

Extract from minutes of the 423rd meeting of the WEU Council held at ministerial level (London, 1 July 1971)

Caption: At the 423rd meeting of the Council of Western European Union (WEU), held at ministerial level on 1 July 1971 in London and chaired by the British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, the delegations discuss the development of East–West relations. On the question of mutual balanced force reductions in Central Europe, Jean de Lipkowski, State Secretary to the French Foreign Minister, gives a detailed explanation of the reasons why France is opposed to such a plan. As long as détente in Europe has not been consolidated, the French Government sees the demilitarisation of a zone between East and West as a potential source of conflict. It believes that such an enterprise would inevitably lead to a reduction in the military potential of the European states, while the forces of the USSR and the United States would simply be moved from one place to another, thereby widening the gap between Europe and the two superpowers and lessening Europe’s chances of becoming truly independent one day. Sir Alec Douglas-Home thinks that it would be wise for the Western countries to probe Soviet intentions before establishing their position. But he notes that French policy on this question has differed from that of the rest of the allies for some time.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of 423th meeting of WEU Council held at ministerial level on 1st July 1971 in London. 2. East-West relations. CR (71) 14. pp. 45-48; 55-61. 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: 1971, 01/02/1971-30/03/1974. File 132.15. Volume 4/7.

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EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF 923 MEETING
OF W.E.U. COUNCIL HELD ON AT MINISTERIAL
LEVEL ON 1st July 1971 IN LONDON

FILE No.

CR (71) 114

Chairman: Sir A. Douglas-Home

II POLITICAL CONSULTATION

2. East-West relations

- a) Bilateral contacts with eastern countries
- b) Mutual balanced force reductions

Mr. MOERSCH said he would first briefly review German-Soviet relations and the conclusions to be drawn from the Congress of the Socialist Unity Party (S.E.D.) in East Berlin. He would also deal with matters arising from changes in the G.D.R. following the departure of Ulbricht.

Over the last few weeks, the policy of the Federal Republic of Germany towards the East had been determined, first, by the ministerial meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Lisbon and, secondly, by the S.E.D. Congress in East Berlin, during which Brezhnev had made a speech which merited close attention.

The ministerial meeting of NATO had confirmed that the Alliance would continue to support the efforts of the Federal Republic of Germany to reduce tension. The speech made by the leader of the Soviet Communist Party in East Berlin on 16th June had confirmed that the Federal Government's Ostpolitik was understood in the East and had produced a response. Admittedly, this policy was still at an interim stage. Decisive progress would not be possible until the problem of Berlin had been satisfactorily resolved. Nevertheless, it could be claimed that the first material results had been achieved over the past twelve months. Changes had taken place particularly in the nature of the collaboration, that is in the climate of relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the U.S.S.R. and the east European states.

The German Government thought that Brezhnev's speech was important for three reasons, namely, its form, its substance and, particularly, the place where it had been made. The Government of the Federal Republic were well aware that Brezhnev had repeated the U.S.S.R.'s well-known fundamental views regarding the capitalist world. It was, however, significant that, in a speech made in East Berlin itself, Brezhnev had abandoned polemical attacks on the Federal Republic of Germany, even if he had been unable to refrain from aiming, as it were in parenthesis, a number of critical remarks at certain political circles in the Federal Republic.

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The meeting adjourned for lunch at 1.15 p.m. and resumed at 3 p.m., with Sir Alec in the Chair.

Since the French Foreign Minister had reported at the Lisbon meeting on the results of his visit to Moscow from 4th to 7th May last, M. de LIPKOWSKI would merely report that M. Schumann had, on that occasion, gained a more optimistic impression of the Russians' readiness to conclude a satisfactory arrangement on Berlin. Indeed, Mr. Gromyko had not rejected the idea of reaffirming the responsibility of the Four Powers for access to the city, and had acknowledged that the document delivered by Mr. Abrassimov on 26th March was, therefore, negotiable. Since then, the progress of the Four-Power talks and the statements made by Mr. Brezhnev in Berlin during the S.E.D. Congress had confirmed the French view that there was some softening of the Soviet position.

Referring next to the contacts France had had with the Soviet Union at diplomatic-mission level since the Lisbon meeting, M. de Lipkowski commented as follows:

These contacts had shown that the Soviets apparently wanted to go ahead with both the Conference on European Security and the other disarmament proposals included in Mr. Brezhnev's peace plan. While rejecting the continued insistence on prior settlement of the Berlin question, they had stressed "the quite realistic nature of the Lisbon Communiqué" and noted that "it was less bad than documents of the same nature in the past". In their view, it contained less reservations and the West expressed themselves less inflexibly than previously.

At any rate, the U.S.S.R. had, on these occasions, shown that it did not want preparation of the Conference on European Security to get bogged down.

With regard to the reduction of forces, Mr. Gromyko had put forward a number of ideas. On the point of substance, he said these negotiations should not be thought of as between blocs; indeed, this was an essentially political problem arising out of the Second World War and the Allies' victory. He had stressed that, contrary to the French view, the political and military aspects were indissolubly linked and could not be treated as cause and effect. In any case, he had emphasised how much a solution for the problem of force reductions would help in solving other issues connected with the Conference on European Security.

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As to procedure, he had commented that the reduction of forces should not be discussed within the framework of the European Conference but should preferably be dealt with elsewhere, for example, by a body set up by the Conference and including all interested states. As to whether the negotiations would take place after or before the Conference, Mr. Gromyko had said he was ready to consider any formula and thought discussions could start before the Conference if other interested parties were in favour.

From all these conversations, the French Government had gained the impression that there was a measure of vacillation and a great deal of uncertainty in the position of the Russians, who spoke in turn of reductions in foreign and national forces, of discussions outside the Conference or within a body to be set up by that Conference, of exchanges of view in the near future or, on the contrary, of holding them after the Conference. All this was rather contradictory. The Russian attitude might reflect uncertainty as to how to deal with the problem or it might be intended to force the western countries to take initiatives and to show their hand, leaving the Soviet Union free to adapt its tactics to the situation as it developed.

With regard to the meeting of the five nuclear powers, the Soviet Ambassador to Paris had, on 15th June, handed the President of the Republic the text of a statement by his Government which had also been communicated to the other three countries concerned. The French Government had welcomed this step since the idea of such a conference was in any case of French origin.

The French Prime Minister had visited Yugoslavia from 22nd to 24th April. As the positions of that country were well known, M. de Lipkowski simply mentioned that the Yugoslavs had clearly emphasised the importance they continued to attach to their economic independence which was the basis of their political independence. They had not hidden the size of the problems which they were trying to solve through constitutional reform or of the effect on these problems of their still difficult relations with Moscow and its allies.

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M. de Lipkowski had himself been to Warsaw in May and had a series of political talks. It had seemed to him that, despite the change in leadership, the aims of the Polish Government's foreign policy had not altered. Everyone he had met had insisted on the need for a rapid conclusion to the Berlin negotiations and for the preparation of the Security Conference. With regard to this Conference, they had again taken up the Polish idea, which was, in fact, a fairly old one, of a permanent European body, with three commissions which would be responsible for political relations, economic co-operation and disarmament respectively. They had stated that this was, however, only a plan and was still being considered within the Warsaw Pact. Obviously what interested the Poles was the ratification of the German-Polish Treaty. They fully realised that there was a link, at any rate of fact, between this ratification and the Berlin question, but also that they obviously had no means of exerting any influence in the matter.

As to the replacement of Mr. Ulbricht, Mr. Moersch had wondered whether this was for health or political reasons and had concluded that it was probably a result of the two combined. M. de Lipkowski said that from the moment he arrived in Warsaw, about a fortnight before the event, the people he had met had already forecast that it would happen, not for health but for political reasons: undoubtedly, Mr. Ulbricht's loyalty to the U.S.S.R. was absolute but he was becoming a burdensome partner in that he enjoyed, within the socialist camp, the prestige of having been a companion of Lenin; and the Poles had not hidden the fact that his presence had been one of the obstacles to progress in the Berlin negotiations. They had added that his departure would be accompanied by greater flexibility which had indeed subsequently been the case. They saw in Mr. Honecker a man who was completely faithful to Soviet Russia but easier to handle than his predecessor because he did not enjoy the same prestige in the socialist camp; in addition, they thought that his very firm position over the non-reunification of Germany was likely to reassure the Soviets.

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M. de LIPKOWSKI commented that everyone knew where France stood on this matter of a balanced reduction of forces. She had not associated herself with the various positions adopted in 1968 at Reykjavik, later in Rome and then at Lisbon. Her attitude towards reducing forces in central Europe remained unchanged. Whatever effect this move might have on public opinion in the various countries, the French Government felt that it was a bad move both militarily and politically.

Militarily, reducing forces could only work in favour of the Warsaw Pact, even if the latter agreed to make a few concessions on the idea of asymmetry. From the political viewpoint, this reduction was confusing cause and effect, by anticipating a genuine improvement in the political climate through a cut-back in forces; it was wrong, in that it gave a dialogue between military organisations preference over consultations between nations. In any case, such an undertaking could upset the whole basis of European politics. This of course applied, first of all, in the case of defence; it was no doubt desirable that there should one day be a decrease in the military forces deployed in central Europe, but, it must be repeated, these forces were not the reason for the tensions. They were the result of the tension, and had in the past, merely by being there, made it possible to prevent certain crises ending in disaster. So long as détente in Europe had not been consolidated, the greater or less demilitarisation of a zone separating East and West might well, on the contrary, constitute a source of conflict.

It also seemed extremely questionable to try to define a balance between two sides by considering only those parts of their forces that were stationed in one area of their respective territories. The weight these forces carried did not depend only on what they represented in themselves, but most of all on their relationship to other forces on the same side. Thus when the United States had, for example, nuclear superiority over the U.S.S.R.,

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the level of their conventional forces stationed in West Germany had, it must be said, been relatively low. Today, however, in view of the strategic doctrine of the Alliance, and, more important, of the fact that the credibility of an American intervention with strategic weapons was becoming less and less and would be especially weakened if a SALT agreement were signed, it was essential that a significant American presence and large Allied forces, which would gain from being increased even in the event of a reduction in Soviet forces, should be maintained in western Europe.

Moscow, it had been said, was contesting the idea of a balance. This was true, but it was also true that unless one imagined a massive reduction in Russian forces as a whole (and not just those stationed in the satellite countries) it was impossible to arrive at a balance between the two camps in the heart of Europe in the conventional sphere. If, nevertheless, the plan to reduce forces was to be carried through, this could be only at the cost of abandoning the idea of a strategic balance, and in favour of political options.

Reducing forces would inevitably lead to a decrease in, and a freezing of, the military potential of the European states to which it applied, while - and this was the important point - the forces of the U.S.S.R. and the United States would merely be moved from one place to another.

In other words, the gap between the countries of Europe and the super powers would be widened, and there was no hiding this fact; Europe's chances of one day really becoming mistress of her own fate would be diminished. Meanwhile, the forces of the United States and the U.S.S.R. would then become available for other theatres of operations and, in the case of the Russians, for applying pressure on the flanks of the Alliance.

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Thus, despite certain appearances, a reduction of forces was a threat to European independence. It tended, in fact, to settle Europe's fate by allowing an agreement between military organisations - i.e. in practical terms, between the leaders of these organisations - to take the place of attempts to reach a political consensus between the countries of this continent. For western Europe this would mean that an alliance contract was being replaced by a sort of Soviet-American tutelage.

For all these reasons, the question of force reductions called, in the French Government's view at least, for special vigilance.

M. THORN said that, at the recent meeting of the North Atlantic Council, as at the present meeting, there had been much talk of the hopes and anxieties aroused by the idea of a conference on the balanced multilateral reduction of forces. The main arguments against had just been repeated. Often, and now again, such a conference had been criticised on the grounds that there was a danger of its being held between two military blocs. M. Thorn thought this argument must be answered. As was well known, the countries which were members of neither the Warsaw Pact nor the Atlantic Alliance thought the effort of reduction should be borne mainly by the members of these alliances. But none of the countries which, in Lisbon, had favoured such a conference had thought it should be confined to countries belonging to one or other of the military blocs. This was the point that should be stressed; the impression must not be given of wanting a meeting between blocs. But the countries concerned, just as much as the neutrals, were aware that a reduction was essentially a matter for the military alliances and it was normal that preparations and soundings should start at the

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level of these alliances. In M. Thorn's view, all that had been envisaged at Lisbon was a sounding of the Warsaw Pact countries as to their intentions, to see whether there was any chance of holding such a conference, which would not be an inter-bloc meeting but one where all countries would participate and have the same opportunity to express their views. So much for the first criticism.

Next, M. de Lipkowski had drawn attention to certain dangers which might arise from such a reduction of forces with special reference to the question of "asymmetry". The Luxembourg Minister said he largely shared these fears. The concept of asymmetry was often used and abused without full appreciation of its implications. M. Harmel had already commented on how closely linked all the problems were, from one geographical area to another, and that there was no advantage in creating the appearance of security in one area by transferring the military weight to another, whether it were now the Mediterranean or some other zone.

M. de Lipkowski was also right when he said there was some risk, not, in M. Thorn's view, of tutelage, but of a transfer of the military supremacy of the two super powers to some other part of the world, with the other countries playing an even less important role. But was not all this and even the third argument, that of security, which could be seen through M. de Lipkowski's remarks, and those of M. Schumann in Lisbon, likely to strengthen the theory that before taking up a stand on the reduction of forces, the governments should agree amongst themselves within the Alliance, on the minimum guarantees they required for security and the minimum defence aims of Europe. M. Thorn agreed with M. de Lipkowski that it was basically a matter of politics rather than of defence. But now that the European Community was expanding and political co-operation was being talked of, this Ten-Power Europe would need the courage to undertake its own defence and its members would have to discuss amongst themselves what minimum efforts they were prepared to make. It might be that the W.E.U. Council would in the future have a vital role to play in this matter.

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After thanking delegations for their contributions, the CHAIRMAN remarked that the general impression gained by Sir Denis Greenhill, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, who had returned from the Soviet Union only the previous day, on the complex of conferences that was projected, was that the Russians were very imprecise so far. They had not made up their minds at all on either the way or the time-scale in which they wished them to be organised, and so there was a degree of flexibility. For almost as long as any of those present could remember, the policies of western countries had been determined by the increasing strength of the Soviet Union, and it seemed that they were still fundamentally in this dilemma. As democracies, they all wanted détente, but they had to seek it against a background of continuous expansion in Soviet strength such as could be seen in the increasing quality of Soviet weaponry in eastern Europe, in the phenomenal increase of their naval expansion in the Mediterranean during the last two years, and in the acquisition of Soviet-operated airfields on Egyptian soil on a long time-scale.

All this of course ought not to be ignored. In the field of disarmament, even though the Russians were now making a considerable offensive here, the actual situation was that, apart from the Test-ban Treaty and the Non-proliferation Treaty, armaments during these years had been on the increase all the time with the Soviet Union making the running. These were facts of life which had to be faced. So, from Berlin, which after all ought to be the easiest situation in which to lower tension, to disarmament, which was the most complex, one was so far virtually stuck as far as détente was concerned. It was against this background that one had to look at the Soviet Union's approaches on a number of fronts now and at this sort of complex of conferences with which the western Alliance was faced.

These conferences could really be put into two categories: SALT and Berlin. As far as SALT was concerned, it would not yet have an impact on the European members of the western Alliance as the discussions would not get down to the problem of forward air bases. They were more likely to concentrate for a long time on defence against nuclear and inter-continental missiles. The category of conferences revolving around Berlin however, presented a much more difficult tactical problem in the sense of how they should be handled.

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There was first of all the European Security Conference, in which the Russians for some time increased the pace before rather cooling off, and then increasing it again. Then there was the mutual balanced force reductions and, lastly, the new proposal for a reduction of navies.

Sir Alec thought it fair to say, and Sir Denis was convinced of this after his talks in Moscow, that the Russians had really not thought these things through, either in respect of the nature of the conferences which they wanted to stage or the organisation of them. So, to the extent that the Russians were open-minded and flexible, the situation was not discouraging. Personally, Sir Alec felt that the West had been absolutely right so far to place the emphasis in the time-scale of such conferences on Berlin. The machinery for dealing with the problem was already there and an improvement in the lot of the West Berliners in respect of access to the city for example, was not only a civilised request but one that ought to be conceded, since it could not really involve the Russians in any serious loss of face or influence. This, therefore, was something that ought to be pursued and put right in the foreground when considering a programme for these conferences which the Russians required. If agreement could not be reached on this comparatively easy issue it was very difficult to see what value there could be in setting up a European Security Conference for example.

The mutual balanced force reductions problem seemed to present much greater difficulties. As it was originally a NATO proposal, it could be argued that the West should go ahead with it. But M. de Lipkowski had wisely reminded his colleagues that the Soviet forces were significantly stronger than those of the Alliance. They were also nearer to their bases than many of the NATO partners. When the West referred to mutual balanced force reductions they really meant that they must be balanced, but when Sir Denis was talking to the Soviet leaders about this it was very unclear whether they put the same interpretation on this as the western countries. The position

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therefore needed clarification, and this justified the fairly unanimous western view that first of all it was necessary to probe Soviet intentions, which could be done on a bilateral basis, and secondly, to establish an allied position, which was enormously important. Sir Alec did not believe that within the Alliance, although a considerable number of studies had been made, it was known what could be put forward unanimously as a reasonable and safe proposition on mutual balanced force reductions. It seemed right and prudent therefore first to probe the Russian intentions, and then to analyse the position and come forward with conclusions. Sir Alec felt, however, that, while this was the right way to play the hand and gave the West time to assess developments in the Berlin discussions, the more one looked at mutual balanced force reductions, the less attractive they became to the western Alliance.

It was always difficult with the Soviet Union to know whether they were running a propaganda offensive or whether they were really attempting to begin genuine negotiations about détente. The West had to tread very carefully. On the face of it, taking into account the Mansfield amendment connected with the American situation generally, and the meeting of the NATO Council, the Russian approaches looked very much like a propaganda move but this was not necessarily so. There were certain developments, such as the Chinese situation and the consumer demand creating increasing economic strain in the Soviet Union, which could mean that they were at last beginning to negotiate genuinely. This possibility must not be ignored.

Sir Alec recalled that M. Harmel had rightly drawn attention to the potential dangers inherent in a situation whereby the Russians might withdraw forces from one front simply to redeploy them to another, which would be in keeping with their outflanking policies.

M. de Lipkowski in turn had sounded a cautionary note on mutual balanced force reductions, although French policies had differed from those of the rest of the allies on this question for some time.

Concluding, the Chairman thought that to tread very carefully but not to ignore the possibility that the Soviet Union might really mean business was probably the right tactics. This had been a very useful discussion which would repay further study of all that had been said at the meeting.

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