the last Ministerial Council, East-West relations had been governed by a number of factors that had either increased in importance or arisen for the first time.

These included, first of all, the maintenance of military balance and of a credible defence capability for the West, as a precondition for its policy towards the countries of eastern Europe; as Soviet armaments continued to grow, this had taken on more importance. The Harmel Report had already in 1967 described defence capability and détente as the two pillars underpinning the Alliance's

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M. BERNARD-REYMOND said that East-West relations had just passed an important milestone with the conclusion of the Soviet-American negotiations on limiting strategic arms. While still unable to offer any opinion on the content of the agreement, which had not yet been made public, France welcomed this event, and hoped that the two super-powers would not be content with these limitations, but would go further still. Already, however, she looked on this development as proof that the spirit of détente was still alive and well.

All the countries represented around the table would surely agree in regarding détente as a top-priority aim, and in feeling that it must govern the actions of all members of the international community.

This was so first of all in Europe, where détente today meant a consolidation of the process begun by the C.S.C.E. The Madrid meeting next year would be a success if the States taking part, and public opinion round the world, were able to see that real and substantial progress had been made in implementing the provisions laid down in Helsinki. This was what France was saying to the East European countries, making it quite plain that there had not been enough progress so far and that this should spur on their efforts to apply the Final Act.

Progress in the desired direction could be fostered by establishing closer and more trusting relations between all the countries of Europe. France was working to this end by continuing her political dialogue with the Soviet Union and all the socialist countries, by strengthening the economic and cultural co-operation with them, and by expanding person-to-person contacts whenever possible. This policy had recently been marked by the visit to France of Mr. Kadar in November, and by visits made by M. Giscard d'Estaing to Bucharest in March and to Moscow

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at the end of the month just past. The French Government believed that good relations between France and the U.S.S.R. and other countries of eastern Europe were a contribution to stability in Europe and to détente. He was happy to see, likewise, the establishment of good relations with these countries by any of France's western partners. The Secretary of State added that, where France was concerned, there were other meetings planned with most of the eastern capitals between now and the end of the year, particularly at Foreign Minister level.

Détente must go hand-in-hand with disarmament. The formidable concentration of weapons in Europe did not merely reflect the distrust between the two camps - it fed that distrust, and jeopardised détente. For this reason France, observing that the paths explored so far had led nowhere, had proposed that the 35 States who had signed the Helsinki Final Act should look at these problems together, with the primary aim of working out measures that would genuinely build up confidence, and should then proceed to a real reduction in the armouries.

This being so, it was obvious that détente also depended on a balance of strength. It would be utterly wrong to lend support to the notion that legitimate efforts to maintain or re-establish a balance guaranteeing security would conflict with détente. This meant that France would be keeping up her defence effort as long as this seemed necessary.

Détente was also affected by crises and centres of tension and conflict outside Europe. There had been a relative lessening of these tensions in Africa, which had been particularly acute at the same time a year ago. But how could one fail to be worried about the possible repercussions of the events in Iran, in Afghanistan or in the Middle East? How could anyone avoid feeling disquiet at recent happenings in South-East Asia, especially as these stemmed from the antagonism between China and the Soviet Union which was one of the main features of the current international situation, and at the risks that these could bring for the progress of East-West relations?

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France had been glad to see, in the context of these events, the restraint shown by the Soviet Union, which had confirmed its interest in détente. France thought, therefore, that it would be wise, again in the interests of détente, to do everything possible to bring China more and more into world affairs.

A lasting improvement in international relations required, moreover, that the two sides in East-West relations should not translate their rivalry to other continents, should not seek to exploit for political, military and ideological advantage any crises that arose there, and that they should act with moderation. This, too, was what France was telling the East, since an extension of détente to all parts of the world formed the third goal, together with implementation of the Helsinki agreements and progress towards disarmament, of France's dialogue with the socialist countries.

Mr. FERGUSSON was sorry that there was no United Kingdom Minister at the present meeting, but he felt sure that all delegations would understand the circumstances which would have made it very difficult for anyone to get away. He observed, however, that the new Prime Minister, in her first public speech on international relations on the occasion of her welcoming Chancellor Schmidt of the Federal Republic to London the previous week, made specific mention of the modified Brussels Treaty.

Mr. Fergusson believed that, due to the election, there was only limited significance in trying to assess the state of East-West relations over the past year in a particularly United Kingdom context, because British Ministers would be looking at the situation afresh and would be developing and expanding their own policies in the months ahead.

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The British representative then proceeded to an assessment of how Anglo-Soviet relations in particular might currently appear to the Soviet Ambassador in London.

First of all, he would feel that they were not particularly warm, he would observe that the British Government had responded to the pressures from activists in and out of Parliament, to take a continued declamatory stance in respect of its attitude to the continued violations by the Soviet Union of human rights considerations, he would have seen that, following the trials in the Soviet Union this time last year, the United Kingdom had deliberately curtailed some of its exchanges with the Soviet Union; he would also have seen that there were pressures in the United Kingdom relating to the Moscow Olympic games (an event of great pride to all Russians), which would come at a rather significant moment, shortly before the resumed C.S.C.E. meeting in Madrid in November 1980.

The Soviet Ambassador would perhaps have found it a little more difficult, because of the nature of the system that he was used to, to understand the extent to which Ministers were responsive to public opinion, and in the United Kingdom had felt it necessary to go along with the genuine sentiments of public opinion, particularly on human rights issues, so as to maintain public support for the broader policies of détente and the management of East-West relations with which they were concerned. He would have seen on the part of public opinion in the United Kingdom a continued dismay, a continued consciousness of the build-up of arms which, for instance, Frau Hamm-Brücher had mentioned. He would have seen too that, following the NATO Heads of Government meeting in May last year, a Government which traditionally found it

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difficult to maintain defence expenditure, had had little difficulty in committing itself to an increase in the defence budget of 3% in real terms, and he would have seen the preoccupation, on the part not only of military experts, but also on the part of informed public opinion, of the deployment of new missile systems like the SS-20. He would have seen the growing public irritation in the United Kingdom at the exploitation by the Soviet Union of its arms-length tool, in the shape of Cuban forces, which permitted the Soviet Union, without being so directly involved, to interpose its own interests in the vacuum that existed in certain parts of the world; he would have seen the growing concern of the British people, indeed of western peoples, at Soviet adventurism and opportunism. This was, of course, a particularly sensitive matter in the United Kingdom due to the preoccupation of public opinion with developments in southern Africa and in Rhodesia, and without making any moral or value judgement about it, there was no doubt that British public opinion as a whole had been concerned at the ease with which Nationalists who had taken up arms could get hold of such arms from Soviet sources.

The Soviet Ambassador would have looked at the evolution in the relationship with China, and he had certainly widely explained the extent to which China was a preoccupation of the Soviet leadership. A conspicuous element in the Anglo-Chinese relationship, and also in the Anglo-Soviet relationship, was the question of whether or not the Harrier jump jet should be sold to the Chinese, and what the strategic or other military consequences of such a sale might be. Many in the West felt that this aircraft was perhaps important not so much in a military sense but in a symbolic sense, both to the Chinese and to the Soviet Union.

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Above all, the Soviet Ambassador would report that there seemed to be a relative closeness and warmth of contacts between his leaders and those of other western European countries which was absent in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom at present; indeed there seemed to be a lack, he might observe, of any particular pressure from public opinion to warm up the relationship with the Soviet Union. On the United Kingdom side, it had certainly been observed that, whereas Mr. Brezhnev for instance had been to Bonn in May 1978 and President Giscard had just returned from Moscow, there had been no return visit to the United Kingdom from the Soviet leadership at that level since Prime Minister Wilson went to the Soviet Union in February 1975. As Foreign Secretary, Dr. Owen had been to Moscow in Autumn 1977, but Mr. Gromyko had not repaid that visit to the United Kingdom though under the terms of the agreement of February 1975, there should theoretically have been an annual exchange at Foreign Minister level. Clearly, however, some part of that coolness related to the lack of an attempt on the Soviet side to make relations any warmer. But recently there had been one or two hints, for reasons which the British Government had not yet been able to explain, that the Soviet Union saw advantage in making overtures. There had, for example, been suggestions that, to greet the arrival of the new Government, the Soviet exhibition in London which was to be opened at the end of next week, might have been attended at a very senior level of the Soviet leadership. As matters were, it would be opened by Mr. Patolichev, the Soviet Minister for Foreign Trade.

The Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister would be visiting the United Kingdom in the middle of June, and it was hoped that this would mark the beginning of solid contacts with the Soviet Union at practical level, because it was only by this kind of exchange that the two governments could properly understand each other's policies.

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In making his assessment, the Soviet Ambassador would be setting that history of slight coolness against what evidence he now had of the attitudes of the new Government. In public they were so far relatively few, but it had been stated in the Queen's Speech to the Houses of Parliament the previous day that the Government would take steps to improve the security of the Nation and to strengthen its contribution to the North Atlantic Alliance on which Britain's defences were based, that they would maintain the effectiveness of Britain's nuclear deterrent and at the same time would work for greater stability in East-West relations. At the press conference at the conclusion of Chancellor Schmidt's visit to London the previous Friday, Mrs. Thatcher had remarked, in reply to a question, that détente was fine so long as it was two-way, and it happened. One of course favoured détente, but it had to be two-way détente: it could not be one-way. Though not in any way different, they were part of the same strategy. Détente should be pursued if at all possible, but always from a position of strength in one's defence system.

Mr. Fergusson suspected that there would be a rather cautious approach in the reporting which the Soviet Ambassador was now making to Moscow about the prospects for a rapid and dramatic change in the Anglo-Soviet relationship.

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In conclusion, he observed that, whereas Britain's relationship with the Soviet Union had been of a rather distant kind over the past year, her relationship with eastern Europe had been quite different. The United Kingdom Government increasingly found, in the last year or two, that it was more possible to have a sensible, intelligent and frank dialogue with countries like Poland, Hungary and Romania, without expecting their policies to change, than with the Soviet Union. Indeed, it had been interesting to note, in this context, the remark made a week or so ago by a member of one of the neutral and non-aligned countries represented at Helsinki, that, looking at the eastern European countries, it was significant to what extent they were increasingly emphasising the "European" and de-emphasising the "eastern" aspects. The British Government considered this to be a positive development.

The following visits had been exchanged with eastern European countries over the past year.

With regard to Poland, Mr. Wojtaszek, Foreign Minister, had visited the United Kingdom in November 1978; Mr. Lejczak, Minister of Mines, in October 1978; and Mr. Czyrek, Deputy Foreign Minister, in April 1979.

In the case of Hungary, Mr. Nagy, Deputy Foreign Minister, had paid a visit from 29th January to 1st February, 1979. Visits had been made in the reverse direction by Mr. Dell, Secretary of State for Trade, in July 1978, by Lord Goronwy-Roberts, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in September 1978, by Mr. John Davies, Opposition Spokesman on Foreign Affairs, in October 1978, and by Mr. Moyle, Minister of State for Health, in November 1978. The Archbishop of Canterbury would be visiting Hungary in May 1979.

As for Czechoslovakia, Mr. Smith, Secretary of State for Trade, had been on a visit from 22nd to 24th March, 1979.

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In the case of Romania, President Ceausescu had made a State visit in June 1978, while Mr. Gheorghe Petrescu, Minister of State for Machine-building, and Mr. Paul Niculescu, Minister of Finance, were due in the course of 1979. Lord Peart, The Lord Privy Seal, had gone to that country in December 1978.

In connection with Bulgaria, inward visits had been made by Mr. Pankov, Minister of the Chemical Industry, in July 1978, by Mr. Chakarov, Minister of Machine-building and Metallurgy, in February 1979, and by Mr. Ginev, Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade, in April 1979. While Lord Goronwy-Roberts had gone to that country in September 1978.

Inward visits from Yugoslavia had been made by the Prime Minister of Macedonia in December 1978, by the Prime Minister of Serbia in February 1979, and by General Potocar, Chief of Defence Staff, in November 1978. In the other direction, the Prince of Wales had visited in October 1978, and Mr. Judd, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in January 1979.

Mr. Nier, Deputy Foreign Minister of the German Democratic Republic would be visiting the United Kingdom on 21st and 22nd May, 1979.

Having explained that the Netherlands Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. van der Mei, had fully intended to be present at this meeting but had suddenly and unexpectedly been required to participate in a Parliamentary debate in The Hague on technical details of the direct elections to the European Parliament, Mr. FACK stated that he had listened with a good deal of interest to the introductory statement of Frau Hamm-Brücher and to the statements made by other representatives. He could assure them that the Netherlands Government shared many of their preoccupations.

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