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RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE
PRESIDENT OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC IN THE CAR BETWEEN LONDON
AIRPORT AND CHEQUERS AT 10.50 a.m. ON FRIDAY 16 NOVEMBER 1973

Present: Prime Minister M. Pompidou
Sir M. Palliser M. Andronikof

China

The Prime Minister asked President Pompidou for his impressions of his recent visit to China, with a view to his own impending visit there early in the new year.

President Pompidou said that he had had long and interesting talks with Mr. Chou-en-Lai. He had been much impressed by the Chinese Premier's intelligence and grasp of the problems, despite his age. The French had believed Chou-en-Lai to be 75. But he himself had said, almost with coquetry, that he was in fact 76. President Pompidou said that he had also enjoyed his talk with Mao Tse-tung. But it had been of quite a different order. Mao looked in reasonable physical shape but had told the President, almost as a joke, that, according to his doctors, he was suffering from virtually every illness in the medical textbooks. M. Pompidou had the impression that Mao Tse-tung no longer played any active part in affairs and was clearly unconcerned with any matters of detail. Indeed conversation with Mao was essentially on the philosophical plane. To illustrate what he meant, M. Pompidou said that after he had made the usual introductory gambit about the size and importance of China and the significance that General de Gaulle had attached to the role in the world of the Chinese people, Mao had taken him up on a remark made by the General.

M. Pompidou recalled that at the time of de Gaulle's visit to China he had made some fairly "theatrical" statements (M. Pompidou implied that the General had been laying it on a good deal too thick) including that the Chinese people were "a proud people". Mao Tse-tung had told M. Pompidou that General de Gaulle had got it all wrong. The Chinese were not in the least proud: and the two men had then had a 20-minute discussion of a philosophical character about the nature of pride.

M. Pompidou said that he had nevertheless told Chairman Mao that China's population alone gave her influence. There had then been some discussion about the size of the Chinese population. Mao had said that they put the figure at around 700 million. When a census was taken it arrived at a higher figure. But he noted that whenever there was talk of a possible war the figure dropped. He had implied that there was a certain amount of "cooking the books" about these figures: and M. Pompidou had the impression that there might be a tendency for Chinese, in order e.g. to obtain two sets of ration cards, to have themselves registered on more than one list. He said that from his meetings with Mao and Chou-en-Lai he had gained the impression that Chou was more intelligent than Mao: but the latter was clearly an immensely powerful personality and had a "will of iron". He was in effect underwriting the present regime. M. Pompidou had been struck by the "generation gap" in the Chinese leadership. They all seemed to be either over 70 or around and below 40. And he felt that he had detected amongst at least some of the latter a tendency to question the wisdom of Chou-en-Lai's rapprochement with the United States. There was no doubt that this was a personal policy pursued

by Chou, with Mao's approval. It would be interesting to see how things developed when Mao, with his immense prestige, disappeared from the scene.

The Prime Minister asked about Sino-Soviet relations and recalled a story he had been told by Sir A. Douglas-Home after the latter's visit to China during which Chou-en-Lai had asked the Foreign Secretary if he knew how to make the Russians get up and leave. Chou had explained that if one called the Russians 'imperialists' they were angry and shifted uneasily in their seats. But if one called them 'capitalist imperialists' they rose to their feet and left. He then proceeded to illustrate his thesis, during a speech at the end of the lunch, and by use of the technique described made the Russians present get up and leave the table.

President Pompidou laughed and said that he had not witnessed this particular technique. But he had been made very aware of the deep suspicions and anxieties felt by the Chinese of the Russians.

The Prime Minister said that his impression was that this hostility towards the Soviet Union resulted less from ideological differences between them than from a bitter feeling by the Chinese that the Russians had simply abandoned them during the 50s by withdrawing their aid etc. President Pompidou said that this was no doubt the case. But he thought that the fundamental reason for Sino/Soviet hostility was that their interests conflicted. He had been particularly struck by Chinese anxiety at Soviet penetration to the Indian Ocean, whether through Afghanistan or, as the Russians must hope, in due course through the Suez Canal.

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The Prime Minister asked about Chinese thinking on the military threat. President Pompidou said that he thought that the Chinese were now less concerned at the possibility of a pre-emptive nuclear strike by the Russians. What they seemed to fear was an all out conventional attack on Peking and on their own nuclear force installations. The Prime Minister referred to the Chinese programme of building deep shelters. M. Pompidou said that this was indeed a noticeable feature. But who could tell how the situation would develop. He wondered whether the Russians were not biding their time until the disappearance of Mao with the hope of them encouraging the emergence in China of a younger generation of leadership which might be ready to establish more friendly relations with the Soviet Union. In reply to a question from the Prime Minister, M. Pompidou said that he had not come under any pressure from Chou-en-lai to join with the Chinese in striking an anti-Soviet attitude.

M. Pompidou said that he had not seen much of Chinese industrial development. He had visited Shanghai but the impression that he had gained was that it had changed very little since the "imperialist" period. It was simply being run by a different set of bosses. In any case he had been struck by the much greater emphasis laid by the Chinese in their talks on the agricultural problem than on industry.

Public Opinion Polls

President Pompidou referred to an opinion poll published that morning in "Le Figaro" about French and British attitudes to Europe. He had been struck in particular by the response to a question asking which member country of the Community was considered to be most determined to protect its own national interest. A substantial majority of those polled in France had replied "Britain": and an equally substantial majority polled in Britain had replied "France". This seemed to him to illustrate the national attitudes in each country towards the other. The Prime Minister commented that it perhaps exemplified the respect which the people of each country had for the other. M. Pompidou added that Germany was not far behind in the opinion of those polled.

Regionalism

M. Pompidou commented that he had seen that a Scottish Nationalist had recently been elected to the House of Commons. The Prime Minister told him something about the newly elected Member but said that her interest in the House had not yet proved sufficient to encourage her to come and take up her seat. M. Pompidou said that he was impressed by the extent to which regional feeling was growing within the Community. This was just as noticeable in France as elsewhere. It was no longer confined largely to Brittany but extended also to less tightly knit regions such as the South West and the Midi.

