

DOCUMENT NO. 2

Minutes of 290th NSC meeting, July 12, 1956

This National Security Council session focuses on a new draft policy statement toward Eastern Europe, NSC 5608 (see previous document). Much of the discussion is about ensuring that the United States has sufficient flexibility in pursuing policies, particularly economic actions, toward individual countries in the Soviet bloc. The relevant FRUS volume reproduces only a small portion of this discussion, omitting most of the lively debate over what U.S. trade and economic goals in the region should be. In the previously unpublished sections that appear below, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles clarifies a hidden purpose behind the proposed U.S. policy to tender food aid to the Eastern Europe regimes. Acknowledging that in making “our offer recently to the people of Poznan, we never seriously thought that we would be able to provide food to these people,” he discloses that “our main idea was to embarrass the Government of Communist Poland.” Even after the 1953 East German uprising, Dulles still aims to promote “spontaneous manifestations of discontent and opposition to the Communist regime, despite risks to individuals.” This phrasing would survive in the final policy statement, NSC 5608/1 (Document No. 17). In another memorable moment that does not appear in FRUS, Vice President Richard Nixon, who is presiding at the session, reflects his stark realpolitik approach, commenting that “it wouldn’t be an unmixed evil, from the point of view of U.S. interest, if the Soviet iron fist were to come down again on the Soviet bloc.”

July 13, 1956

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Discussion at the 290th Meeting
of the National Security Council,
Thursday, July 12; 1956

[...] ⁷⁹

There follows a summary of the discussion at the meeting and the main points taken.

1. U. S. POLICY TOWARD THE SOVIET SATELLITES IN EASTERN EUROPE
(NSC 5608 and Annex to NSC 5608; NSC Action No. 1530-b; NSC 5505/1; NSC 174;
Memos for All Holders of NSC 5608, dated July 5 and 6, 1956; Memo for NSC from
Executive Secretary, same subject, dated July 11, 1956)

⁷⁹ This paragraph contains a lengthy list of participants.

Mr. [Dillon] Anderson⁸⁰ briefed the Council on the main features of the proposed new policy, particularly as it differed from the existing policy on the subject, NSC 174.

[...]

Secretary Dulles said that he believed there was a misunderstanding of the intention of this paragraph. It was not the objective of this paragraph or this paper to encourage any level of trade with the Soviet satellites. The objective was simply to put the U.S. Government in a position to be able to make offers of surplus materials to the satellite governments which these governments could not reject without simultaneously putting pressure on the USSR to match the U.S. offer of surplus food. Moreover, no satellite government would be able to accept any U.S. offer of surplus food without affording the United States increased political influence in that satellite. Essentially, therefore, this was not a matter of trade, but rather of economic and political warfare. The United States simply must be in a position to be able to make these gestures and feints in its duelling with the Communists. Thus, for example, when we made our offer recently to the people of Poznan, we never seriously thought that we would be able to provide food to these people. Our main idea was to embarrass the Government of Communist Poland. In concluding, Secretary Dulles once again repeated that he was not now seeking any new authority, along the lines suggested by paragraph 25, from the Congress at this time.

[...]

The Vice President said that he would be most reluctant to approve any policy which seemed to follow the George Kennan line that there was essentially nothing we could do about the unhappy status quo now existing in the Soviet satellites. If our policy paper were to be couched in terms that would be discouraging to the democratic elements in the satellite populations, this would be a very great error. Moreover, continued the Vice President, it was naive to imagine that the existence of a lot of neat little independent Communist states throughout the world would help to solve the security problem of the United States, though the Vice President admitted that the existence of such states might be more advantageous than the present situation, in which the satellite states were under the thumb of the Soviet Union. Summing up, the Vice President said he did not relish the tenor of the present paper in suggesting that the United States should relax because it can do nothing to remedy the unhappy conditions in the satellites.

[...]

Secretary Wilson said he strongly disapproved of the whole idea of support for any national Communist movement as set forth in paragraph 23. Secretary Dulles explained that the object of supporting in certain instances a national Communist movement was simply to loosen the ties, between a satellite and the Soviet Union. Once these ties were loosened by the development of a national Communist government, it might ultimately be possible to go much further and to change the character of the Communist government in the satellites. He agreed,

⁸⁰ Dillon Anderson was special assistant to the president for national security affairs from April 1955 until September 1956.

however, that we should certainly not openly commit ourselves to a policy of support for national Communist movements in the satellites.

The Vice President expressed his emphatic agreement with this last statement of Secretary Dulles. What it got down to, he said, was that we encourage such national Communist movements where we believe the effect will be to disrupt the tie between the satellite state and the USSR. We certainly do not support such national Communist movements because we approve of national Communism as such. Accordingly, this paragraph would have to be implemented with the utmost caution. Mr. Allen Dulles then suggested language for inclusion in paragraph 23 which he believed would meet the point he had raised and which had found general support among the members of the Council. Secretary Wilson commented that in a kind of a way this was like telling a man how to play poker and even how to cheat if he doesn't like one of the players.

The Vice President said he had one other point to add. He could think, he said, of nothing which would, from the point of view of domestic politics or of our international relations, be worse than the occurrence of a leak tending to indicate that we at the highest levels were agreeing on a policy for national Communism under any circumstances. Accordingly, he hoped that everybody, from those present all the way down the line, would keep their mouths shut on this subject. Secretary Humphrey expressed warm agreement, and wondered whether it was essential that all these papers had to be passed all the way down the line. Imagine what would happen if portions of this paper were ever published in the newspapers. The effect on the Administration would be murderous.

The Vice President wondered whether it would be possible to classify certain portions of the paper as ultra-Top Secret. Mr. Anderson suggested that the covering Note by the Executive Secretary could call attention to the extreme sensitivity of the contents of NSC 5608. Under Secretary [Herbert] Hoover, on the other hand, pointed out that it was inevitable, from the point of view of OCB, that these policy papers receive a wide circulation. Indeed copies of them have to be sent all over the world. Accordingly, it was almost impossible to preserve absolute secrecy as to any particular portion of the policy statement. Secretary Humphrey said that in any case we should do our best to minimize the risk of a leak, for if one occurred on this paper it would be the worst we had ever had.

On the same subject, Secretary Dulles pointed out that NSC 5608 was rather a rarity among our policy papers, in that in this paper we were dealing with [1 1/2 lines excised] He agreed that it would be very dangerous indeed if the contents of the paper should leak. Agreeing with Secretary Dulles, Secretary Wilson commented adversely on the moral tone which the paper would seem to give rise to. In turn, Mr. Streibert wondered whether it might not be possible to work out a more limited distribution for this paper than the distribution normally given to a policy paper.

Mr. Anderson said that questions of the security of policy papers had often arisen before, and asked if the Council would not like to hear from the Executive Secretary as to how these matters had been handled in the past. Mr. [James] Lay pointed out that for this paper, as for past papers, it was perfectly possible to resort to a very limited and restricted distribution, so that the

precise text would be known only by the heads of agencies, who could pass on the required information in some carefully guarded form. Mr. Lay's remarks prompted the suggestion from Secretary Hoover that certain sensitive paragraphs in the paper should be extracted and made the subject of a special annex to NSC 5608.

Secretary Wilson pointed out that it was, after all, the responsibility of officials in the several departments to carry out these policies. This did not mean that they had to pass the policy papers all over the place. The Defense Department leaked like a sieve, and Secretary Wilson said he couldn't seem to stop these leaks.

Secretary Dulles indicated that it would be possible to remove certain sentences and paragraphs and give them a higher, classification, though in general, of course, these papers had to circulate as guidance for those who were to carry out the policy. He personally favored the suggestion of Under Secretary Hoover for a special annex.

[....]

6. SIGNIFICANT WORLD DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING U.S. SECURITY

[....]

Continuing his intelligence briefing, Mr. Allen Dulles pointed out that the Soviet leaders are now trying to cut off debate on the Khrushchev speech to the Twentieth Party Congress. The United States, of course, wants to keep the debate going, and indeed it is still going on, as witness Togliatti's continuing statements and those of the French Communists and other foreign Communist parties. One vehicle we are going to use, said Mr. Dulles, to keep the pot boiling, is to collect and publish all relevant data bearing on the Khrushchev speech and its implications. [1 line excised.]

The Vice President commented that it wouldn't be an unmixed evil, from the point of view of U.S. interest, if the Soviet iron fist were to come down again on the Soviet bloc, though on balance it would be more desirable, of course, if the present liberalizing trend in relations between the Soviet Union and its satellites continued.

Mr. Dulles then pointed out indications of considerable unrest in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Our attention had been diverted from these significant developments by the more spectacular events in Poznan.

[....]

[signed]
S. Everett Gleason⁸¹

⁸¹ S. Everett Gleason was deputy executive secretary of the NSC.

[Source: Mandatory Review Release to the National Security Archive from the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library.]