

SUBJECT
cc Notes

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RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE
PRESIDENT OF FRANCE AT 1920 HOURS ON THURSDAY 20 OCTOBER 1983
AT 10 DOWNING STREET

Present: Prime Minister President Mitterrand
Mr. Coles M. Vedrine

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The Prime Minister suggested that the talks should begin with a discussion of defence and disarmament issues. We were expecting a demonstration in London this weekend on the part of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The Leader of the Opposition was planning to speak at a CND meeting during the demonstrations. Public opinion seemed to give the French Government very little trouble on these matters.

President Mitterrand said that he had certain difficulties with public opinion but the situation in France was not at all like that of Germany. He himself was against nuclear weapons. If the Soviet Union and the United States were to get rid of theirs, he would be delighted. But the reality was different.

The Prime Minister said that we were rather concerned about the delay in the Bundestag debate. During her visit to the United States she had tried to reassure President Reagan that Chancellor Kohl would deploy on time. It was possible that the Russians would make another propaganda proposal in an attempt to delay deployment. We must not allow this to happen. We had made it clear that we wished the negotiations to continue after deployment. The meeting between Herr Genscher and Mr. Gromyko suggested that deployment was now inevitable.

President Mitterrand said that he believed that the Russians were resigned to deployment. They considered that President Reagan had never really wished to embark on negotiations before the new missiles were in place. There were now two possibilities open to the Soviet Union. First, they could try to delay the

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process. This would seem superficially reasonable to many sectors of public opinion, but in fact it would be a victory for the Soviet Union. Secondly, the Russians could try to create a climate of public opinion in Germany and perhaps other countries so that the position of the Governments concerned on this issue was weakened.

The Soviet Union would continue to advocate a few simple ideas which seemed reasonable to ordinary people but were in fact unreasonable, for example, that the French and British deterrents should be included in the INF negotiations. It appeared that the Russians were banking on a revival of German nationalism. We should not forget that there was a very powerful pacifist movement in Germany, composed of three elements. There were the true pacifists (not a very large group), those who for ideological or other reasons were easily influenced by Soviet propaganda and those who could not agree to nuclear weapons which were not under sovereign German control. The latter attitude was understandable but it was a new element in the European situation. This group wished Germany to emerge from a position of tutelage. The younger generation in Germany did not know what war was. We might see in them a revival of German nationalism. The Russians were playing on this.

The Prime Minister commented that the Russians might be trying to exploit this mood but they could not wish to promote the reunification of Germany. She had taken steps to criticise in public the facile statements which were being made about the need to include the British and French deterrents in arms control negotiations. Those who made such statements had not thought through the proposition. The Americans had to have parity with the Soviet Union, as the Jackson Amendment required. But if the British and French deterrents were included in the equation, American/Russian parity was not possible. President Mitterrand agreed. We would also find that if our deterrents were included in an arms control agreement we should not be able to modernise

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them without obtaining permission from others. Our deterrents would no longer be independent. He was absolutely convinced of the soundness of the present French position and it would not change. But he was worried about Germany. All members of the SPD except Schmidt favoured delaying deployment. Even some of the Christian Democrats, for example in Belgium, favoured delay. These people would take any opportunity to avoid a decision to deploy. Genscher's meeting with Gromyko had been unnecessary.

The Prime Minister said that she believed that Genscher had arranged this meeting for presentational reasons. But there remained a worry that shortly before deployment the Russians would come up with a tempting negotiating ploy. We would stand firm. She believed that Chancellor Kohl would. Herr Schmidt had told her recently that he would speak out not only at his Party Congress but also in the Bundestag in favour of deployment and that he would vote in favour of it. President Mitterrand said that there was no problem of will as far as he was concerned. We must all remain solid. But we were in for a stormy time. The Prime Minister commented that in Britain the main argument had been won during the last Election. The British Government wished to negotiate arms reductions but there was no response from the Soviet Union.

Returning to the question of the British and French strategic deterrents, she had read the President's UNGA speech. President Mitterrand said that he had felt it necessary to make this speech because it was difficult to argue on the one hand that the French deterrent could not be included in the INF negotiations and on the other that it could not be included in START. So he had taken the course of stressing the strict conditions under which the deterrent could be included in strategic arms negotiations. Essentially the super-powers would first have to make enormous reductions in their stockpiles and that would not happen overnight. The Prime Minister agreed.

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The Soviet Union had 40 strategic weapons for every one of ours. She had noted the President's suggestion that the five nuclear powers should come together in negotiations. She assumed that the President was thinking of the distant future. President Mitterrand confirmed that he was. The fact was that the conditions he had put on the table for such a meeting were not realisable. There was no chance of the Americans and Russians accepting them. It was possible that the Soviet Union would say in November that the START and INF negotiations should be combined, and thus again seek to include the British and French deterrents. If they did so, he would repeat the kind of arguments used by the Prime Minister against the inclusion of these weapons.

The Prime Minister said that she had been worried that the Soviet Union might try to get all the nuclear powers to the negotiating table. Then we would be trapped. Our Polaris fleet was at an irreducible minimum. The plans for Trident raised the possibility of us having a deterrent of more than irreducible minimum size. We would need to consider how many weapons to acquire.

President Mitterrand said that his position was similar. In the coming years France would develop its strategic force considerably and it would then be really impressive. The Soviet Union might try to involve us in negotiations before then. Our two countries should stick together, react in the same way and have quiet, discreet discussions about these matters.

The Prime Minister said that she very much hoped that the President's speech to the UNGA and the other efforts we had all been making had had the effect of killing the idea of including our strategic deterrents in the INF negotiations. President Mitterrand said that he believed that that idea had now lost much of its force. He had gone to New York precisely because international opinion had been coming to see British and French weapons as an obstacle.

/ The Prime Minister

The Prime Minister suggested that the discussion should turn to the future of relations with the Soviet Union. She wished to tell the President in confidence that she had had a number of meetings with academics and others about this question. We had reached the conclusion that although the Soviet economy was in very bad shape, the political system was so rigid as to be incapable of change. There was little faith in Communist philosophy in the Soviet Union but again the prospects for change were remote because the survival of those at the top depended on the status quo. The Russians were showing interest in Hungary's economic policy but its introduction into the Soviet Union would undermine the system. The upshot was that we in the West would have to live with the Soviet Union for a longer time. So what strategy and tactics should we adopt? We should not over-estimate our capacity to influence the Soviet leadership. But there had been some movement over the years, perhaps as a result of the Helsinki process. Possibly the system was not quite so cruel as it once was.

We had decided that when the Korean airliner incident had receded rather more we should try to have a closer dialogue with Moscow than in the past. But she did not envisage a stream of British visitors to Moscow. The aim would rather be to arrange for visits by the younger members of the Politburo to the West. It was desirable to expose the Soviet leadership to the free world. The prospect was therefore one of opening up more contacts at a number of levels. We must of course stay firm on defence issues. It was easier to talk from a firm base. Further, trade should be conducted to our mutual benefit but we should not pass on any technology of military significance. She had indicated in two public speeches that when the time was right we were prepared to begin a dialogue. But we did not wish the term "dialogue" to acquire a bad reputation as detente had done.

President Mitterrand said that he thought it would be a mistake to seek closer contact with the Soviet Union before the end of this year. The Prime Minister said that she entirely

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agreed. President Mitterrand explained that France had not ceased to have contact with the Soviet Union. His predecessors had had good relations with the Soviet leadership. This had been more difficult for him because he was not prepared to give the Russians what they wanted. So contacts had been kept to a minimum. When he had opposed American policy on the Siberian pipeline and on credit it was partly because he thought it wrong to attack the Russians on all fronts. Their fear of encirclement was as strong as ever. We should be firm on defence but not hostile on other matters. Early next year we should define areas where contacts could be established. In any case, this was what he proposed to do. For if we refused all concessions on INF deployment we should reach out a hand in other fields.

He had thought that Chancellor Kohl's visit to Moscow was premature. The Russians had used it to influence opinion in Germany. Kohl had not been able to make any concessions and had therefore used up his credit with the Russians. The situation after his visit was worse than before.

US policy towards the Soviet Union was suspect. It was not sufficiently systematic. One moment it was weak, the other strong. And the Americans did not understand Europe.

The Prime Minister said that the major European countries were used to regular discussion of these big issues. But on her recent visit to Canada she had been struck by the statement of Mr. Trudeau that the only time he had discussed nuclear issues with his Western colleagues was at Williamsburg. That degree of isolation was very serious. President Mitterrand said that Mr. Trudeau had just asked him for an urgent meeting, if possible next week. He had had to reply that he could not meet him until 8 November. He believed that the Canadian Government was worried because they thought that new missiles would be deployed to the North of the American continent. Canadian public opinion was not prepared for such a possibility. The Prime Minister commented that Mr. Trudeau had not taken steps to prepare public opinion to face defence issues. Defence took

only 2% of Canada's GNP. It was not right that a country should live under a defence umbrella provided by others and contribute inadequately to it. President Mitterrand said that he was still puzzled as to why Mr. Trudeau was in such a hurry to meet him. Was he possibly thinking of new proposals which would complicate the situation?

Returning to the question of relations with the Soviet Union, the Prime Minister reiterated that her aim was to persuade members of the Soviet leadership to visit the West, not that large numbers of British visitors should go to Moscow. She did not believe that a US/Soviet summit was advisable at present. There had not been sufficient preparation. But we must hope that by the Spring of next year no other event had occurred which would upset the prospects for dialogue. In addition, it was desirable to step up visits to some of the satellite countries which wished to express their separate identities.

President Mitterrand said that he frequently received invitations to do so. He recently visited Hungary - and Romania and Bulgaria were pressing him. By history Bulgaria was the closest to Russia of all the Eastern European countries. Its Prime Minister was a clever old peasant who probably had more influence in the Kremlin than Mr. Kadar. He (President Mitterrand) had met Mr. Kadar three times and had learnt much about his life and background. The Prime Minister said that she had also been pressed to visit Hungary and would probably do so one day. President Mitterrand said that he thought this would be a good idea. But all these new moves were for 1984 rather than now.

The Prime Minister asked whether the President thought that the Soviet Union would break off the INF talks when missiles were deployed? President Mitterrand replied that he anticipated a temporary break of several months. The Prime Minister said that that might again prevent the development of a dialogue with the Soviet Union. President Mitterrand said he was not sure that that was the right approach. He would not resume contact before missile deployment but he would

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not make it a condition of contact that the Geneva negotiations were resumed - for the simple reason that it might take a long while to fulfil that condition.

The Prime Minister observed that next year, when the Americans were involved in their Election campaign, Europe might need to take a firmer lead on these matters. She did not know, for example, whether it would be possible to make progress in the Middle East. She was unhappy about the Lebanese situation. The Multi-National Force had no clear objective. President Mitterrand commented that he was worried by precisely the same point. Once the Palestinians and the Israelis had left Beirut, the Force had ceased to have a real purpose. The Prime Minister said that it was difficult to be sure what would happen if the Multi-National Force withdrew. But we needed to do some clear thinking or we might find that we were contributing to the division of Lebanon. President Mitterrand said that Syria did not wish to loosen its hold. If the Multi-National Force ended up by fighting the Syrians, that would mean that partition had occurred. If the MNF declined to become involved, they would be spectators of partition. It was an unpleasant situation. The most important thing was to help President Gemayel until he had an effective national army. At the moment he had 30,000 men. If we could help him raise this to 60,000, he would be able to defend his country. And that would provide an opportunity for the Multi-National Force to leave. The Prime Minister said that in her view the moment for the departure of the MNF would probably come when there was a Government of reconciliation in place and when there was a reasonably strong Lebanese army.

The discussion ended at 2015 hours.

A.J.C.

21 October 1983