Why the EAEC failed

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Why the EAEC failed

The assumptions and interests of the Member States with regard to the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) were very diverse, and that made the EAEC's task more complicated. It had to establish favourable conditions for the creation and development of nuclear industries, but it was able neither to establish a concept for Community research nor impose from the outset a single type of reactor. It proved equally difficult to draw a clear distinction between the civil and military uses of the atom. Above all, the Treaty presupposed a political commitment which, in actual fact, soon vanished.

Disagreement about the objectives

France wanted to develop its military and energy programmes quite independently. It wanted to maintain its independence with regard to both supply and the technology applied. Nevertheless, it came down in favour of an Atomic Community of the Six, because it saw in it a way of controlling Germany and preventing it from developing a nuclear programme which, with US assistance, would outstrip the French programme. France also sought to boost its own atomic programme by means of a pooling of resources (ores and fissile materials) and investment, in particular for the construction of a European isotope separation plant. France's strategic aims took precedence over economic profitability considerations, although that was the specific objective of its European partners.

France, which has no natural oil and gas resources of its own, does, however, possess natural uranium resources; so, defending its national and colonial interests, it gave priority to this option for the construction of its reactors. Several options were in fact in competition on the European market. The American option known as 'ordinary water' is based on enriched uranium, while French and British reactors run on natural uranium. Each nuclear power sought to develop its own option, which was advantageous to its research scientists and its installations. The American option eventually triumphed and led to the signing of a cooperation agreement, in November 1958, between Euratom and the USA on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Indifferent to France's argument about European independence, France's partners — which did not have a military programme — preferred to use the enriched uranium option. They consequently bought American nuclear power stations and secured supplies of enriched uranium from across the Atlantic. In May 1964, the Six negotiated a new agreement with the USA on the mutual development of fast reactors for peaceful purposes. In 1969, after General de Gaulle left office, the French nuclear industry totally abandoned its natural uranium option as it had proved too costly to use.

The United States was dismayed at the proliferation of nuclear weapons and objected to European nuclear weapons. Enriched uranium supplied by the Americans became subject to strict American controls, and it was banned from military use.

The blocking of the Commission

The Commission of the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) should have been entrusted with considerable supranational powers in order to pursue a strict policy on the development of nuclear technology. At all events, that was the belief held by the French Federalist Étienne Hirsch who had headed the Commission since 1959.

However, the governments refused to grant the Commission such wide-ranging powers. On grounds of economic liberalism, Germany was, therefore, against a public authority intervening in the supply of fissile materials. The FRG refused to pay Euratom prices, which were considerably higher than world market prices. In 1961, Étienne Hirsch's personal approach to the United States offended General de Gaulle who vehemently objected to Euratom's supranational prerogatives. Étienne Hirsch's term of office was not renewed in 1962. The world economic environment hardly favoured Euratom. The fear of a general shortage of petroleum products receded, and Euratom gradually appeared to be less of a political and economic priority.

The problems of financing

The European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) gradually changed into an intergovernmental cooperation association. Unlike the High Authority of the ECSC, which was financially independent, the Commission of the EAEC, like that of the EEC, relied on national contributions to fund its budget. The application of the ‘fair return’ principle prompted each Member State to claim benefits in return for its participation in the Euratom budget, which led to a certain tendency to scatter resources. This is why Euratom’s Joint Research Centre came to be split up between Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany.

The lack of a programme for global development

The Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) provided for neither the pooling nor the coordination of nuclear research. Duplication of tasks was unavoidable.

The EAEC carried out long-term research programmes without any immediate commercial spin-offs. In France, from 1967, the Pierrelatte enrichment facility developed a reactor which was a resounding commercial failure.

The Member States less developed in nuclear technology, such as Italy and the Netherlands, also wanted to increase their potential. They demanded that EAEC expenditure in their country should correspond to their net contribution. This ‘fair return’ prevented a truly comprehensive programme from being implemented. The various research centres had limited resources doled out to them a little at a time, and the research programmes were soon restricted to the operational maintenance of equipment.