

Draft note on the British Government's view on the proposed armaments pool (London, 26 September 1955)

Caption: On 26 September 1955, Francis John Stephens, Higher Executive Officer at the British Ministry of Defence, sends a note to John Wyndham, Private Secretary at the Foreign Office, in order to brief the delegation working on the French proposals for the creation of a European armaments pool. The British consider the French proposal too restrictive, also stating that the remaining Western European Union (WEU) members are unlikely to support a proposal that does not include the United Kingdom, whereas the French had assumed that the United Kingdom would not participate given its reluctance to join a supranational authority. The British Government therefore proposes a more flexible organisation, which leads to a recommendation from the WEU working group to set up a Standing Armaments Committee.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office: Political Departments: General Correspondence from 1906-1966. WESTERN ORGANISATIONS (WU). Western European Union (WEU): HMG policy. 01/01/1955-31/12/1955, FO 371/118595 (Former Reference Dep: File 10793).

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/draft_note_on_the_british_government_s_view_on_the_proposed_armaments_pool_london_26_september_1955-en-f4efa67d-60c3-44cd-8eob-4582aob183b7.html



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1955

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WESTERN ORGANISATIONS DEPT.

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WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION.

FROM
Mr Stephens

Ministry of Defence

to Mr Wynnham

No.
Dated 26/9/55

Received in
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Government's view on the proposed WEU
Arms Pool

Attaches letter from S. H. Linstead of September 16
in his capacity of Vice-Chairman of the Franco-
British Parliamentary Relations Committee as follows
on above. Attaches memorandum prepared for Mr Schuytling
to send to him. Also whether appropriate agree

References to former relevant papers

119

see MINUTES with.

(Print)

(How disposed of)

By Mr Stephens
Min. of Defence
for Mr Wynnham
Sept 29

(Action completed)

Forth

(Index)

WU
22/10/55

References to later relevant papers

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THE ARMAMENTS POOL

The French Proposals

The French proposals for the pooling of armaments among the Continental countries of Western European Union, by which they mean the introduction of arrangements to achieve the integration of armaments production and the greater standardization of weapons among those countries, were first put forward at the Nine-Power Conference in London in October 1954. Because of the complicated issues ^{raised} ~~involved~~ further consideration of these proposals was remitted to a Working Group of the seven W.E.U. powers which started work in January 1955 (see Cmd. 9304 - Documents agreed on by the Conference of Ministers held in Paris October 20th to 23rd 1954 - page 51).

The French developed their ideas at the meetings of the Working Group. They contemplated the rapid building up of a supra-national authority which would be responsible for promoting the standardization of armaments among its member countries; for drawing up a common armaments programme and allocating production orders to them, for supervising the production programmes as they developed, and for planning and co-ordinating capital investment in the development of production capacity.

This very rigid organisation proposed by the French did not find favour with the majority of the other W.E.U. countries. In particular, they were reluctant to see any arrangements established which did not include the United Kingdom, whereas the French had assumed from the outset that the United Kingdom, in view of her well-known and accepted inability to join a supra-national authority, would not participate in these arrangements.

The United Kingdom Government were, for their part, most anxious to maintain the closest possible association with the other W.E.U. countries and therefore put forward proposals

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for the setting up of a more flexible organisation which would enable gradual but definite progress to be made towards achieving the objectives sought by the French without creating some of the more intractable problems to which the French proposals gave rise. After a good deal of further discussion and elaboration of the United Kingdom ideas, the Working Group recommended to the Council of W.E.U. the formation of a Standing Armaments Committee whose terms of reference are:-

"The Standing Armaments Committee shall, in close relation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, seek to improve consultation and co-operation in the sphere of armaments with a view to finding joint solutions which would assist Governments of member countries in meeting their equipment requirements.

To that end it shall encourage, on a case by case basis, agreements or arrangements on such subjects as the development, standardization, production and procurement of armaments.

These agreements or arrangements may be concluded between all the countries of Western European Union or between some of them. They would remain open to participation by other countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

The Standing Armaments Committee shall submit half-yearly progress reports on all its activities to the Council of Western European Union."

and, with the approval of the Council of W.E.U., this Standing Armaments Committee has now been set up in Paris and is getting down to work.

The United Kingdom Government's Viewpoint

The declared objective of the French proposals was to obtain the maximum efficiency and economy in the production of armaments for the W.E.U. countries, but ^{the proposals also} ~~there were of~~

~~course ...~~

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~~course~~ ^{had} political and purely domestic economic ^{repercussions.} ~~angles to them~~
~~as well.~~ The United Kingdom Government was naturally as
keen as any other to see that all the Western European
countries are armed as efficiently, economically and quickly
as possible but considered that in arriving at the most
effective way of achieving these objectives it would be wise
to ~~pay~~ ^{make} ~~the fullest regard to~~ ^{best possible use of} our previous experience in NATO.

As regards standardization, for example, it ~~stands to~~ ^{is}
~~reason~~ ^{clear} that when, as in the case of W.E.U., ~~you have~~ ^{there are} a number
of countries ~~who~~ ^{possessing} already ~~have~~ substantial armed forces with
their own traditional military methods and equipment, ~~who~~ ^{and having}
~~have~~ ^{not only} military commitments of widely differing character ~~and~~ ^{but also}
~~who~~ have long-established armaments industries with their
domestic engineering practices, trade secrets and patent
rights, there are very serious limits to what can be achieved
in the way of standardization even in the long-term. After
several years' experience this has been recognised in NATO,
where the main emphasis is now placed on standardizing the
components of large equipments, ~~on standardizing these~~ ^{and} items of
stores which are consumed in large quantities; on the
production of ammunition which can be used by all guns of the
same calibre whatever the country ^{of} manufacture (e.g. the .300
rifle ammunition) and on the development of adaptors to enable
equipments to be operated ~~under~~ ⁱⁿ different circumstances ^{from} ~~than~~
those for which they were designed (e.g. to enable the
electrical apparatus of one country to be used with the power
supplies of another). The United Kingdom view is that this
is the only practicable procedure and ~~is~~ ^{that} future development
both in NATO and W.E.U. should be on these lines. This need
not, of course, preclude bilateral or multilateral arrangements
among the W.E.U. countries for the adoption of common items
of equipment, ~~provided~~ ^{that} they do not clash in any way with NATO
standardization agreements, and this is reflected in the terms
of reference of the Standing Armaments Committee.

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The practicability of integrating national armaments production programmes has also been under examination in NATO for a number of years, but the conclusion has emerged that this is not possible unless the countries concerned are prepared to integrate their strategic planning and also the financing of their defence programmes as a whole, which would mean, of course, the loss of domestic Parliamentary control. ~~as far as the latter are concerned.~~ All this would involve a degree of supra-national authority considerably exceeding that contemplated by the French and very much greater than anything in which the United Kingdom, with her special relationship and responsibilities to the other Commonwealth countries, could participate. The proposed French organisation for controlling armaments production was also open to the criticisms that it would be too inflexible to adapt itself readily to the modifications which are continually being required of the armaments programmes of individual countries by changes in the political, strategic and economic factors governing them, and that, being based on the fallacy that the armaments industry is a separate entity, it would be bound to produce serious disturbances in the balance between defence and other production in the industrial activities of the main producing countries. For all these reasons, the United Kingdom Government considered that what was required in W.E.U. *was not* ~~instead of~~ the rigid organisation proposed by the French ~~was but~~ a body which would act as a forum for the exchange of information about the national production programmes of the individual countries and thus facilitate the formation of bilateral or multilateral agreements for the common production of particular items of equipment. This again is reflected in the terms of reference of the Standing Armaments Committee.

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Summing up, therefore, the United Kingdom Government considers that in the setting up^e of the Standing Armaments Committee the problems of standardization and economy of production are being tackled by the W.E.U. powers in the most practicable way^{practicable} and hopes that the deliberations of the Committee will proceed fruitfully along the lines set out for it in its terms of reference.

Exchange of Technical Information

The United Kingdom has always contributed very full technical information, particularly about weapons characteristics, to the NATO discussions on standardization and other related topics. This process will no doubt be extended to the similar discussions in the Standing Armaments Committee of W.E.U. as these develop. In the particular field of atomic energy, the position is complicated by the fact that Monsieur Faure has declared publicly that the French have no programme for the development of atomic and nuclear weapons and there^{is} therefore^{no} call for the release to the French of United Kingdom research and development information in this field. The United Kingdom has, however, agreed to make atomic information available to all the NATO countries to assist in the planning of defence against atomic weapons and in the training of personnel in their use (see Cmd. 9431 - Draft Agreement on co-operation regarding Atomic Information approved by the North Atlantic Council).

As regards the civil use of atomic energy, on the other hand, the Atomic Energy Authority has recently concluded an agreement with the French Atomic Energy Commission about the exchange of information in this field.

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Draft.

MR. STEPHENS.
M/DEFENCE.

NOTHING TO BE WRITTEN IN THIS MARGIN.

Letter despatched by
Private Secretary's Dept.

Sept. 30th 1955

FROM:

Mr. Wyndham

MAD }
Private } first
Secretary }

^{We}
~~The Departments concerned~~ have
 considered the note enclosed with your
 letter of September 26 about ~~the proposed a~~
 European Armaments Pool. ^{We}
~~They~~ have no
 comments, and agree that it could be
 given to the Delegation for their
 confidential guidance.

J.W.
29 / IX

September 29, 1955.

We have considered the note enclosed with your letter of September 26 about a European Armaments Pool. We have no comments, and agree that it could be given to the Delegation for their confidential guidance.

J. Wyndham.

F.J. Stephens, Esq.