

Euratom and France's military plans

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Jean Monnet, who had recently resigned as President of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), was busy promoting Euratom as the driving force behind European revival. At the same time, the heads of France's Atomic Energy Commission (CEA) were voicing their fears that they would be obliged to give other European countries the benefit of their country's scientific and technological advances. Furthermore, Pierre Guillaumat, the General Administrator and government delegate to the CEA, was among those who thought that France's military programme should take priority. Unfortunately, with nuclear energy, it is extremely difficult to draw a clear line between military and civilian applications. This explained the opposition of some of the French military high command to any supranational atomic body in Europe. For France, there was no question of Euratom hindering its activities. But France had made so much progress in nuclear research, setting up its own five-year nuclear programme in 1952, that it needed to procure an ever increasing supply of enriched uranium. However, despite the 'Atoms for Peace' programme, the United States was reluctant to exchange uranium-235 for French plutonium. What was more, the U-235 that the Americans agreed to supply in small quantities and at a very high price was not sufficiently enriched to be of any use in military applications. France was consequently determined to end its dependence on the United States. This led to the CEA gradually becoming more amenable to the Euratom project, assuming that its aims were largely technical and hoping that the CEA could derive some benefit from the pool to fund the construction of nuclear power stations in Europe and an isotope-separation plant. The management of the CEA and most French politicians thought that Euratom might result in the Six shouldering the cost of part of the civilian nuclear programme, which, in turn, would enable France to free up new funds and focus its efforts on its military nuclear programme. In other words, Paris would agree to Euratom only if it left France completely free to continue research for its own nuclear weapons, without being subject to any supervision by Euratom.

This was the priority for the French. In the spring of 1955, France's National Defence Committee ruled out any possibility of a European nuclear force. Throughout the negotiations undertaken by the Intergovernmental Committee set up by the Messina Conference, then the Intergovernmental Committee on the Common Market and Euratom, the French delegation opposed the idea that the future treaty should place limitations on national independence or restrict France's nuclear initiatives. Furthermore, Paris was planning to carry out nuclear tests shortly, an attitude that immediately upset the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which was forbidden from developing nuclear weapons under the terms of the Paris Accords of October 1954. In fact, Bonn considered that the French demands ran counter to the principle of non-discrimination between Member States. The Germans feared that the French would use the secrecy essential to the security of its military programme as an excuse for evading the supervision and data exchanges imposed on its partners, despite the fact that, at the same time, its partners would be indirectly assisting French military research. When, in May 1955, Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Foreign Minister and Chairman of the Intergovernmental Committee, proposed a compromise involving a moratorium on the production of nuclear weapons lasting several years, France put an extremely restrictive interpretation on it. French leaders repeated that the National Assembly would never ratify a treaty that implied that France should give up its plans to develop nuclear weapons. On the contrary, the diplomatic humiliation that the country suffered with the Suez Crisis in 1956 convinced France that it needed to develop nuclear weapons as soon as possible. Paris considered that a commitment to use nuclear energy for purely civilian purposes could apply only in the event of worldwide nuclear disarmament. In January 1957, faced with France's refusal to yield and absolutely determined to bring the negotiations on the Common Market to a successful conclusion, the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, ultimately had to give in. He accepted that supervision of the use of fissile materials would not apply to facilities involved in the national defence of a Member State. In the end, after two years of tough negotiations, France had its way: Euratom would not be entitled to verify French military nuclear facilities. The Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom), signed on 25 March 1957 in Rome, concerns only civilian nuclear power and does not encompass military requirements.