

C(67) 116

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CABINET

DEFENCE WITHDRAWALSMemorandum by the Lord President of the Council

I recognise that the plans for much more drastic and rapid withdrawal from the Far East and Middle East worked out by the Defence Secretary go a long way to meet the demands of those of us who felt that the conclusions of the first Defence Review were inadequate, and left us with worldwide commitments far beyond our economic strength. Nevertheless there are three important aspects of the new plans where, even at this late hour, further revision seems to me essential.

2. The most striking feature of the timetable of withdrawal is its prolongation over a period of 8-10 years. I can see the advantages of this leisurely phasing at this stage when the project is being discussed with our allies. A prolonged timetable has obvious attractions particularly to the Governments whose economies will be chiefly affected. In terms of negotiations it is obviously easier to break them in gently to the idea of our going. But when we turn our attention from the negotiations to the actual withdrawal the disadvantages of this leisurely phasing loom large. For the British Government it involves the need to maintain the posture of withdrawal and of slow post-imperialist decline over nearly a decade. For our allies it means a decade of uncertainty when Britain will be announcing the next cut-back of her commitments. I have little doubt that whatever phasing we work out now and irrespective of whether we announce it or not, the plan of withdrawal will be knocked sideways long before the process is over.

3. Nevertheless we are sometimes advised that our wisest course is to sell to our allies in our public statement the project of a lengthy withdrawal while tacitly accepting as the basis for our own actions the likelihood that we shall actually get out faster.

4. I find this line of argument both dangerous and unconvincing. Although it is less than three years since we came to office we are already in the middle of the second drastic revision of defence plans. Each fresh revision widens of course the credibility gap. It is surely unwise to try to allay our allies' anxieties about our intentions by committing ourselves to revised plans that will shortly require yet another revision.

Middle East

5. I would recommend a rather different treatment of the Middle and of the Far East. In the former area the case for cutting our military commitments as soon as possible has been greatly strengthened by recent events. In the Arab world a British military presence is an embarrassment to our friends and a provocation to our enemies and does not seem to strengthen our own hands in negotiations. I believe that we should now decide to opt out of CENTO and to cancel our treaty obligations in the Persian Gulf as soon as this can be done without repercussions.

6. I recognise of course that as long as we remain in the Far East the Cyprus bases will be of special technical importance. Nevertheless I would urge that here too as in Malta we should plan for the removal of the British military presence as soon as possible.

Far East

7. I accept that in the Far East the position of Hong Kong is unique and that in Singapore there are strong social and political arguments for a withdrawal carefully calculated to maintain political stability. Nevertheless I would like to see the Cabinet insist on a study of the practicability of a revised timetable with envisages complete evacuation of the mainland within five years.

The Far Eastern British military presence

8. In the paper presented to Cabinet by the Secretary of State for Defence (C(67) 117) the continued British military presence in the Far East has been reduced, after we leave the mainland, to a capability. This notable advance towards realism will however be reversed if under pressure from our allies the actual capability we maintained is redefined as a British presence in Australia. It is difficult to suppose that after nearly ten years of steadily declining military strength in the area a British military presence would be credible either to our allies or to our enemies. In fact it would be a residual delusion of grandeur with which we would delude only ourselves. It would surely be better to eradicate it now once and for all from our plans.

Economic Aid

9. The plans presented by the Secretary of State include a formidable commitment to provide economic aid over a very long period on a scale sufficient to make up the economic damage caused by our departure. The more leisurely the phasing of our withdrawal the easier it will be for the Governments affected to extract the price they want for our going. It seems to me essential that in our negotiations we should be careful to avoid even the implicit assumption that the scale of our aid must be sufficient to cover the damage our departure causes and that the phasing of the withdrawal should be determined by the economic interests of the areas affected. Instead of ~~prolonging~~ the withdrawal in order to appease our allies, I should prefer us to insist on a period shorter than they deem tolerable, accepting in exchange a somewhat higher scale of economic aid. The shorter the period the more generous the aid; the more leisurely the withdrawal the more drastic the reduction of it.

R. H. S. C.

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