

Note from Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury to Christian Pineau (Paris, 22 June 1956)


Caption: A few days before the beginning of the diplomatic Val Duchesse Conference on the preparations for the Rome Treaties, Maurice Bourgès-Maunoury, French Defence Minister, makes Christian Pineau, his counterpart at the French Foreign Ministry, aware of his determination to safeguard France’s freedom to manufacture nuclear weapons independently of its accession to Euratom.

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Minister for Defence and the Armed Forces
to
The Minister for Foreign Affairs
37, Quai d'Orsay
Paris

The French Government has always insisted on the right to act as it sees fit with regard to the manufacture of nuclear weapons. To renounce that right in a world where nuclear disarmament is not yet a reality would be tantamount to France abandoning all national defence.

Even within the framework of our alliances it is no longer possible to imagine effective armed forces that are not equipped with such weapons. And a deliberate decision to rely solely on other powers for our security would be a serious responsibility indeed.

Permanent renunciation of nuclear weapons seems to me out of the question.

Is 'temporary' renunciation, along the lines proposed by Mr Spaak in his covering letter to the six Euratom Ministers, still possible?

In my letter of 9 March to the Prime Minister I envisaged conditional renunciation until the end of 1958, applying to manufacture but not to research and experimentation of a scientific nature.

Two new factors now make me think that even such a moratorium is undesirable and potentially dangerous.

(1) Both the Franco–American agreements on the purchase of U-235 and the documents on the International Agency Project show the direction American policy in the matter is taking and the tendency for the great powers to seek a monopoly over the manufacture of nuclear weapons by exercising tight control over the raw materials market and the use of fissile material.

By entrusting Euratom, whose role is non-military, with the 'exclusive supply' of nuclear material to France, and by not reserving, from the outset of the negotiations, our right to use the product of 'joint facilities' for military purposes, we risk finding ourselves, at the end of the moratorium, bound by a web of international agreements from which we cannot escape. Hence it would be futile to accept a temporary renunciation of nuclear weapons manufacture in the hope of being able to regain our freedom of action easily at a later date. Temporary renunciation is likely to be irreversible.

(2) Also, a new technical factor has emerged. As of January 1957, France will be in a position to open a pilot plant for the separation of uranium isotopes. This process is vital for national defence, both for propellants and for certain types of explosive devices. Agreeing to a temporary ban on military applications would mean accepting that our supplies of uranium 235 would come exclusively from:

— either the United States (in which case the U-235 would be subject to restrictions on its use and extremely strict monitoring, as the recent Franco–American agreement shows);

— or the 'joint' European production facility, which is for strictly peaceful ends.

If we wished to reassert our right to produce weapons at the end of the 'Spaak moratorium', we could not use the U-235 from this joint, non-military facility. The establishment of an unrestricted national production chain for fissile material, which we are already capable of setting up, would have been delayed for the duration of the moratorium. Yet it is quite clear that we have already fallen well behind and should not lose any more time.

One way of avoiding such problems would be to have it accepted at the outset of the negotiations that, given

its great power status, its responsibilities and the advanced stage of its development of atomic power, France should be entitled to use fissile material from the 'joint' facilities for possible weapons manufacture.

In conclusion, I would ask you kindly to bear the above concerns in mind during the forthcoming conference in Brussels and to ensure that the Euratom treaty gives France:

- (1) the right to manufacture nuclear weapons whenever it sees fit and without the restriction of a time limit;
- (2) the possibility to use, for that purpose, any ore or nuclear fuel, whether domestically produced or obtained through the supply Agency;
- (3) Failing such agreement on the use of products from the 'joint facilities', all measures should be taken by our negotiators to preserve the possibility of setting up a chain for 'unrestricted' products, which is an essential requirement for pursuing a military programme, should we wish to do so.

Moreover, given the importance to the Ministry of Defence of the issues to be dealt with in Brussels, I would appreciate it very much if you agreed to the nomination of a representative from the Paris office of my Department as a member of the French delegation.

(signed) M. Bourges-Manoury