

Extract from minutes of the 354th meeting of the WEU Council held at ministerial level (Rome, 21–22 October 1968)

Caption: At the 354th meeting of the Council of Western European Union (WEU), held at ministerial level on 21 and 22 October 1968 in Rome, the delegations discuss East–West relations and particularly the consequences for Europe of the Soviet military intervention in Czechoslovakia. French State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Jean de Lipkowski strongly condemns Moscow’s actions and the entry of troops from the Warsaw Pact member states into Czechoslovakia during the night of 20 to 21 August 1968. But he notes that, in the interests of Europe and of global peace, the only possible policy remains one of détente. The British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Michael Stewart, calls for a consolidation of Western defence and announces Britain’s intention to improve the quality of its contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of 354th meeting of WEU Council held at ministerial level on 21th and 22th October in Rome. Political Consultation. CR (68) 19. Part I. pp. [s.p.]; 49-53; 6 p. 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: 1966, 01/03/1966-30/11/1970. File 132.15. Volume 2/7.

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EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF 354th MEETING
OF W.E.U. COUNCIL HELD ON AT MINISTERIAL LEVEL
ON 21 + 22 OCTOBER IN ROME

Chairman: M. G. Medici, Minister for Foreign Aff. Italy.

POLITICAL CONSULTATION

East-West relations

State of these relations in the light of the Soviet intervention in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the consequences for Europe of this intervention

Mr. JAHN said that the main event affecting East-West relations had been the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia which had touched off a crisis in relations both between the east European countries, and between Moscow and its four allies and the West. This crisis was continuing. In the east European countries which had been forced to take part in the intervention in Czechoslovakia, there was resentment and perplexity, combined with the feeling that recent events had increased Moscow's domination which was now more pronounced than ever. Of particular interest in this context was the question of relations with Rumania, Jugoslavia and Albania. It was to be expected that the U.S.S.R. would bring additional pressure to bear in the Balkan countries. The threat of fresh crises in this area had, therefore, not lessened and this must be a matter of concern for Europe.

The Soviet intervention had shown that the U.S.S.R. possessed a vast striking force but had, at the same time, revealed an astonishing lack of assurance as regards policy and ideology. The Soviet leaders were unrelentingly opposed to the autonomy of the east European countries and, on that basis, were developing a doctrine that class interests took precedence over national interests. At the same time, however, they were trying to continue their dialogue with the West wherever that might serve their interests and, to that end, were trying to re-establish the atmosphere which they knew they had partly destroyed.

The relations of the Federal Republic of Germany with the East had been seriously affected. The German Government were bound to condemn unreservedly the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the U.S.S.R. and its allies and to call for the withdrawal of the invading forces. Nevertheless, they had not abandoned their efforts to reduce tension because no other policy seemed possible. They had, however, to be careful to avoid dealing with the U.S.S.R. alone, even though that was what Moscow wanted; on the contrary,

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M. de LIPKOWSKI recalled that the French position had been made clear during the early hours of the armed intervention in Czechoslovakia by means of a communiqué issued from the Presidential office on 21st August, and had been explicated on several subsequent occasions, either by the Head of State himself or by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. France had categorically condemned this unjustifiable incursion carried out in defiance of the right of all peoples to self-determination and to the free mastery of their fate. None of the reasons put forward by Soviet Russia to justify their action stood up to close examination. For instance, developments in Czechoslovakia had been planned and carried out along independent lines and it was absolutely wrong to allege that any western power had interfered in her internal affairs with a view to influencing her freely chosen course. The operation launched by the U.S.S.R. during the night of 20th-21st August was thus designed solely to impose hegemony. The principle of socialist solidarity had been falsely invoked as a cover for Moscow's determination to regard eastern Europe as its exclusive zone of influence.

Obviously, a serious blow had been struck by the U.S.S.R. and their four partners at the growing improvement of East-West relations. A new situation had come into being with brutal suddenness through a return to methods that had been thought obsolete; this was a serious matter for the whole world and, of course, especially tragic for the European continent. It was thus only normal that the governments of W.E.U. countries should place the event in the forefront of their considerations as being the major problem among those now facing the West. How should they react? To underestimate the gravity of recent events would be to suggest that they were indifferent, and might well encourage a repetition of such strong-arm methods. As had already been noted, Rumania and Yugoslavia had both felt their security to be threatened following the intervention in Czechoslovakia. France had taken steps to express her concern to those two countries that they should continue to contribute in full independence to the development of harmonious relations in Europe.

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This being the situation, ought it to be allowed to lead to a revival of the old nightmare of the cold war? Such a reaction could only serve to encourage those in all countries who favoured a return to anachronistic and unreasonable methods. Therefore, the only possible course to follow, in the interests of Europe and of world peace, would still seem to be that of détente. It was already obvious at the time of the crisis that this policy was closely in line with the wishes of the immense majority of peoples and their leaders; indeed, the refusal of the Czechoslovaks to accept enslavement was universally recognised, besides which the armed intervention had been condemned by nearly all those countries who had not taken part, including - and this should be stressed - several socialist and communist states.

M. de Lipkowski went on to observe that the improvement of relations with the East was not of course the sole responsibility of the western states. Real progress could only be made if the governments of eastern Europe behaved in a manner consistent with the détente sought by the West. The first essential was of course that the U.S.S.R. which, in the course of the last Franco-Soviet conversations, had upheld the principle of non-intervention should honour it in practice and cease to interfere in the affairs of Czechoslovakia. The French Government had sent a strong appeal to the Soviet Union to this effect. There was no avoiding the fact that their eventual reply would determine the whole future of the policy of détente. France continued to regard this policy as Europe's best, and probably only chance, and the Government were resolved to pursue their efforts towards détente with all the means at their disposal without, however, entertaining any illusions on the difficulties involved, while trusting that their appeal for understanding and co-operation would be heard. All nations and individuals faithful to the European ideals of freedom and solidarity should follow the course of events in the eastern part of the European continent with unswerving vigilance, while the determined efforts of the peoples of eastern Europe to achieve their liberty called for a deeper, closer, more patient and more generous degree of sympathetic understanding than ever before.

/Mr. STEWART ...

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Mr. STEWART said that whatever the motives for the Soviet action in eastern Europe, its nature was clear - it was a concrete illustration of the doctrine that the Soviet Union was entitled to invade neighbouring countries whenever it thought necessary to do so for its own security, or that of the Warsaw Pact as a whole. That would be a sufficiently disquieting doctrine if it were limited to the territories of those countries which the Russians claimed as their own sphere of influence, it was still a denial of the principles on which the United Nations was based. But recent remarks by Mr. Gromyko indicated that they might extend this concept; asked to define what he called the socialist commonwealth, he had said simply that it had no geographical limitations. The adoption by a great power of a principle of action such as this was serious enough, and it was the more alarming when the government concerned was uncertain in its policies and had embarked on a course, the real nature of which it could not predict itself. There would doubtless be a long contest in Czechoslovakia between Soviet ruthlessness and Czech ingenuity in trying to frustrate their occupiers; it was impossible to forecast whether at some point the Soviet Union would proceed to impose an outright military government, indeed they probably did not know themselves, and this added to the serious nature of the situation.

What could the West do? To a large extent, Mr. Stewart agreed with his French colleague that their approach should be primarily European in character, since Europe was the part of the world immediately threatened by these developments. One of their first aims should be to consolidate their defences. The German representative had spoken of an improvement in the quality of his country's contribution to NATO; the United Kingdom considered itself to be under the same obligation. There was a time in the world's history when one could rely on an alliance that was based simply on a promise to come to one's neighbours' assistance in the event of attack but owing to the sophisticated nature of modern warfare such a promise, even when given and carried out in complete good faith, had to be backed up by adequate planning between the allies. The importance of the Alliance was thus underlined by recent events.

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The division of the world into two great blocs created a far from ideal situation, but it was not of Europe's making; immediately after the war it had been hoped that the goodwill, if any, existing between Russia and the West could form the basis of one world - history would show that this outcome was prevented by the policies of the Soviet Union. Although the existence of two great blocs was to be deplored, the situation would be far worse if it consisted of a great and powerful bloc, with an integrated military machine, facing a group of nations disunited, unprepared, and unpolicied.

It was sometimes suggested that if the Europeans were to take further steps to improve their defences, the United States might feel entitled to disengage themselves progressively from Europe. Mr. Stewart believed this to be a complete misreading of American opinion. The United States were far more likely to understand the need to maintain close connections with Europe if it became clear that the latter intended to play its proper part; conversely, they would be more likely to desert a Europe that seemed unprepared to do the best it could for itself.

However, the reaction of the West should not be expressed solely in terms of defence - that would be altogether too negative - it should also be manifested in the field of ideals. In particular, they should continue to rebutt Soviet propaganda against the Federal Republic of Germany, which had taken a significant turn. In Soviet eyes, Germany's real fault was that she was getting on better terms with her eastern neighbours. It was a serious matter when an attempt to improve relations with members of the Warsaw Pact was regarded by the Soviet Union as an offence, and western European countries ought not to lose the propaganda battle over this issue.

All the previous speakers had urged that the aim should continue to be détente. What exactly, asked Mr. Stewart, did this imply? The word assumed different shades of meaning when used by different people and in different contexts. To his way of thinking, it meant that while as a matter of necessity and safety the West should maintain its defences, armed conflict between East and West was not inevitable, for certain things could yet be done to reduce the general danger in the world. It was in

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that spirit that the allies should approach the Soviet Union and her partners and consider what could be accomplished with them, to diminish tension without either putting the stamp of approval on what they had done or altering the grim balance of military power in Europe and throughout the world. And if the word "detente" did not bear that meaning, Mr. Stewart would apologise to his French colleague to whose language the word belonged.

While it was important to work out a balanced policy, they should lose no opportunity of repeating their condemnation of what had happened in Czechoslovakia. The Netherlands representative had expressed disappointment with the reactions of the third world, but it was likely that some time would elapse before the lesson was understood. Many countries had hitherto tended to take a somewhat rosy picture of the Soviet Union. A good many years ago Mr. Stewart, when visiting a newly-independent country, had asked someone long resident there which great power was most popular; he had replied "the Russians, of course". And the reason for this preference? It was because they had never seen a Russian yet! That optimistic view of Soviet intentions had been badly shaken by recent events and it should be the business of the allies to see that they were not forgotten. For the rest, when deciding on the kind of contacts to pursue with the Soviet Union or its allies, western governments should ask themselves whether their approach was to be merely ornamental and capable of interpretation by the Russians as a goodwill gesture, so that the latter might suppose that Czechoslovakia was being forgotten. If so, that approach should be discarded. On the other hand, if something like a trading contact was envisaged, a move which would be to the advantage of both sides, or if it were decided to reactivate the discussions on a balanced disarmament, which would also be in both eastern and western interests, such contacts could only serve to reduce the total amount of danger in the world without tilting the scales against the allies.

Concluding, Mr. Stewart emphasised that the foregoing ideas were merely a selection of those considerations which governed the principles that should guide western policy. Fuller discussion would produce a more satisfactory assessment of the situation, and he wished to underline the importance of pursuing European consultations on the attitude to be adopted towards the East in the light of events in Czechoslovakia.

/M. HARMEL began ...

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