

Memorandum of Conversation

Place: Royal Palace of Brussels

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Date: 23 February 1969

Present: The President
The Secretary of State
Mr. Henry Kissinger
Major General Vernon Walters

Prime Minister Eyskens
Foreign Minister Harmel
Viscount Davignon

The Prime Minister opened the conversation by expressing his satisfaction ^{that} at Belgium ^{was} being the first stop on the President's journey. He recalled that this was the first Presidential visit by a U.S. President in 50 years but mentioned that a number of ex-Presidents had visited Belgium among them Mr. Hoover, Truman and General Eisenhower.

The Prime Minister said that he would set forth their views for the President although there were, to the best of his knowledge, no major problems between Belgium and the United States. He said Belgium was deeply committed to the idea of communities and multilateral relations. Belgium had started out with the Belgo-Luxembourg economic union in 1923, then the Benelux in 1944, which had been consolidated, and subsequently Belgium had been a strong advocate of such multilateral activities as Western European Union, ^{The} Coal Steel Community and NATO. They had tried to go forward with the European Defense Community but this ^{had} failed because of the attitude of France. Belgium much preferred its international affairs to be conducted on a multilateral basis. They felt more comfortable in large communities. Some of the smaller countries were fearful that bilateral relations between strong countries might

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result in the smaller countries becoming discouraged and veering toward neutralism and pacifism if they ~~got~~ ^{developed} the feeling they were being left out. The President was not going to Holland, but they also felt the same way. The Prime Minister emphasized the importance of NATO to Belgium which had unhesitatingly undertaken to receive SHAPE after it left France. Belgium felt that multilateral discussions were much better than bilateral discussions. He emphasized the importance of NATO and said everything should be done to increase the non-military aspects of the alliance without downgrading the importance of maintaining a strong defensive posture.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister both expressed the hope that the current difficulties between France and Britain would die down and said all of Belgium's action was to try and calm things down between the two countries. They felt a crisis between the two at this time would be very unfortunate. The Prime Minister said that traditionally, Belgium had tried to play a conciliatory role in such disputes. The fact that France had been induced to continue in the Alliance after she had withdrawn from the military organization was, in itself, a considerable achievement. Many of the troubles in Europe were due to nationalism. This was particularly true of France. Belgium believed Britain should be admitted to the European Common Market. This was necessary because the British Empire no longer existed and the only hope for Britain to attain economic stability was to enter a far larger market. Belgium also felt it was politically desirable for Britain to enter the Common Market as it would provide a more

balanced situation if there were three large powers in the market rather than two (the Prime Minister said he would not refer to Italy) such as Germany and France. *It would also keep in moving towards political integration, but that was still some way off*

Belgium felt this could not be done now but was confident that after a period of transition, Britain would eventually be fully integrated into the European Community. Mr. Wilson had withdrawn the British from Southeast Asia and from the Middle East and had no alternative to Europe. He felt ~~that~~ a united European community was a far more valid and useful partner for the United States than dealing with a number of smaller European countries, not merely in defense matters but also in political, monetary and trade matters. The Prime Minister felt if the United States gave a privileged position to Germany or France, this would have a most disruptive effect on NATO. He recognized the British had a privileged relationship with the U.S. and needed it at this time because of their economic difficulties. The President broke in to say that Britain had a "special" but not privileged position. The Prime Minister again made clear Belgium's preference for multilateral relationships rather than bilateral talks between major powers in which the smaller countries would feel left out.

Prime Minister Eyskens then said that in monetary matters, he did not feel there were any major problems. Belgium had a very strong currency and its balance of payments was in good shape *with* 63% of its exports going to the countries of the Common Market. He felt that in monetary matters, Belgium would have no difficulty in going along with the U.S. and would follow its lead.

Discussing relations with the Soviet Union, Mr. Eyskens said Belgium favored a policy of detente but this could only be achieved by maintaining a strong defensive position for NATO. There had been a strong feeling in Europe that danger from the East was diminishing but the invasion of Czechoslovakia had checked this *to some degree*

The President then said he also felt it was appropriate that his first stop on his journey be in Belgium, a country which had done so much to foster the community and multilateral concept to which the Prime Minister had referred. He had undertaken this journey to consult with the leaders of the countries of Western Europe. He wanted them to know what his thinking was. He had always supported the idea of a European Community and NATO ever since he had come to Europe as a young *C*ongressman 22 years ago. He felt strongly about the value of multilateral relationships and said the U.S. would resort to bilateral talks only if they felt this was necessary to get things off dead-center or to break up a log jam and that this would not be done without keeping our allies fully informed through consultations. He asked whether the Prime Minister was opposed to bilateral talks in all circumstances *or* whether he felt they could sometimes be useful. The Prime Minister replied that he agreed with the President's concept and that such bilateral talks were on occasion necessary. The Secretary of State said ~~that~~ *that* at some time we would be talking to the Soviets on arms limitation and asked whether this *is* seemed appropriate. Both the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister said they felt this was desirable and necessary. He felt, *that* on such matters as strategic and inter-

continental weapons systems, the U.S. and the USSR should talk. But ~~that~~ any serious withdrawals of U.S. Forces in Europe would recreate fear on this continent as the Europeans know ~~that~~ with their 22 Divisions (which perhaps ought to be 35) ~~they~~ could not hold off the Soviets in a conventional war. The physical presence of U.S. Forces in Europe was vital. It was essential, while talking with the Soviets, to maintain a strong NATO and a strong defensive position.

In reply to a question by the President as to why he thought the Soviets might be interested in a detente, the Prime Minister said he felt ~~that~~ for many reasons, such as the heavy cost of sophisticated weapons, the desire of the Russian people for a better life and the need to show their own people that they were attempting to maintain good relations with other countries. *the Soviet conflict*

The Foreign Minister said there was a deep-seated desire in the Russian people to live a more normal life and not to live in isolation and separation. If these ^{conditions} were to continue, this would impose greater strains on the USSR's internal structure. He said the Belgians were in a particularly good position to evaluate this as the Soviets, following their invasion of Czechoslovakia, were doing everything they could to normalize their relationships with the other countries of Europe. This was true not only of the Soviets but also of other countries in the East, such as Poland and Hungary, and not only the countries most closely integrated into the Warsaw pact but also the Rumanians and Yugoslavs. The Soviets had allowed many contacts that would have been unthinkable fifteen years ago and this had also increased

the pressure for normalization. The Czech Foreign Minister was in fact, anxious to come to Belgium. Actually, this would be bad for him but his desire proved how urgent it was for the Eastern Countries to prove to their peoples that they were doing everything they could to have normal relationships with the West.

The Prime Minister said the Soviets were concerned with the Chinese and anxious to have their rear areas secure. In addition, Germany was once more the most powerful country in Europe, industrially and financially, and this made the Russians anxious to maintain total control over the satellite countries of Eastern Europe and thus have a protective glacis between Germany and their own national frontiers. The Foreign Minister voiced agreement with the Prime Minister's statement concerning the Soviet fear of China. He said ~~that~~ when the Soviets speak with the voice of propaganda, as they did at one of their party congresses two years ago at Karlovy Vary, they had mentioned ~~that~~ their principal objectives for the years 1968/1969 were the detachment of Western Europe from the United States; the detachment of the other countries of Western Europe from the German Federal Republic and keeping Britain out of the Common Market. However, when the Russians talked privately as statesmen, it was obvious, ~~that~~ for the reasons enumerated above, ^{that} they were anxious for a detente. The President then asked whether the Belgians thought breaking up NATO was still one of the Soviets major objectives. [✓] Whether they still had aggressive designs on Western Europe. The Prime Minister, in reply, shrugged as to "designs" but said certainly the Russians were anxious to do everything they could to break up NATO and if that were to happen or the U.S. were to give

signs of lessened interest in Europe by a large withdrawal of forces, ~~then~~ fear would grow all over Europe and the inroads of Communist propaganda would increase all over Western Europe. The Foreign Minister said that it was essential that NATO be kept strong and effective as the Soviets would not talk detente with a weak counterpart.

The Secretary of State then asked the two Belgians why it was that the Soviet Union always wanted talks on arms limitations only, and when we tried to talk about other matters, such as the Middle East, they always insisted ~~that~~ we should make progress on arms limitations ~~for~~ first before going on to other subjects. The Belgians did not reply directly to this but in answer to a question by the President, the Prime Minister said he did not believe the Soviets wanted to heat up the situation in the Middle East or in Vietnam, rather he believed they wanted to cool it down because of their concern about the Chinese.

The President then said that in any talks with the Soviets, we would keep our allies informed as we would value their ideas and did not believe we had any monopoly on good ideas. He would hope the Belgians would give us any ideas they had as to how we could strengthen NATO. He was well aware of the study done by Mr. Harmel on the non-military aspects of the Alliance.

In reply to a question by the President, the Prime Minister said it was most important to have a strong NATO if one were going to talk with the Soviets. This could not be regarded by them as provocative.

The Belgians did feel the U.S. should have conversations with the Soviets. Foreign Minister Harmel pointed out that prior to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, NATO had moved quite far in the direction of presenting proposals of a specific and nature for regional reduction of arms. These had been presented at the NATO conference at Reykjavik last June and were still on the agenda. He did not see any contradiction between maintaining a strong NATO and perhaps going forward with such proposals. The other side did not seem to have rejected them out of hand. He felt that as a medium-term objective, not a short-^{term}-time one, we might see for a non-increase of arms in Europe rather than an actual reduction. But because of the increasing cost of modern weapons and the constant increase in firepower this in itself would be progress.

The President then asked whether, if talks progressed with the Soviets, this would not lead to some feeling in Belgium that they could let down on their military efforts. The Secretary of State said ~~that~~ there were people in the United States who tended to equate detente and euphoria. Mr. Harmel said he did not feel this would be too difficult as the example of Czechoslovakia was still there. Prior to August 21 there had been difficulties in getting certain defense projects through the Belgian Parliament but ~~that~~ since that time, there had not been the same difficulties. The Prime Minister indicated by his eloquent silence that he was not sure ~~that~~ there would not be somewhat of a problem in this field. The President said that in the U.S., there were some to whom detente might mean that all of our troubles were over, but he

felt the Europeans, with their long experience, might understand better that detente was an interlude rather than the end of all our problems. Prime Minister Eyskens repeated ~~that~~ ^{that} it was important for the U.S. to talk to the Soviets. ~~He felt that~~ ^{He} it would be quite wrong to leave this ~~entirely~~ to the French. The Secretary of State pointed out that often when detente was discussed, this led some people in the U.S. to ask "if there is detente, why ~~not~~ bring the U.S. troops home from Europe". ~~and~~ ^T this was something that should be borne in mind.

The President said he hoped ~~that~~ we would have the benefit of the Belgian's thinking on what could be done to reinforce the non-military side of NATO. He felt the conditions which gave birth to the alliance twenty years ago were not quite the same now. ~~and~~ ^T there was less fear and, for this reason, it was necessary to do what we could to give more purpose to the alliance. He himself was perhaps more in favor of appropriate consultations with our allies than his immediate ~~predecessor~~.

The President then inquired about the situation in the Third World. He had himself been greatly impressed with the ~~potential~~ and resources of the Congo. He felt, in many cases after the end of colonialism and after a period of about five years, many of the newly independent countries had turned back toward the former colonial power for assistance for reasons of language and other affinities. He asked whether this was the situation with the Congo. ~~and~~ ^T the Foreign

Minister said this was definitely the case. There were perhaps more Belgians in the Congo now than at any time and that relations were good. The Congolese Budget was balanced and they had been able to get considerable revenue from taxing the copper companies. It was important also to maintain the political integrity of the Congo.

The President then asked whether Mobutu was a good man. The Prime Minister replied, ~~that~~ he was able and had moved in a few years from Sergeant to General and President but as for being a good man all he could say was that he appeared to be the best one available. The Foreign Minister said ~~that~~ relations between the Congo and Belgium were perhaps too good in the sense that Mobutu might be accused of being the "Belgians man". As a matter of fact, Prince Albert the King's brother was currently in the Congo and the Congolese had been anxious that the King himself come at some time. The President pointed out ~~that~~ there was a great deal ~~that~~ only the Belgians could do for them and ~~that~~ other countries could not.

The Secretary of State then said ~~that~~ he wanted to express his thanks for all ~~that~~ the Belgians had done to help us get the two Americans out of Iraq where they had been accused of espionage.

The Prime Minister then thanked the President for giving them so much of his time. The President said ~~that~~ he was ^{happier} happy to be here than he had never been in Belgium before. He added in a jocular vein ~~that~~ he had only been sent to places where we had troubles and as we had had no such troubles with Belgium, he had never had occasion to come here before. After final amenities, the meeting concluded and the President accompanied by Prime Minister Eyskens returned to his hotel.