



INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

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MEMORANDUM FOR THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

SUBJECT: MBFR: The British Position on the Hungarian Question (U) -  
INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

You recently asked why the British were so dug in on the question of Hungarian participation in the MBFR negotiations. They have now joined the rest of the Alliance in accepting the compromise on this question, but only after an exchange of letters between Secretary Rogers and Sir Douglas-Home, which you will have seen.

It is important to understand that from the outset it has been the principle more than the substance of the Hungarian question that has concerned the British. They had fully accepted the original NATO Guidelines Area (NGA) for MBFR and, like us, joined in adding Hungary only when the Benelux insisted at the October 1971 Deputy Foreign Ministers Meeting. Moreover, the British representative on the NATO MBFR Working Group subsequently circulated a very good paper questioning the desirability and wisdom of including Hungary in the area, since Soviet forces there were oriented to the South rather than to the West. Sir Douglas-Home's concern (in his letter to Secretary Rogers) about the impact of excluding Hungary on the Balkans and in particular Yugoslavia is not something the British have pressed very hard.

In fact, when the Soviets first raised the Hungarian question in Vienna the British immediately interpreted it as a tactical ploy that could be beaten back by a firm Western front. Well after most Allies had concluded that Hungary was a serious substantive question for the Soviets, the British continued to argue that the Soviets were simply setting it up as a bargaining counter to be traded for some tactical advantage.

When it became evident, even to the British, that the Soviets were not going to give up on Hungary, then another element which had been present in British thinking since the outset moved to the forefront of British policy and remained there until now. That element was a conviction that the Hungarian question was a major test of negotiating strength between East and West whose outcome could set an important precedent for the future course of the negotiations. They strenuously argued that to give way on the first hard question encountered in the MBFR talks would encourage the Soviets to believe that they could have their way in the future simply by standing firm.

Clas: Dir, DOD MBFR Task Force

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(1) But British stubbornness was directed, in my view, as much at us as at the Soviets. They felt that we were too ready to compromise too quickly on Hungary because of concern about the effects on Congress of lack of progress in Vienna. I believe they saw in our "haste" on Hungary a worrisome precedent, and deliberately dug in to teach us, as well as the Soviets, a lesson for the future. Moreover, our quickness in seeking a compromise on Hungary also made the British suspicious that we had already done a deal with the Soviets before Vienna.

(2) Of course, the roots of the British position on Hungary have to be traced to their basic views on MBFR. Very simply put, they do not like it one bit. They far and away say more about the dangers and risks of MBFR and less about its positive aspects than any other Ally. Their negativism is heavily shaped by an extremely pessimistic view of the NATO/Pact conventional force balance. And they are deeply worried that MBFR could unravel Western defenses by stimulating parliamentary and popular pressure against defense spending. The position they have taken with us is that they are prepared to go along with MBFR if we believe it will help with Congress -- although they appear increasingly skeptical that it will. At the same time they have made it clear to us that, Congress or no, they intend to be extremely cautious about the pace and direction of the whole enterprise.

(3) I think we have to share in the blame for the position the British took on Hungary. We did, in my view, move too quickly to compromise when the Soviets first raised it, and did appear to be stampeding the Allies. But, I also believe that the British were fundamentally misguided in casting the Hungarian issue as a test of negotiating strength. It seems to me that the worst thing one can do in a negotiation is to take a hard stand when one's ground is weak. And our ground was weak on the Hungarian question. The Soviets knew that Hungary had been added to the NGA late in NATO consideration of the MBFR area at the insistence of the Benelux alone. They had reason to believe that the US was unprepared to go to the wall over the issue. They also knew that the inclusion of Hungary did not count substantively for the UK and told the British so point-blank. Finally, the Soviets knew that the Allies understood Soviet forces in Hungary to be earmarked for the South rather than for the Central Region. Against this background, the compromise the Allies achieved on Hungary -- Eastern recognition of the possible inclusion of Hungary -- was about as good as could be expected.

(4) The Hungarian question aside, we can expect the British to dig in on other issues in the negotiations. When all is said and done, I think that they will continue deliberately to cast themselves in the role of the very tough defender of firmness and caution in dealing with the Soviets on MBFR. There will be times when this will be useful -- perhaps more than when it is not. We can do a lot to harness their toughness to good effect by close and systematic consultations with them on tactical as well as substantive questions.

*Lawrence S. Eagleburger*

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