CABINET

RECOGNITION OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Communist Government of the People's Republic of China, which was set up on 1st October, 1949, has expressed a desire to enter into diplomatic relations with foreign Powers. The Soviet Union and satellite Powers have already accorded de jure recognition. We shall have to make up our minds in due course whether or not to recognise the Communist Government as the de jure Government of China, but before we do so we are committed to consultation with other Commonwealth countries, with the United States and with other friendly Powers. Since our interests in China are very much greater than those of the other Powers, we should not necessarily feel bound by the views of other Powers, but it is obviously desirable to obtain the largest measure of agreement possible and in particular the agreement of other Commonwealth countries.

2. The question of recognition is to some extent bound up with the complaint to the United Nations Assembly of the Nationalist Government of China. This item is on the agenda of the Political Committee, and the attitude of the Powers in that Committee will necessarily have some bearing on their attitude towards the Communist Government. I set out in the following paragraphs the considerations which I think should govern our own attitude towards these two related questions.

I.—RECOGNITION

Argument

3. The Nationalist Government were our former allies in the war and since the war they have been a useful friend in the United Nations. Today, however, they are no longer representative of anything but their ruling clique and their control over the remaining metropolitan territories after the fall of Canton is tenuous. British interests can reap no advantage from continued recognition of this shadowy Government, since they lie almost entirely within Communist control. In the United Nations Organisation the continued recognition of the Nationalist Government offers the temporary advantage of a vote which in the past has usually been cast in our favour, whereas a Communist vote is likely to be cast against us. But this is hardly an advantage which can be maintained indefinitely.

4. For the time being the Communist Government of the People's Republic of China is the only alternative. The Communists are now the rulers of most of China. The fall of Canton has brought them to the Hong Kong frontier. It would be a mistake to disregard the fact that they are, on their own statements, orthodox Marxist-Leninists who openly declare their strong partiality for the Soviet Union and its methods. How long they will last, how "orthodox" their methods will be and how strong their leadership will prove is yet to be seen. They have trade to offer and we have an immovable stake in their territory which can only be maintained by trade. Too long delay in according them recognition cannot fail to make them ill-disposed towards us. We may thereby gratuitously vitiate our future relations. Similarly, delay will increase the existing tendency.
of the Communist Government to look to the Soviet Union, and may induce the feeling that they can tighten their belts and do without Western economic assistance. A considerable number of Russian technicians have already arrived in North China and it may be expected that the Soviet Union will take full advantage of the fact that they are first in the field. It is possible that in due course friction may develop between the Russians and the Chinese, but we cannot take advantage of this unless we are in relations with the Communist Government.

5. As regards our own trading interests, we have advocated the policy of keeping a foot in the door. If this policy is to bear fruit (and British firms are remitting sterling from London to the tune of £360,000 a month for maintenance) it can only be done by according full and early recognition. On political as well as practical grounds we should therefore decide to recognise the new régime.

6. I am advised by the Legal Adviser of the Foreign Office that the recognition of the Chinese Communist Government as the de jure Government of China in the present circumstances cannot be said to be contrary to the principles and practice of international law, having regard to the proportion of Chinese territory controlled by the Communist Government, the firmness of its control there on the one hand and the small proportion of Chinese territory held by the Nationalists and the tenuous nature of Nationalist control, where it exists, on the other hand. The best writer on recognition in international law says: "So long as the revolution has not been fully successful, and so long as the lawful Government, however adversely affected by the fortunes of the civil war, remains within national territory and asserts its authority, it is presumed to represent the State as a whole... So long as the lawful Government offers resistance which is not ostensibly hopeless or purely nominal, the de jure recognition of the Revolutionary Party as a Government constitutes premature recognition which the lawful Government is entitled to regard as an act of intervention contrary to international law."

7. I consider that it can be asserted that the resistance of the Nationalist Government in China is now ostensibly hopeless, and its control over any portion of Chinese territory on the mainland hardly more than nominal, and on this political appreciation of the facts of the situation my Legal Adviser considers de jure recognition of the Communist Government to be legally justifiable.

8. Our present position in regard to recognition is that His Majesty's Consul-General in Peking has made a communication in the following terms to the Chinese Communist Government:

"His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom are carefully studying the situation resulting from the formation of the Central People's Government. Friendly and mutually advantageous relations, both commercial and political, have existed between Britain and China for many generations. It is hoped that these will continue in the future. His Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom therefore suggest that pending completion of their study of the situation, informal relations should be established between His Majesty's Consular Officers and the appropriate authorities in the territory under the control of the Central People's Government for the greater convenience of both Governments and promotion of trade between the two countries."

I am advised that this message can be interpreted as according recognition to the Communist Government as the de facto Government of the territories which they control, but no reply has been received from the Communist Government and our original assumption that the Communists would be satisfied with nothing less than de jure recognition appears to be correct. In my speech to the United Nations Assembly on 26th September I stated that China had entered into certain international obligations which we feel must be honoured, and that a wise approach to the handling of these problems will be in the interest of the whole world. There has been no further public indication of our attitude towards the question of recognition.

Attitude of other Powers

9. India and Australia have made communications to the Chinese Communist Government similar in nature to that quoted above, and Portugal and Denmark have instructed their representatives to do the same.
10. It is clear from the talks which I had in Washington with Mr. Acheson and M. Schuman that the United States are not in favour of early de jure recognition and that France, because of her position in Indo-China, is afraid of the consequences of such recognition. The attitude of the State Department is influenced by the attacks in Congress upon its China policy. In an effort to meet these attacks the State Department published on 30th July a voluminous White Paper on China which, however, failed to stifle the critics and indeed provided them with further ammunition. In the circumstances it must be recognised that the State Department will be influenced in its attitude more by internal American politics than by the realities of the situation in China. The French are influenced by the views of their High Commissioner in Indo-China, who appears to believe that de jure recognition of the Communist Government will endanger the constitutional structure which has recently been set up under the Emperor Bao Dai. This view is not shared by the French Ambassador in China, but it is nevertheless likely to influence the French Government in the direction of deferring de jure recognition.

11. Of the other foreign Powers with whom we have been in consultation, the Dutch may conceivably hesitate to recognise the Chinese Communist Government in view of the Indonesian situation, though this is not certain. The other European Powers may be expected to follow our lead.

12. Of the other Commonwealth Powers, Canada may be reluctant to take a line unpalatable to the United States. Her interests in China are not extensive, and she may feel that in the circumstances she can afford to be out of step with the rest of the Commonwealth. Australia and India are believed to be in favour of early recognition. The other members of the Commonwealth have no direct representation in China, but will probably keep in line with the United Kingdom.

13. It will be necessary to consult both with other Commonwealth countries and other friendly foreign Powers before reaching a decision to recognise the Chinese Communist Government. Other Commonwealth Governments might be invited to instruct their High Commissioners in London to confer with me, thus affording evidence of the principle of Commonwealth consultation.

II.—CHINESE NATIONALIST MOTION IN UNITED NATIONS ASSEMBLY

14. There is the related question of the Nationalist Government's complaint to the United Nations Assembly. They have secured time in the First Committee to invite attention to the infringements by the Soviet Union of the terms and spirit of the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship of 1945. The question may come up for debate about mid-November. It is extremely doubtful if the Chinese can make a case against the U.S.S.R., and the move can only have for object a vain and belated attempt to make political capital. We have told the Chinese that we would consider supporting their case if they can make one. The United States Government were initially rather more forthcoming, but have since realised the weakness of their position. Their White Paper on China has unfortunately provided abundant material to show the extent of American intervention in China and the rottenness and corruption which have led to the defeat of the Nationalist Government and to the assumption of power by the Communists. The State Department now realise that the Soviet Union is likely to take full advantage of the opportunity thus provided, and it may be expected that there will be a violent attack upon the status of the Nationalist Government and its claim to represent China in the United Nations Organisation.

15. If we hold the views outlined in Section I of this paper and in consequence propose eventually to recognise the Communist Government, it follows that we should no longer support in any degree this Chinese resolution. Anything we say, however anodyne, can hardly fail to be embarrassing vis-a-vis the new régime, while our support of the Nationalist Government could not fail to make us ridiculous in the face of the available evidence. Our best course would therefore seem to be to instruct the United Kingdom representative to take no part whatever in the debate and to abstain from voting. We should explain our intentions and our reasons to Commonwealth Governments and other friendly Powers in advance.
III.—Timing of Recognition

16. It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that we cannot take a decision as to the date when *de jure* recognition should be accorded to the Chinese Communist Government until we have consulted with other Powers. We have also to consider the impact of recognition upon United Kingdom interests in the Far East. There is to be a conference at Singapore from 2nd–4th November under the chairmanship of Mr. Malcolm MacDonald, which will be attended by all His Majesty's Representatives in the Far East, including His Majesty's Ambassador to China, and also by the three Far Eastern Commanders-in-Chief. This will afford a suitable opportunity to discuss the implications of recognition, and it is desirable therefore to await the outcome of this conference before reaching a decision.

Recommendations

17. I invite my colleagues to agree that—

(1) I should consult with the United States and other friendly Powers on the basis of this paper;

(2) our views be communicated to other Commonwealth Governments and that they be invited to instruct their High Commissioners in London to confer with me on the question of recognition;

(3) no decision as to the date of recognition be taken until the results of these consultations are known and until a report is received on the outcome of the Singapore conference.

E. B.

*Foreign Office, S.W. 1,*  
*24th October, 1949.*