Stalin’s death in March 1953 marked a new development in East-West relations and in a few years the Cold War appeared to give way to what has been called the ‘early détente’. In this connection Britain, in particular the Tory leader Winston Churchill, who had come back to power in October 1951, played a leading role in promoting a dialogue between the West and the Kremlin’s new leaders. The role Churchill played in trying to overcome the worst aspects of the Cold War, his speech at the House of Commons in May 1953, his attempts at convening a summit conference, the difficulties he had to cope with as a consequence of the American authorities’ suspicions, and also of the doubts nurtured by Anthony Eden and the Foreign Office, and by several members of the Tory cabinet, are well known; scholars’ attention has already focused on these issues. Nonetheless if these episodes are examined in a broader perspective, they seem to offer some food for thought, in particular they may throw some light on the changes in Britain’s policy towards Moscow between late 1952 and mid-1953, on early contrasting reactions to Stalin’s death, as well as on the reasons which led Churchill in May 1953 to openly launch his project for renewed dialogue with the Soviet Union.

Dialogue with Moscow had been a main goal for Churchill from the moment he came back to Downing Street in October 1951. His hopes surfaced both in an official telegram he sent to Stalin and in the inaugural speech he delivered at the House of Commons on 7 November. The Prime Minister’s aspirations were confirmed during 1952, even if he understood his ambitious goals could not be achieved without a radical change in the attitude of the American administration, but it was very unlikely the Washington authorities could work out such a dramatic development on so thorny an issue, in particular since in 1952 American foreign policy was heavily influenced, almost paralysed, by the impending presidential elections. In mid-June Churchill confided to his private secretary and close adviser, John Colville, ‘... that if Eisenhower were elected President, he [Churchill] would have another shot at main peace by means of a meeting of the Big Three’. A few months later Churchill confirmed his opinion, according to which, if Eisenhower were elected, the new President would be ready to start some dialogue with the Kremlin’s leader.
In spite of these hopes, as John Young has argued, 'the first year of the Conservative Government saw no easing in the Cold War'. Among the reasons for such a deadlock Young has singled out the Truman administration's steady opposition to any initiative on the part of the West. The continuing American intransigence was not the only element which frustrated the Prime Minister's aspirations: the Soviet attitude did not justify any optimism. On the other hand, the Soviet note on the future of Germany, issued in March 1952, had been rejected by the Western powers, which had labelled the Soviet document as a mere propaganda device. In late December 1952 the British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir Alvary Gascoigne, sent Eden a secret and personal despatch, which aroused the Foreign Secretary's attention. In sketching out the main patterns of Soviet foreign policy in 1952, Gascoigne stressed the negative attitude the Soviet Foreign Minister Vyshinsky had shown on the Korean question. The British Ambassador added:

As viewed from Moscow the Kremlin's attitude towards the West seems to have crystallised during the year. The proceedings of the Communist Congress in October, and the implications of Stalin's various statements at that time, seem, undoubtedly, to show that the Soviet Government have definitely, as far as one can see, turned their faces against any agreement with the non-communist world.

Gascoigne, who was aware of Churchill's hopes, pointed out the Western European leaders' eagerness to renew some form of dialogue with Moscow, but he ruled out any chance of 'high level talks'. In the opinion of the British Ambassador, the Soviet Union did not want an armed conflict with the West; at any rate he believed the existing situation played into the hands of the Soviets both in Asia and in Europe. Furthermore, Stalin appeared to be able to control the tensions in the Communist bloc. As a conclusive remark, Gascoigne took into consideration the Republican electoral success. In this connection, on the basis of the 'warmongering' statements by some Republican leaders, Gascoigne wrote:

As regards the future, I suggest that we can but continue to deal with the leaders of Soviet communism as we have in the past. Patience is of the essence; that and a willingness to listen to any Soviet suggestion which may be made for an easing of the tension, be it made directly or indirectly. Any hasty action taken for instance with regard to the Eastern European satellites, or in Asia against China, might well, I feel, bring upon us the great calamity of a general war. It is to be hoped that the new leaders in the United States will bear this very much in mind, and that they will not be pushed by certain elements to take hasty action which we should regret.