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SECRET

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C.M. (49)

28th Conclusions

CABINET 28 (49)

CONCLUSIONS of a Meeting of the Cabinet held at 10 Downing Street, S.W. 1, on Tuesday, 26th April, 1949, at 10 a.m.

Present :

The Right Hon. C. R. ATTLEE, M.P., Prime Minister (*in the Chair*).

The Right Hon. HERBERT MORRISON, M.P., Lord President of the Council.

The Right Hon. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

The Right Hon. Sir STAFFORD CRIPPS, K.C., M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The Right Hon. A. V. ALEXANDER, M.P., Minister of Defence.

The Right Hon. HUGH DALTON, M.P., Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT JOWITT, Lord Chancellor.

The Right Hon. J. CHUTER EDE, M.P., Secretary of State for the Home Department.

The Right Hon. P. J. NOEL-BAKER, M.P., Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations.

The Right Hon. A. WOODBURN, M.P., Secretary of State for Scotland.

The Right Hon. G. A. ISAACS, M.P., Minister of Labour and National Service.

The Right Hon. ANEURIN BEVAN, M.P., Minister of Health.

The Right Hon. T. WILLIAMS, M.P., Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

The Right Hon. GEORGE TOMLINSON, M.P., Minister of Education.

The Right Hon. J. H. WILSON, M.P., President of the Board of Trade.

The following were also present :

The Right Hon. VISCOUNT HALL, First Lord of the Admiralty.

The Right Hon. THE EARL OF LISTOWEL, Minister of State for Colonial Affairs.

Marshal of the Royal Air Force LORD TEDDER, Chief of the Air Staff.

Admiral of the Fleet LORD FRASER OF NORTH CAPE, First Sea Lord and Chief of Naval Staff.

Field-Marshal Sir WILLIAM J. SLIM, Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

Mr. M. E. DENING, Foreign Office.

Secretariat :

Air Marshal Sir WILLIAM ELLIOT.

Mr. A. JOHNSTON.

Mr. S. E. V. LUKE.

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China.

(Previous
Reference:
C.M. (49) 18th
Conclusions,
Minute 2.)

The Cabinet had before them a memorandum by the Foreign Secretary and the First Lord of the Admiralty (C.P. (49) 93) to which were appended the draft of a statement to be made in Parliament on the circumstances in which H.M.S. *Amethyst* and other British warships were fired upon in the Yangtse River, and copies of telegrams which had been exchanged with the British authorities in China about the position arising in Shanghai through the rapid advance of the Communist forces on that city.

The Foreign Secretary recalled that it had been decided that the British Embassy should remain in Nanking and should not follow the Nationalist Government if it retired to Formosa or some other part of China. Other countries, except the Soviet Government and the Governments associated with it, had decided to pursue a similar policy. Similarly, the Cabinet had agreed on 13th December, 1948, that the British communities in China should not be urged to leave, and these communities were, in fact, maintaining their position with great skill and determination. British warships had been employed in providing communications for the British Embassy at Nanking, bringing supplies to the British community there and preparing, if necessary, to carry out their evacuation. Until recently it had been contemplated that British warships would be used, if necessary, for the evacuation of British civilians from Shanghai.

The Cabinet then discussed in detail the draft statement appended to C.P. (49) 93, about the damage and loss of life in H.M.S. *Amethyst* and other warships, which was to be made by the Prime Minister that afternoon in the House of Commons. A similar statement would be made by the First Lord of the Admiralty in the House of Lords. The main points discussed were as follows:—

(a) Paragraph 2 of the statement should refer to the general decision to maintain Embassies and Legations in Nanking, and to the fact that several Governments had stationed warships at Shanghai and Nanking to assist in any necessary evacuation of their nationals. The relief of one British warship at Nanking by another warship had been carried out as a routine matter every two or three weeks.

(b) There was some discussion of the question whether reference should be made to the fact that the stationing of British warships and their movements from one port to another in China had been undertaken with the full knowledge and consent of the National Government. Since it was obvious that the authority of the National Government had greatly weakened, it might be said that this was a formal rather than a practical step; and attention was drawn to a statement issued by the Chinese Embassy in London on the previous day that the National Government had advised foreign Powers in February last to withdraw warships from the Yangtse in view of the risk of incidents. The general feeling was, however, that it was necessary to refer to the information which had been given to the National Government, as the authority in control of these areas, though the extent to which that Government had consented to the movement of warships would have to be further examined.

(c) If precise information was available, the statement should endeavour to meet the criticism that the passage of H.M.S. *Amethyst* had been delayed until too near the time when incidents might occur in consequence of the expiry of the Communist ultimatum on 21st April. It was believed that after the expiry of an earlier Communist ultimatum on 12th April there had been some days when no reliable information was available to the British authorities in China, and it would probably be found that the departure of H.M.S. *Amethyst* from Shanghai for Nanking on the morning of 19th April was the earliest time at which the ship could have sailed, and there was every reason to believe that it would reach Nanking before the expiry of the ultimatum on 21st April. In any event, previous experience suggested that a neutral warship could make its way

between the opposing forces, particularly since fighting was not in progress on the banks of the Yangtse on 19th or 20th April.

(d) Paragraph 5 of the statement would need some amendment to make it clear that H.M.S. *Consort* had not left Nanking simultaneously with the departure of H.M.S. *Amethyst* from Shanghai, and that, as pointed out in paragraph 8, H.M.S. *Consort* did not leave Nanking until information had been received about the damage done to H.M.S. *Amethyst*.

(e) H.M.S. *Amethyst* had displayed the White Ensign and Union Jack; and, if necessary, the point could be made in debate that the first battery that shelled her had ceased fire when further Union Jacks were displayed. Thereafter, another battery opened fire on her and the fire became sustained after the ship had been put temporarily out of control through damage to the wheel-house.

(f) The references to the inhumanity of the Communists' conduct in paragraph 6 should be deleted from the narrative of events, and it was for consideration whether, with H.M.S. *Amethyst* still in the Yangtse and the British communities at the mercy of the Communists in the areas under their control, the Government statement should do more by way of censure of the Communists than was required in a statement of facts.

(g) The statements about casualties in paragraphs 12 and 19 should be amended in the light of the latest information.

(h) Reference might be made to the courage which was being shown by the British communities in Shanghai, Nanking and elsewhere; and to the skilful work done by the British authorities in China in handling a difficult and delicate situation.

The Cabinet were informed that the Speaker was apprehensive about the time which might be taken up by questions and answers consequent upon the Prime Minister's statement, and had suggested that it might be preferable for the Government to move the adjournment of the House and allocate a fixed period for discussion. There was general agreement that, since full information was not yet available, it would be preferable that the Prime Minister, in making the statement, should indicate that, if it was the wish of the House that the subject should be debated when full information was available, facilities for this purpose would be afforded.

The Cabinet—

Approved the draft statement on the shelling of H.M.S. *Amethyst* and other warships in the Yangtse to be made by the Prime Minister that afternoon in the House of Commons, subject to amendment on the points raised in the discussion.

Cabinet Office, S.W. 1,
26th April, 1949.
