

## Minutes of a meeting of the United Kingdom Government on British policy in the Netherlands East Indies (London, 28 March 1946)

**Caption:** These minutes of the meeting of the United Kingdom Government — held on 28 March 1946 at 10 Downing Street following the reaction in the Netherlands to the announcement by the United Kingdom to withdraw its forces from Java — outline the future policy of the British Government in the Netherlands East Indies. Those attending the meeting included Clement Attlee, British Prime Minister and Minister of Defence, Ernest Bevin, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Field Marshal Viscount Alanbrooke, Vice Admiral Sir Rhoderick Robert McGrigor and Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Arthur William Tedder.

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C.O.S. (46) 49th Meeting

STAFF CONFERENCE

held at No. 10 Downing Street, S.W.1. on  
THURSDAY, 28TH MARCH, 1946 at 11 noon

PRESENT

The Rt. Hon. C.R. Attlee, M.P.,  
Prime Minister and Minister of Defence  
(In the Chair)

The Rt. Hon. Ernest Bevin, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs  
Field Marshal Viscount Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff

Vice Admiral Sir Rhoderick McGrigor, representing the First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff  
Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Lord Tedder, Chief of the Air Staff

General Sir Hastings L. Ismay,  
Office of the Minister of Defence

THE FOLLOWING WAS ALSO PRESENT:

Mr. J.C. Sterndale Bennett,  
Foreign Office

SECRETARIAT

Major General Sir Leslie C. Hollis  
Major P.R.M. Waterfield

FUTURE POLICY IN THE NETHERLANDS EAST INDIES

(Previous Reference: D.O. (46) 9th Meeting, Minute 4)

THE COMMITTEE had before them a copy<sup>+</sup> of a memorandum left with the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs by the Netherlands Ambassador on 27th March, 1946, lodging a formal protest against the plans<sup>o</sup> for the withdrawal of British troops from the Netherlands East Indies as approved<sup>r</sup> by the Chiefs of Staff and expressing the hope that His Majesty's Government would withhold their consent to this plan.

MR. BEVIN said that technically the protest by the Netherlands Government could be rejected by us on various grounds. Nevertheless he felt that it would be unwise to reject the protest without careful consideration in view of the increased likelihood of a successful conclusion being reached in the Dutch Indonesian discussions.

LORD ALANBROOKS said that it was quite wrong to describe the troop movements into and out of Java as a withdrawal. The fact was that as the Dutch troops were moved into Java so were Indian formations being moved out when they had been relieved. The position at present was that there were some 34,800 Dutch troops in the Far East, the bulk of which were now moving into, or were already in, Java; approximately 2,500 Dutch troops would reach the Far East by June and a further 20,000 were due to leave Europe in September. The present strength of the British and Indian troops in the Netherlands East Indies was 60,000 and this number of troops would not be altered except that, in time, the British and Indian troops would be replaced by Dutch troops. The reliefs that were at present planned were mainly in Western Java, where there would remain, however, for some time yet, a corps H.Q., an Indian Division and a number of Corps troops.

In answer to an enquiry by Mr. Bevin, Lord Alanbrooks said that any delay in the relief of British troops by Dutch troops, as already planned, would be most undesirable as it would disrupt the shipping programme and would be the cause of considerable agitation in India and possibly amongst the troops themselves when the delay in their repatriation to India became known. He added that the full implication of any delay in their repatriation could only be determined in South East Asia Command.

MR. BEVIN pointed out that whether the movements of British troops were described as withdrawals or releases, the fact which was worrying the Dutch was that the programme provided the disappearance of five out of eight British and Indian Brigades within a month at a critical period in the negotiations. The Dutch well realise that their own troops were not in a sufficient state of training to accomplish the tasks of the British and Indian troops. He also pointed out that while it might be technically accurate to argue that our original commitment had been to free the internees from Japanese hands, the fact remains that if we left a large number of internees in the hands of the Indonesians in conditions where their lives were in danger, we should lay ourselves open to damaging criticism not only in Holland but elsewhere.

+ Annex  
/ SEACOS 660 - 225  
/ COSSEA 499 - 247

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In answer to a further question by Mr. Devin LORD ALANBROOKE said that there remained in Java about 33,000 Japanese prisoners of war to be evacuated, who were now in the interior of the Island and were not yet under our control. Steps were being taken to get them to march into the British lines. He estimated that there were some 30,000 RAPWI to be released who were not yet under our control. Our responsibility was limited solely to releasing them from Japanese camps and not from Indonesian camps. We were under no obligation to fight the Indonesians to obtain the release of RAPWI which could only be effected by reaching an agreement with the Indonesians.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that it was clear that the Dutch really had no grounds upon which to lodge a protest. The movement of troops referred to constituted a relief and there could be no question of allowing British troops to remain in the Island once Dutch troops were available to relieve them; neither were we under any obligation to the Dutch to discuss with them our military arrangements or the operational movement of our troops in the Netherlands East Indies.

MR. DEVIN said that as the negotiations with Java had reached such a delicate stage, it would be of great help if the possibility of delaying the withdrawal of Indian troops for about a fortnight could be examined.

THE COMMITTEE:-

- (a) Invited the Chiefs of Staff to send a telegram<sup>+</sup> to S.A.C.S.E.A. asking him to examine and report as a matter of urgency, on the implications of delaying, wholly or in part, by about a fortnight, relief of British troops in Western Java.
- (b) Took note that the Chief of the Imperial General Staff would obtain further details of the progress of the repatriation of the remaining Japanese prisoners of war in Java.

Offices of the Cabinet and  
Minister of Defence, S.W.1.

28TH MARCH, 1946.

+ Sent as COSSEA 504 - 254

ANNEX

Copy of a letter dated 28th March, 1946 from  
the Foreign Office

x x x

I enclose a copy of a memo left with the Secretary of State by the Netherlands Ambassador last night. I have not yet heard what passed at the interview but I think you should have the document without delay for the information of the Chiefs of Staff.

(Signed) J.C. STERNDALE BENNETT

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Copy of a Memorandum left with the Secretary  
of State by the Netherlands Ambassador on  
the 27th March, 1946.

The Netherlands Government has been informed concerning the withdrawal of British troops from Java, approved by the Chiefs of Staff and communicated to Her Majesty's Ambassador on the 25th March.

The Netherlands Government is deeply disappointed and concerned that this withdrawal has been approved by the Chiefs of Staff without previous consultation with the Netherlands Government.

While this withdrawal was contemplated, the Netherlands Government received repeated assurances emanating from the Foreign Office that no time table for large scale withdrawals had been drawn up.

The Netherlands Government feels, that before the commitment of the British Government concerning the liberation of the APWI and the evacuation of Japanese prisoners of war is executed, a withdrawal as now contemplated, is in flat contradiction with the agreed policy between the two Governments.

The Netherlands Government must also remind His Majesty's Government that the agreed execution of so-called course B is still in its initial stage.

The Netherlands Government moreover fears that this action will have very detrimental effect on the negotiations conducted at the present moment at Batavia.

The Netherlands Government, on the grounds mentioned above, must lodge a formal protest against the withdrawal of troops as approved by the Chiefs of Staff and expresses the hope that His Majesty's Government will withhold their consent to this withdrawal.