

Memo from Raoul de Fraiteur to Paul-Henri Spaak (Brussels, 20 October 1948)


Caption: On 20 October 1948, Raoul de Fraiteur, Belgian Defence Minister, sends a confidential letter to Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, in which he reviews the decisions adopted by the conference of defence ministers of the five Member States of Western Union.

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Memo from R. de Fraiteur to P.-H. Spaak (Brussels, 20 October 1948)

Top secret

Dear Prime Minister,

Further to your letter of 13 October 1948, I have the honour to inform you of the decisions taken at the Conference of Defence Ministers. They can be grouped under the following headings:

I — Western Union defence organisation.

It was decided to set up:

(a) an intergovernmental authority.

This will be provided by the 'Defence Committee of the Western Union', consisting of the Ministers responsible for defence in time of peace and in time of war. The Committee will meet as and when circumstances require.

The Defence Committee's role will be to draw up the military policy to be applied in the defence of Western Europe and to promote the production and distribution of the material resources needed for the purpose;

(b) a supreme military authority.

This will be provided by the 'Permanent Committee of Chiefs of Staff of the Western Union', consisting of the Chiefs of Staff (land, air and sea) of the Five Powers. The Committee will meet at regular intervals and, in addition, when circumstances require.

The Committee's tasks will be to advise the Defence Committee of the Western Union on issues of a military nature and to review all matters referred to it by the Defence Committee (for example, the standardisation of weapons, which it has been asked to investigate).

The Committee will have a combined Headquarters and a secretariat based permanently in London.

The five Ministers felt that it would be worth inviting the United States and Canada to send observers to the Committee of Chiefs of Staff of the Western Union (in fact, several American officers and one General from the Permanent Military Committee);

(c) a Command organisation.

This will consist of:

- a Commander-in-Chief of Ground Forces,
- a Commander-in-Chief of Air Forces,
- a Naval Counsellor, who will take the title of Admiral Western Europe.

In order to coordinate the work of these three authorities, a President of Commanders-in-Chief or Supreme Commander will be appointed.

The tasks of these command units will be:

(a) to draw up plans for action aimed at protecting Western Europe against attack from the East,

(b) to inform the Permanent Committee of Chiefs of Staff of the Western Union of the requirements which must be met in order to put these plans into execution,

(c) to draft the operational directives to be given to formations which will be placed under the orders of the Supreme Commander in time of war.

This applies in particular to the Allied Occupation Forces in Germany,

(d) to carry out inspections and to liaise closely with the Commanders and the formations which will be placed under their command in time of war.

In other words, while these Commanders-in-Chief and their President do not have effective command in time of peace of the forces which will be placed under their orders in the event of hostilities, they have an essential role in preparing forces for combat and in inspecting them.

By agreement with the Chief Ministers of the Five Powers of the Brussels Pact, the following appointments have been made:

President of the Committee of Commanders-in-Chief:
Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery.

Commander-in-Chief of Land Armies:
General de Lattre de Tassigny (French).

Commander-in-Chief of Air Forces:
Air Marshal Sir James Robb (British).

Admiral Western Europe:
Vice Admiral Jaujard (French).

Belgian, Dutch and Luxembourg officers will serve on the staffs of these four Commanders-in-Chief. They will be allotted posts and duties commensurate with the size of the military forces which they represent.

II — Defence policy of the Western Union.

Having studied the political and military situation of the Western Union, on the one hand, and of the USSR, on the other, the five Ministers of Defence considered that the main threat from the USSR was directed against Western Europe and that it was important, in the event of war, to halt its troops as far east as possible in Germany in order to protect Western Europe from an invasion.

To this end, implementation plans will take account of the gradual build-up of Allied forces. Accordingly, the Command will need to adapt its plans so as to take account of the progress achieved in the provision of arms.

It is, therefore, necessary to raise the level of military preparedness of all the Five Powers. This will be done to the extent permitted by considerations of an essentially economic order.

I stress that point, because the Ministers were agreed in thinking that it was important not to launch an arms race which would be detrimental to normal economic life.

One of the main points which emerged from the discussions was the need to conclude a financial agreement which would facilitate the application of the principle of mutual assistance laid down in the Brussels Treaty.

III — Miscellaneous.

The Ministers then considered certain specific problems to which a solution was urgently required because of

the long lead time required for implementation.

(a) They decided to adopt an air defence plan involving the establishment of:

— a surveillance and early-warning radar network covering the territory of the five Western countries,

— a round-the-clock force of Allied fighter aircraft, to which each of the five Signatory States would make a contribution on the basis of its capabilities.

As regards the establishment of radar networks in Belgium, the expenditure of around 350 million Belgian francs is to be spread over several years; 100 million francs would have to be spent in 1949.

As regards aircraft, Belgium's contribution will be 12 squadrons of daytime fighter aircraft and three squadrons of night fighters, of which three squadrons would be equipped with modern aircraft in 1949; the programme as a whole would be spread over five years.

(b) Tanks located in Belgium (tanks at Antwerp deriving from the British surplus).

The Ministers of Defence decided that the tanks currently located in Belgium which were militarily suitable would be purchased by France. The Chairman, Mr Ramadier, promised to send a mission to Belgium at the earliest opportunity in order to decide which tanks he would want to take.

On this subject, I would point out that the Under Secretary of State, General Lejeune, recently came to Brussels, accompanied by technical experts, and that talks on purchase are currently under way.

IV — Formation of a Five-Power Military Armaments Committee.

The manufacture and production of arms are clearly crucial factors in the military preparedness of the five Signatory States.

In fact, only Great Britain currently has an industry capable of producing weaponry.

France will be able to bring its industry back into production; the potential of the three other Signatory States is not inconsiderable, but it cannot be compared with the capabilities of France and Britain.

Given this situation, what needs to be done is to promote the activity of the arms industries of the five countries, to assess their capabilities in relation to requirements and then to distribute the arms produced among the beneficiaries.

To this end, the Ministers decided to set up a Supply Board consisting of eminent civilian and military persons well acquainted with the industrial capabilities of their countries.

Belgium has appointed as its representatives Mr H. Janne, *Chef de Cabinet* of the Minister for Economic Coordination, and General Paheau.

A meeting of the Board took place on 21 October. We were previously sounded out as to possibilities for the manufacture jointly with the Netherlands of jet aircraft, whose engines would be built in Belgium. I had the matter looked into, and the prospects look promising.

Results achieved to date.

The only results of substance achieved to date are the establishment of boards and committees, the definition of their terms of reference and the organisation of the Command.

However, the machine seems to be well put together and will perform well if the Governments follow up the

proposals to be put to them.

— In the field of air defence, things are much further forward than for defence on land.

Indeed, a joint Allied committee on aviation was at work even before the Brussels Pact was signed and, under the auspices of the latter, has brought about the complete coordination of the air defence of Western Europe:

— overall estimation of the fighter aircraft requirements of the five countries;

— assignment to the five countries of the contributions to be made by them in five years (15 squadrons for Belgium);

— standardisation of aviation equipment;

— complete organisation of the coverage of our territories by an early warning system (radar), to be set up gradually but as soon as possible.

— These results achieved in the field of aviation are very important because it is clear that it is by means of technically advanced weaponry, in aviation for example, that Western Europe will be able to defend itself, pitting the quality of its arms and other equipment, as well as its fighting forces, against quantity, which will always be the strong point of the Soviet Union.

— Belgium has been asked to build the engines for the jet aircraft required for its rearmament and that of the Netherlands; the Netherlands will be entrusted with the manufacture of the airframes for these aircraft.

Talks with the Fabrique Nationale d'Armes de Guerre are in progress. They are being conducted by the Minister for Economic Coordination and myself, and they seem likely to succeed.

— The total military contribution of each country has not yet been determined, but it soon will be, given the tasks which have been entrusted to the Commanders-in-Chief.

According to current estimates, this military effort would extend over a period of five years, rising to a maximum around 1953. This deadline was set by Great Britain, although it did not give any precise reasons to justify it.

— The Americans and Canadians are following the work with great interest, but they repeatedly state that Europe must make a substantial effort of its own before they can consider assisting.

The Americans have, nevertheless, agreed that, in the event of a surprise attack, the Command of their army of occupation in Germany would accept orders from our Commanders-in-Chief. This is fairly significant.

— Currently, with regard to the occupation of Germany, Belgian troops are under British command for the purposes of the administration of the occupied zone and the maintenance of order.

In the event of military operations, Belgian troops, including those of the occupation force in Germany, will be completely independent and will be on an equal footing with those of the other armies.

Comments and considerations.

— The representatives of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg seem overwhelmed by the scale of the problems posed.

Mr Dupong has told me that he would very much like us to cover the interests of the Grand Duchy on the various boards and committees. For this purpose, he would like to conclude a military agreement with Belgium along the lines of the Belgo-Dutch military agreement. He promised to visit you shortly in Brussels.

— France and the Netherlands often draw attention to their manifold difficulties, with the apparent intention of securing free supplies of arms and other equipment, either from Great Britain or from the United States.

France has made several attempts to induce the Americans to throw in their lot with the Signatory States of the Brussels Pact. It is likely, indeed almost certain, that this will happen, but the American delegate has issued a categorical statement to the effect that Western Europe must give a formal undertaking of its will to defend itself and make serious efforts before the USA can commit itself to anything at all.

It is not certain that the United States' position will remain firm because, despite this statement, France has continued to appeal to the United States, outside the Committee of Five, for supplies of arms, while offering certain compensations, particularly in North Africa.

It is certain that direct talks have taken place between France and the United States and that American envoys are in North Africa.

The Netherlands, for its part, acts through the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee in Washington, a war committee which still exists and to which the Netherlands sent a delegate for issues relating to the war in the Pacific.

The Netherlands is less demanding than France and, moreover, is making an aviation contribution identical to our own.

In my opinion, if the Americans act quickly to bring about the rearmament of Western Europe, it will be because they want to shorten the five-year timescale indicated in this memo and not because of any desire to assist countries which have done nothing to help themselves.

This action could be given various interpretations, the most obvious of which would be that it is driven by the likelihood of a threat to peace materialising in the fairly near future.

The Minister for Defence