

Extract from minutes of the 243rd meeting of the WEU Council held at ministerial level (London, 23–24 January 1964)

Caption: At the 243rd meeting of the Council of Western European Union (WEU), held at ministerial level on 23 and 24 January 1964 in London, the delegations discuss the situation of East–West relations. British Foreign Secretary Richard Austen Butler shares the concerns of Federal Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder over the change in the USSR’s tactics. The two believe that internal difficulties will cause the Soviets to review their strategy, although the aims of communism will remain essentially the same. With regard to disarmament, the two governments affirm that they are keen to support any efforts to reach an agreement on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, but not at the expense of Western security, which is based on nuclear dissuasion. French Foreign Minister Maurice Couve de Murville agrees with the British and German analysis but adds that the US proposals at the disarmament conference should in no way lead to neutrality in Germany or in Central Europe.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of 243th meeting of WEU Council held at ministerial level in London on 23th and 24th January 1964. CR (64) 3. Part I. pp. 14-17; 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: 1963, 01/10/1963-30/11/1965. File 132.15. Volume 1/7.

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EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF 243) MEETING

OF W.E.U. COUNCIL HELD ON AT MINISTERIAL

LEVEL IN LONDON ON 23rd & 24th JANUARY
1964

[Chairman: Mr. BUTLER]

II. POLITICAL CONSULTATIONS

1. East/West Relations

Mr. SCHROEDER would like to make some remarks concerning the political and economic situation in the Soviet bloc, and to draw certain conclusions from this regarding the policies of member Governments.

His Government considered that the most important feature of developments in the Soviet sphere was the loosening of the monolithic nature of the bloc as it had existed under the Stalin régime. The Communist States no longer formed a unified structure, and there was no longer a world Communist Party directed from the Kremlin. The individual characteristics of the satellite countries were emerging, and in some a measure of emancipation could even be detected. The internal situation in certain satellites was, of course, far from satisfactory, and in some cases the changes in the pattern of the social structure could have a detrimental effect on governmental authority which, in turn, could lead to unforeseen consequences; but the revolutionary élan of the Soviet countries had certainly weakened, and the desire for private property, for individual security, and above all for more consumer goods was growing. Among the intelligentsia the wish for greater cultural and scientific freedom was widespread.

In this situation, the attitude of the Soviet leaders seemed to be wavering, and there appeared to be no unified approach to the problem. Certainly, no official opposition to Mr. Krushchev had developed. The Army appeared to have strengthened its position, but did not oppose him. Therefore, although Mr. Krushchev might have to take more account than hitherto of certain factors, such as the views of other leading members of the régime, and the intelligentsia, he still remained the outstanding personality in the Soviet bloc.

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So far as the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons was concerned, Mr. Schroeder considered that both the nuclear Powers, and those not possessing such weapons, had an interest. His country had been the first to renounce their manufacture (1954), and would be happy to see others do likewise; they would therefore support all efforts to reach agreement on this subject. But such agreement must not imperil nuclear-based security, and NATO members must be free to make multilateral arrangements for their nuclear protection. The setting up of the multilateral nuclear force was therefore a condition for the adherence of the West German Government to any such pact, and was motivated not by a wish to obtain possession of nuclear arms, but by the need to ensure security.

In conclusion, Mr. Schroeder did not consider that the Communist aim of world domination had changed. Difficulties had arisen in the Soviet bloc, leading to attempts to reach a détente, but there was no readiness to make concessions on fundamental problems. In these circumstances the West must maintain its position.

(Chairman)

Mr. BUTLER had little to add to his statement at The Hague. He agreed with Mr. Schroeder that, owing to economic difficulties, some shift might be taking place in Soviet tactics, but that there was no fundamental change in the aims of Communism.

An indication of these changed tactics was Mr. Khrushchev's New Year Message. The British Government considered that with this message the Russians appeared to have reverted to their old tactic of launching a peace initiative with a strong propaganda flavour, which did not commit them very far, but which they could exploit however the West reacted; the aim was to try to give the world an image of a régime attempting to eliminate world tension. They might also have wished by this statement to fill a gap while they were reassessing their policy. The message contained much that was unacceptable, but it was worth noting that by Soviet standards it was marked by less anti-Western polemic than usual; it was also designed not only to annoy the Chinese but also the Americans.

The British reply, which had been circulated in NATO, took account of the following considerations. The previous year's exchanges had brought no significant progress on any of the possible measures which had been discussed with the Soviets; Mr. Butler thought they must now realise that the West was not prepared to pay the sort of price for further limited agreements that they had been asking, namely, an enhancement of the status of the East German régime, the shelving of the multilateral nuclear force, the denuclearisation of Germany and the reduction of conventional forces in Europe. Nevertheless, if Mr. Khrushchev was not ready to make some of the necessary concessions now, he might be led to do this later on, and therefore the dialogue could be maintained, provided that the absolute necessity of maintaining the balance of strength and the position of the West was borne in mind.

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However, a constructive line was needed from the West, particularly for the sake of public opinion. It could be assumed that the Russians were ready to consider realistically the possibility of measures to reduce the risk of war; but these measures must be made effective. The British Government did not wish to see another Kellogg Pact, consisting of pious aspirations with no machinery to carry them out, nor did they consider that territorial disputes only should be singled out for action; the aim must also be to prevent intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries, by infiltration, subversion or other means.

The British answer to Mr. Krushev's message would also cover situations like Berlin, where the Russians aimed to damage the Western position without the use of force, and special reference would be made thereto. What was wanted was recognition by the Soviets that Western rights and the rights of the West Berliners could not be threatened.

Mr. Butler could agree with Mr. Schroeder's five main points. He thought that, of the peripheral subjects, observation posts was the one on which there was most likelihood of making progress, but the Russians were making conditions which might render this difficult.

Mr. Butler had also noted Mr. Schroeder's remarks concerning the agreement on non-dissemination of nuclear weapons; here progress was highly desirable.

Another field where contact could be maintained with the Russians was the Geneva Disarmament Conference. No immediate results could be expected here, and if Mr. Butler attended the Conference, he would not do so for any dramatic reasons. The American President had made a statement for release at the Conference with which the British Government were in general agreement. The Russians would doubtless make as much as possible of their proposal on the territorial disputes and their revised version of a plan for the retention of a minimum nuclear deterrent until the third stage of disarmament, put forward by Mr. Gromyko in the United Nations General Assembly. Mr. Butler's own view was that, at Geneva, working groups should make a serious technical study of the practical problems involved in particular proposals in the disarmament field, as there was still a good deal of work to be done on this subject. His Government would like to see the Conference make a renewed effort to achieve progress towards comprehensive disarmament, and this business-like approach to its work, which the British would probably suggest in the near future, could be the most sensible way of handling the matter.

/Mr. Butler ...

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Mr. Butler wished to stress the calm and careful view he was taking of East/West relations. Whilst aware that immediate progress was difficult, he was convinced that contact should be maintained on the previously mentioned conditions. He had little to add to Mr. Schroeder's remarks concerning the peripheral subjects. He had been in Berlin at the time of the Christmas passes discussion, and though he recognised that there had been a humanitarian advantage in the agreement, he agreed with the West German Government that such moves must be watched to ensure that they did not conceal subtle campaigns to confirm the division of Germany and undermine the Western position.

But the major problems of the future of Berlin, the ultimate unification of Germany and the future of the German boundaries must be kept in mind. The initiative must come from the Federal Government, but the British Government would always be ready to help with any such initiatives on the understanding that they did not undermine or alter the balance of strength as between East and West. This offer of British collaboration was made without any particular plan in view; indeed, it seemed too early to foresee anything which was likely to meet with success in negotiations.

Mr. Butler cited four factors which he felt might eventually lead the Russians to reappraise their interests in Central Europe: the unity and strength of the West, the strains on the Soviet economy, the centrifugal tendencies in the satellites and finally the dispute with China. In connection with the third, he congratulated Mr. Schroeder on the diplomatic initiative he had taken. No action would however be started by the British Government without the help of its allies, who would be kept fully informed of any contacts.

In conclusion, Mr. Butler stressed again the overriding importance of preserving the unity, strength and vital interests of the Western Alliance.

M. SARAGAT had listened with great interest to the statements of Mr. Schroeder and the Chairman, with which he was in general agreement. Regarding the general problem of the Soviet Union's attitude towards the West, his Government considered this to be the result of a lasting, not a transitory, policy, dictated by strategic necessities: the Russians realised that war could only be total and completely destructive. Economic difficulties in the Soviet bloc played a real part, as did the dispute with China, but this was not a determining factor. The Soviets seemed to wish to appear to the non-committed countries as the champions of peace; there seemed to be no tendency to veer towards the Chinese position.

/M. Saragat ...

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So far as the peripheral subjects were concerned, Mr. Luns agreed that explorations should continue, but shared the cautious view taken by Mr. Butler concerning the Geneva Conference.

He agreed with previous speakers that the best guarantee lay in the strength of the West. Whilst there might be signs that in the long term there could be a possibility of a détente, Mr. Luns shared Mr. Schroeder's view of present possibilities.

M. COUVE de MURVILLE had little to add to the preceding declarations. He agreed with their analysis of the situation in the Soviet Union, of which the most striking features were the fragmentation of the Communist bloc, the difficult economic situation particularly in agriculture, and the heavy financial burden carried by the State, any increase of which must be avoided. All these were bound to have consequences for the West.

The specific problems already referred to had been Berlin, disarmament, and the peripheral subjects.

: Regarding Berlin, M. Couve de Murville observed
: that as the Federal Government were mainly concerned, it
: was normal to accept their attitude on this problem as
: decisive. The French Government were guided by this
: consideration. This was a question of humanitarian
: importance, involving as it did the division of two parts of
: one people, but there were also important political considera-
: tions. The danger was that certain humanitarian decisions
: might have political repercussions, perpetuating the division
: of Berlin by the wall and bringing legal recognition to the
: Pankow Government, as desired by the Soviets.

As regards disarmament and the resumed Geneva Conference, M. Couve de Murville considered that important factors were the exhausting effect of Russia's enormous military costs and also a certain weariness in the United States showing itself, perhaps unconsciously, in, for instance, the American proposals at the Disarmament Conference. It meant in effect that both sides were seeking to freeze the situation, or at least to avoid any stepping-up of the arms race.

So far as the peripheral questions were concerned, the French Government had no very strong views beyond the necessity of ensuring that essential positions were not affected. Regarding observation posts in particular, the French Government had always had doubts as to their military value; nor did the NATO military authorities appear to have very clear ideas on the subject. As regards the political aspects, however, the situation was different. France felt strongly that these proposals should not lead to neutrality in Central Europe and Germany; this was of direct concern for the security of France, and indeed for that of other Western countries.

/M. FAYAT ...

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