

Euratom's monopoly over the supply of fissile materials

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Between 1955 and 1957, the Brussels negotiations on the future European Atomic Community led to a fierce battle among the Six regarding Euratom's monopoly over the procurement and supply of fissile materials, to which, moreover, it would have a right of ownership. Right from the start of the discussions, the French Delegation declared that a monopoly was the best way of guaranteeing free access to fissile materials for all, without discrimination, and of establishing effective controls over their use. Paris saw this as a way of ensuring that Euratom had a weight in nuclear matters at world level comparable to that of the United States and the Soviet Union. But it was also a matter of maintaining effective control over the use of the fissile products, without which the Americans would refuse to cooperate in any way or would impose their own controls. In actual fact, for France it was above all a question of preventing Germany from developing an independent atomic industry and of securing fissile materials for its well developed French nuclear plants in sufficient quantities and at low cost.

On 13 and 14 December 1956, at the meeting of the Heads of Delegations at the Intergovernmental Conference on the Common Market and Euratom and by way of derogation from the principle of equality among Member States, the French Delegation called for France to be guaranteed a preferential supply of fissile materials for a period of ten years so that it could meet the requirements of its current nuclear programme. Faced with objections from its European partners, and particularly from the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which wished to promote its own industries, Paris declared that the principles of Euratom's ownership of and monopoly in fissile materials were fundamental and non-negotiable. To break this political deadlock, the French Delegation said that it would accept three exceptions to the monopoly: a Member State might procure products from a third country if the ores and fissiles supplied by Euratom were insufficient in quantity, at too high a price or on terms different from those on the world market. But the Franco-German confrontation on the question of the ownership of fissile material continued until January 1957. It was not until the Paris Conference of Heads of Government and Foreign Ministers of the Six, held on 19 and 20 February 1957, that the principle was adopted of Euratom's right of ownership of only what were known as 'special' fissile materials.