

# Letter from Sir John William Denys Margetson to William J. A. Wilberforce on the WEU Standing Armaments Committee (Brussels, 6 October 1975)


**Caption:** On 6 October 1975, Sir John William Denys Margetson, Head of Chancery at the United Kingdom delegation to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), sends a letter to William J. A. Wilberforce, Head of the Defence Department at the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), concerning the future of the Standing Armaments Committee (SAC) of Western European Union (WEU). Sir John William Denys Margetson outlines three factors that justify the abolition of the SAC: the French are now participating in NATO programmes in the field of armaments procurement and standardisation; the United Kingdom can afford even less than before the costs involved in maintaining the SAC; and the French appear to have given up their efforts to revitalise the SAC.

**Source:** The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Western Organisations and Co-ordination Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western Organisations Department: Registered Files (W and WD Series). WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION (WEU). Future of Standing Armaments Committee of Western European Union. 01/01/1975-31/12/1975, FCO 41/1749 (Former Reference Dep: WDU 11/1 PART B).

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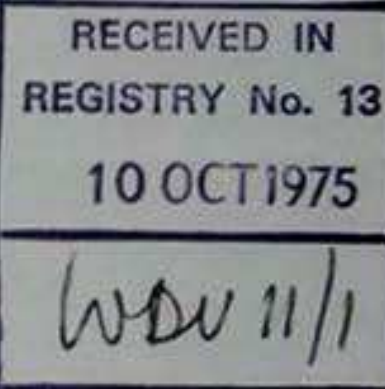


UNITED KINGDOM DELEGATION TO NATO  
1110 BRUSSELS

6 October 1975

AGEN 10/3

W J A Wilberforce Esq  
Defence Department  
FCO  
London S W 1



WEU STANDING ARMAMENTS COMMITTEE

1. When you visited NATO with Richard Sykes recently we discussed the question of the WEU Standing Armaments Committee (SAC) and you suggested that I should write to you so that you might consider the matter further on your return.

2. As you know our policy over the last year or so has been to prevent the SAC from starting any new work which might duplicate work being undertaken in NATO by all the member nations of the Committee including the French. There has, however, been an understandable reluctance in the Department to kill off the SAC, first because of possible German reactions to seeing WEU work being confined to control of armaments (and in practice German armaments): secondly because of possible reactions from the French who were till recently backing the SAC as a rival to the Eurogroup. However, I wonder whether further consideration could now be given to the future of the SAC taking into account the change in circumstances since it was last reviewed in early 1973 - see the exchange of letters between Ted Peck and Tom Brimelow of 23 January 1973 and 2 February 1973 respectively and the brief for the WEU Ministerial meeting in February 1973.

3. It seems to us that there are three factors that strengthen the case for abolition:-

- a) the new work being undertaken in NATO in the field of armaments procurement and standardisation, in which the French are participating, makes it highly unlikely that the SAC could have any worthwhile work on its plate in the foreseeable future. The only potential task, the study which Plantey persuaded the Belgians (perhaps in retrospect against their better judgment) to propose at the Ministerial meeting last May, would embarrass non-WEU members of Eurogroup who have already registered their concern in Euronad. Existing work is fast running out and with no new work being approved it is becoming more difficult than ever to find material for the SAC's agenda: the members of the Committee and the Secretariat are consequently becoming very frustrated.

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- b) The UK can now afford even less than before the staff effort and cost (both budgetary contributions and travel expenses) involved in maintaining the SAC. In our own case we have to send Bill Perry from this Delegation to the quarterly meetings in Paris. He is extremely busy with important work in the armaments field in NATO. Once every seven quarters we have to provide two representatives when it is the British turn to take the chair. The Ministry of Defence have to provide representatives for the one remaining sub-group; they feel they are wasting their time and money.
- c) The French appear to have given up their efforts to revitalise the SAC; certainly they have stopped taking new initiatives at its meetings.

3. I do not know whether, when added to our long-standing view that the SAC is an unnecessary body, these new factors are enough to tip the balance against the political objections to its termination. If it cannot be killed, could we not save ourselves much embarrassment and effort by putting it into a state of suspended animation, reducing the Secretariat to the minimum, with perhaps one formal meeting a year? I do not know whether there would be serious French or German objections to any initiative we might take in either of these directions, or if there were, how much weight we should accord them: these are matters which you will doubtless wish to explore and on which Christopher Lush and Peter Petrie, to whom I am copying this letter, may wish to comment.

4. When you were here we also discussed the possibility, if we could not eliminate the SAC activity, of saving time and energy by arranging for the UK to be represented in future by a member of the staff of the Embassy at Paris rather than from this Delegation. On further reflection, however, we feel that for both constitutional and practical reasons this could create more problems than it would solve. It is unlikely that other nations (except the French who being on home ground have recently and temporarily been represented from their MOD) who do not have armaments specialists on the staff of their Embassies at Paris, could fall in with this practice.

cc: T C Petrie Esq  
Bonn  
C D Lush Esq  
Paris  
G C B Dodds Esq  
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J W D Margetson

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