CABINET 78 (50)

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Wednesday, 29th November, 1950, at 10 a.m.

Present:
The Right Hon. C. R. ATTLEE, M.P., Prime Minister (in the Chair)
The Right Hon. HERBERT MORRISON, M.P., Lord President of the Council.
The Right Hon. H. T. N. GAITSKELL, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer.
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT ADDISON, Lord Privy Seal.
The Right Hon. J. CHUTER EDE, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department.
The Right Hon. G. A. ISAACS, M.P., Minister of Labour and National Service.
The Right Hon. T. WILLIAMS, M.P., Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.
The Right Hon. J. H. WILSON, M.P., President of the Board of Trade.
The Right Hon. HECTOR McNEL, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland.
The Right Hon. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.
The Right Hon. HUGH DALTON, M.P., Minister of Town and Country Planning.
The Right Hon. VISCOUNT JOWITT, Lord Chancellor.
The Right Hon. E. SHINWELL, M.P., Minister of Defence.
The Right Hon. ANEURIN BEVAN, M.P., Minister of Health.
The Right Hon. GEORGE TOMLINSON, M.P., Minister of Education.
The Right Hon. JAMES GRIFFITHS, M.P., Secretary of State for the Colonies.
The Right Hon. P. C. GORDON-WALKER, M.P., Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations.

Secretariat:
Sir NORMAN BROOK.
Mr. A. JOHNSTON.
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Soviet Proposal for Meeting of Council of Foreign Ministers.
1. The Cabinet were informed that on the previous day General MacArthur had reported to the United Nations that organised Chinese forces of an aggregate strength of over 200,000 men were arrayed against the United Nations forces in Korea, which "now faced an entirely new war." This situation, he had added, posed issues which were beyond the authority of his military command and called for a political solution. In the Security Council the United States representative had denounced the Chinese action as open aggression; and the representative of the Chinese People's Government had replied with an intransigent attack upon American imperialism. From the latest messages from His Majesty's representatives in Washington and New York it appeared that the intervention of these Chinese troops in Korea had not been provoked by the latest movements of the United Nations forces, and went beyond anything necessary for the limited purpose of protecting the hydro-electric installations or the frontier zone. It seemed clear that the Chinese had mounted a major offensive, with a large body of organised troops, with the aim of destroying the United Nations forces in Korea. His Majesty's Ambassador at Washington had also reported that the State Department were of opinion that a charge of aggression must now be brought, in the Security Council, against the Chinese Communist Government.

The Foreign Secretary said that, on receipt of these reports, he had at once communicated with the United States Government. He had been apprehensive that American military opinion might favour some precipitate action: in particular, he had been concerned lest General MacArthur should press his previous request for authority to launch air attacks on military targets beyond the Manchurian frontier. In reply to his enquiries he had that morning received a personal message from the United States Secretary of State containing assurances which were satisfactory so far as they went. Mr. Acheson had assured him that he would continue to consult closely with the United Kingdom Government and to bear in mind the special interest of those nations which had contributed to the United Nations forces in Korea. He had also said that the United States Government intended to handle the situation through the United Nations and not unilaterally. Their purpose would remain the same, namely, to resist aggression, to localise the area of hostilities and to settle the Korean problem on a satisfactory United Nations basis in such a way as to avoid committing large United Nations forces indefinitely in these operations. The Foreign Secretary said that he endorsed these purposes. Though Chinese aggression must be resisted, he would strongly deprecate any move to carry hostilities into Manchuria. If we had to fight the Chinese, it was much better, from both the political and the military point of view, that we should do so in North Korea.

The Foreign Secretary said that his conclusion was that, although the situation was serious, it was not out of hand. But these developments in Korea called for even greater vigilance in Europe; and the Cabinet should be alive to the risk that Allied preoccupation with the Far East might provide opportunities for those who were anxious to make trouble in Austria and Berlin.

The Prime Minister said that it was of the first importance that the United Nations should not be trapped into diverting a disproportionate effort to the Far East. Their operations in Korea had been important as a symbol of their resistance to aggression; but Korea was not in itself of any strategic importance to the democracies and it must not be allowed to draw more of their military resources away from Europe and the Middle East. General MacArthur had been over-optimistic about the course of the campaign; and the check which he had suffered might lead him to exaggerate the strength of this Chinese attack. It was therefore the more important that Governments should avoid any precipitate action at the present stage.
In discussion anxiety was expressed about the potential dangers of the Korean situation, and the Cabinet were informed that there was a good deal of uneasiness among Government supporters which might be reflected in the foreign affairs debate in the House of Commons which was to open that afternoon. The Cabinet's discussion turned mainly on the following points:

(a) Public opinion in this country was distrustful of General MacArthur's intentions. For some time past he seemed to have been anxious to obtain authority to launch air attacks beyond the Manchurian frontier; and there was a grave danger that in present circumstances he might take some action which would involve the United Nations forces in full-scale hostilities against China. The United States Government seemed unable to exercise close control over him, and the other Governments which had contributed contingents to the United Nations forces in Korea had no effective means of influencing his conduct of the military operations. The United Kingdom proposal for the creation of a de-militarised zone in North Korea had not been favourably received by the United States Government; and there seemed little doubt that this was due to the fact that it was inconsistent with military plans already formulated by General MacArthur.

As against this, it was pointed out that General MacArthur had won great credit in this country for the speed with which he had routed the North Korean forces after he had broken out from the perimeter at Pusan; and it should not be hastily assumed that the whole of that credit had been dissipated by the check which he had suffered in the last few days. Governments could not expect to intervene in the day-to-day conduct of military operations; these must be left to the military commander, so long as he kept within the limits of the political directives issued to him. And, on questions of major policy, the United States Government had not failed to consult with the other Governments which had contributed contingents to the United Nations forces in Korea. It was easy to criticise the military commander; but were we prepared to ask the United States Government to relieve General MacArthur of his command?

(b) It would probably be suggested in the debate that the United States were handling the Korean operations as though they were a United States, rather than a United Nations, matter and were not taking sufficient account of the views of the United Kingdom Government and other Governments associated with them. Should we not be adopting a firmer attitude in our dealings with the United States Government over this, and demanding that fuller account should be taken of our views?

In reply it was pointed out that the United States Government had not failed to consult us on issues of major policy; and that, as they were providing the greater part of the forces in Korea, we could not expect any larger voice than we had in the conduct of the military operations. Moreover, it was unreasonable to blame the United States for the situation which had now arisen in Korea. We had fully supported the proposal that the United Nations forces should advance beyond the 38th Parallel, despite India's warning that this would provoke Chinese intervention. We, as well as the Americans, had taken the risk of proceeding on the assumption that the Chinese would not in fact fulfil their threat. Finally, any strong divergence of policy between ourselves and the Americans over the Far East would involve a risk of losing American support in Europe. The ultimate threat to our security came from Russia, and we could not afford to break our united front with the United States against our main potential enemy.

(c) It was disquieting that the United States Government should be thinking of bringing forward a resolution in the Security Council charging the Chinese with open aggression in Korea. This might involve full-scale military operations by United Nations forces against China. Such operations would involve us in a long-term commitment in the Far East, which would draw off large forces urgently required for defence against Communist threats in other theatres. Europe and
the Middle East would then be exposed to grave danger. Moreover, there was some reason to fear that if the United Nations launched air attacks beyond the Manchurian frontier, Soviet aircraft would be used in support of the Chinese forces; and this might well precipitate a major war. In these circumstances it was suggested that we should at once make it clear to the United States Government that, although we would be prepared to resist the Chinese offensive in Korea, we should not be willing to agree that United Nations forces should operate beyond the Manchurian frontier either on land or in the air. Our policy should continue to be based on the principle that we had no hostile intentions against China.

On the other hand it was argued that in the last resort it would be difficult to decline to support a United States resolution condemning Chinese aggression. If we were to withdraw our support for United States strategy in the Far East, the United States Government would be less willing to continue their policy of supporting the defence of Western Europe; and, without their full assistance in Europe, we had little chance of withstanding a Russian aggression there. The wisest course would probably be to continue to resist the Chinese forces in Korea, but to seek to limit hostilities to Korea and refrain from any attacks beyond the Manchurian frontier. In that event there was perhaps some prospect that fighting in Korea would gradually come to an end if, as seemed likely, China's intervention was based mainly on considerations of self-defence and did not form part of Russia's world strategy.

(a) Unless the military operations could be limited in this way, it was difficult to see how a long-term solution could be found. Negotiations must be undertaken with the Chinese People's Government at some stage. Was it not time to exchange views with the United States Government about a long-term settlement with China?

(e) One of the main objectives of Russian policy was to provoke divergences of policy between the United Kingdom and United States. We should be playing into Russian hands if we allowed this adverse turn of events in Korea to be a cause of ill-feeling between ourselves and the Americans. We could not afford to lose America's support in Europe; and on that account we must be prepared, if necessary, to accept American leadership in the Far East.

The Cabinet—

Invited the Foreign Secretary to consider, in the light of their discussion, what representations he should make to the United States Government regarding the conduct of the discussions in the Security Council on China's intervention in Korea.

2. *The Foreign Secretary* informed the Cabinet of the statement which he was proposing to make, in the debate on foreign affairs in the House of Commons later that day, about the Soviet proposal for an early meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers.

In discussion the view was expressed that the anxieties of Government supporters about the international situation would be increased if the Government gave the impression that they were adopting a negative attitude towards this proposal of the Soviet Government. The Foreign Secretary would be able to say that arrangements had now been made for officials representing the Foreign Ministers of the United Kingdom, the United States and France to meet in London during the following week to consider what further reply should be sent to the Soviet proposal. As, however, some weeks had already passed since that proposal was put forward, it was desirable that the Foreign Secretary should explain that this interval had been occupied by necessary consultations with the other two Governments. It would also be useful if he could stress the readiness of the United Kingdom Government to seek a settlement of outstanding world problems by negotiation, and make it clear that
the Government, while they were unable to agree that the Council of Foreign Ministers should meet on the basis solely of the Prague communique, would be prepared to join in Four-Power discussions on the basis of a more comprehensive agenda.

The Foreign Secretary said that, while he was anxious to allay the anxieties of Government supporters, he must avoid using language which would alarm the United States Government, who were at present disposed to take a somewhat stiffer line in replying to the Soviet proposal for a Four-Power meeting. He could, however, in his speech that afternoon, go some way to meet the points which had been made in the discussion.

The Cabinet—

Invited the Foreign Secretary to take note of the views expressed in their discussion when referring, in his speech in the House of Commons that afternoon, to the Soviet proposal for a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers.

Cabinet Office, S.W. 1,
29th November, 1950.