

Extract from minutes of the 495th meeting of the WEU Council held at ministerial level (London, 20 May 1975)

Caption: On 20 May 1975, at the 495th meeting of the Western European Union (WEU) Council at ministerial level in London, the ministers discuss the activities of the Standing Armaments Committee (SAC) and the problems of armaments standardisation in Europe. They particularly consider the proposals set out by Belgian representative Renaat Van Elslande, who believes that standardisation and the maintenance of a viable, competitive armaments industry in Europe for the production of large-scale weapons are essential for European defence. But he notes that the idea of 'European preference' is easier to talk about than to achieve. French minister Bernard Destremau and British minister James Callaghan, who chairs the session, agree with the Belgian proposals. They confirm the need for a competitive European industry and better cooperation with the United States. For the French delegate, this cooperation also raises the question of 'European defence within the Alliance'. He also shares the view of the role the Standing Armaments Committee can adopt in a number of problems relating to standardisation and the cost of operations so that proposals might be submitted to the Council. James Callaghan, on the other hand, believes that WEU is not the appropriate forum at the current time for reviewing the defence industries and suggests that the permanent representatives should start by determining the scope for activity of the SAC in the field of European armaments cooperation and then report back to the Ministerial Council.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of the 495th meeting of WEU Council held on 20 May 1975 at ministerial level in London . III. Examination of the activities of the Standing Armaments Committee and problems of the standardization of Armaments in Europe. CR (75)8. pp. [s.p]; 33; 34; 37-39; 42; 44-46. Archives nationales de Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954-1987. Subjects dealt with by various WEU organs. Year: 1976, 01/05/1975-30/06/1976. File 442.00. Volume 4/4.

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EXTRACT FROM MINUTES OF 495 MEETING
OF W.E.U. COUNCIL HELD ON 20th May 1975
AT MINISTERIAL LEVEL IN LONDON

Chairman The Rt Hon James Callaghan, Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs

III. EXAMINATION OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE STANDING
ARMAMENTS COMMITTEE AND PROBLEMS OF THE STANDARDISATION
OF ARMAMENTS IN EUROPE

(CM (75) 3)

Observing that M. van Elslande wished to make a statement on this subject, the CHAIRMAN invited him to take the floor.

M. van ELSLANDE began by explaining, in order to avoid any misunderstandings, that the ideas he would be outlining were not connected with other European suggestions put forward in the last few days. He had in fact first mooted these ideas in the Belgian Parliament at least eighteen months previously; subsequently, at the half-session of the Assembly of Western European Union in Paris in December 1974, he had spoken on the same topic and had expanded on the idea that a European arms policy was one way of making progress towards a European defence system. Since then, however, there had been fresh developments. There had been an initial discussion between the W.E.U. permanent representatives, and the last ministerial meeting of Eurogroup had very largely been given over to this subject; so it seemed in general that there was growing awareness of the European dimension of the problem. Bearing in mind these developments in various bodies, and bearing in mind also certain recent initiatives, M. van Elslande wished to clarify the views of the Belgian Government on these matters: that was why he had distributed a note to his colleagues, through diplomatic channels, for their personal information.

There were, M. van Elslande thought, three points to note.

First, standardisation was an absolute essential if effective defence was to be maintained in the interests of the Alliance and, more particularly, the interests of Europe.

Secondly, it was vital to maintain a viable and competitive armaments industry in Europe (and the word competitive must be stressed) for the production of major weapons. European defence was part of the logic of European union; so it would be hard to conceive of European defence without Europe having its own independent capacity to produce armaments.

/And finally, ...

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In conclusion, M. van Elslande said he appreciated that this was not an easy question, and that there were aspects requiring a great deal more study and work; it was easier to talk, as he had done, of a certain degree of European preference than to bring it about. Yet he believed that it was useful to tackle the question, as various circles had been asking for some time past whether Europe could afford to let matters in the armaments field drift on with the same industrial and economic system as existed today. And here he had tried to make a distinction between the broad choices and what he thought could be achieved in the immediate future.

M. DESTREMAU said that in the French delegation's view, the ideas put forward by M. van Elslande were clearly worth considering. The French Government had tried to reactivate the Standing Armaments Committee but the general response had been somewhat sluggish. They did not wish to be dogmatic or to lay down the law on the subject and, basically, would support the Belgian Minister's proposal which seemed to be fairly pragmatic in many respects.

It appeared that there was unanimous support for standardisation; the problem was, of course, to try and achieve standardisation which, in fact, had been an elusive target for a very long time. The desire to have a competitive European industry was perfectly legitimate. The French Government had no objection to the idea of co-operating with the United States in that respect; there was no need to try to prevent the Americans from winning certain markets, but it must be added that in this matter, two were sometimes needed for an agreement. The problem of "European defence within the Alliance", which the Belgian Minister had outlined, was an interesting question which should be considered further. Should it be interpreted as meaning that within the Alliance, the European countries could never plan any action without the agreement of the Americans and, if that were the case, could they be sure that any action they might take would be fully supported by the Americans? Or was it to be understood that the European countries would be left some room for initiative?

/On the subject ...

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On the subject of industrial policy, M. Destrenau remarked that attempts at industrial co-operation in the field of armaments by European countries had shown that it was very difficult to achieve results, even at bilateral level. He believed, however, that progress would be made, but only between countries which had attained a comparable level of economic and, even more, industrial development. On the other hand, he thought that it would be entertaining false hopes to think that industrial co-operation between countries which were at widely different levels and were too far from each other could produce results quickly. W.E.U. seemed to him to have the advantage of being composed of neighbouring countries which were virtually all at the same level. The French Government could fully agree to W.E.U. being used at least at a first stage, and perhaps at a second. It might perhaps be agreed, for example, that a number of problems relating to the standardisation of armaments and the cost of the proposed operations should be referred to the Standing Armaments Committee. If the Committee felt unable to resolve these problems, there would then be no reason for objecting to their transfer elsewhere. M. Destrenau added that the Standing Armaments Committee should not be regarded as a closed shop; it might, for example, be able to invite members of the European Community and, in particular, Denmark, to participate in some way, possibly through an ad hoc group as suggested by M. van Elslande; he felt, however, that efforts should not be dispersed too widely in this field, because the studies would otherwise become interminable.

In conclusion, France supported the Belgian proposal. It was conceivable, suggested M. Destrenau, that the deputy National Armaments Directors, or even the Directors themselves, could meet within the S.A.C. to work out proposals for the Council for next October.

/Mr. van der STOEL remarked ...

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requesting the Standing Armaments Committee to undertake a descriptive study of the defence industries in the member countries. As M. van Elslande had already suggested, the Ministers could perhaps ask the permanent representatives to see whether such a study was feasible, and if so, what should be the scope and nature of that study.

Mr. MOERSCH (translation from German), thanking M. van Elslande for his interesting proposal, said that in the main he could support what had been said by his Netherlands colleague. The latter had already put the main points, so there was no need for him to repeat them.

He added, however, that where the details of the Belgian proposal were concerned, he was in the same difficult position as Mr. van der Stoel, for the previous day had been a public holiday in Germany, and the Foreign Ministry had not, of course, been able to study the Belgian proposal closely; this needed to be done in close collaboration with the Ministries of Defence and Economic Affairs.

His Government thought it would be well if, during the detailed study by the permanent representatives, the subsequent procedure were laid down. It had been clearly stated on all sides that there must be no prejudice to the Eurogroup and NATO co-operation in general. It was certainly true that this was a broad issue, and M. Destremau had been right in pointing out that industrial policy and co-operation was a big question. He wanted, therefore, to support the proposal that the permanent representatives look at this matter in detail, and that the Council should then come to a joint decision on the further procedure.

Speaking for the British delegation, the CHAIRMAN gave a warm welcome to the spirit behind M. van Elslande's proposal. The idea of standardisation as a vital interest was one that the United Kingdom Government fully accepted. It was also important to understand the need to maintain in Europe an efficient armaments industry. They readily shared the Belgian objectives on financial considerations too. The Council's main concern then was with what institutions were best suited to the task.

/Having read the ...

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Having read the history of this whole question, Mr. Callaghan realised that it had already passed through various phases. In the British view however, the starting point had been, and still was, that there must be agreement on practical doctrines and concepts and thus on the types, numbers and time-scale of equipments which were required. The two things could not be separated, and it was for this reason that the United Kingdom Government were strongly in support of the Eurogroup as the logical place to consider questions of military tactics and doctrine; indeed, the work in these fields in the Eurogroup was well advanced. The Secretary of State made it quite clear that his Government saw no point in reproducing or duplicating that work in other fields. Activities elsewhere might serve a different purpose, but there was at the present moment a great deal of duplication in the work being carried out.

There was also the important question of reaching a better understanding with the Americans in the defence equipment field. The initiative launched by the Eurogroup countries with the Americans in this respect was likely to be discussed in the very near future, so considerable collaboration and interdependence either existed already, or was in prospect.

If a case could be made out for it, Mr. Callaghan did not rule out the possibility of additional inter-governmental studies on the subject, but the problem was basically an industrial one since the defence industries, particularly in the aeronautical field, were linked with civil industries and often played a key role in the industrial structure. He wondered, therefore, whether it did make sense to consider the defence industries in isolation. Nor did he think at this moment that W.E.U. was the appropriate forum for tackling this particular problem.

However, he would hear what his colleagues had to say. Although, like then, he had not had time to study the details of M. van Elslande's proposals, he both saw and agreed with the objectives set out, which would certainly be in the forefront of their considerations.

/Mr. Callaghan suggested ...

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Mr. Callaghan suggested that the Permanent Council should be asked, as a first step, to consider what exactly would be the scope for activity by the Standing Armaments Committee in the field of European armaments co-operation, how this would relate to work being done elsewhere, and then, having considered it more fully, to report back to the Ministerial Council.

M. BATTAGLIA (translation from Italian) also wished to thank M. van Elslande for the Belgian Government's proposal, and to say that the Italian Government shared his basic idea. It was their view too that defence was an essential element in the construction of Europe and, whether or not this was a perfectionist aim, it must be borne in mind.

The standardisation of armaments had become even more necessary in the context of the economic recession through which Europe was now passing. First, it was only too apparent that this recession would involve serious sacrifices for western economies, and that it was becoming more difficult to cover military costs. Secondly, it was equally apparent that inadequate standardisation of armaments involved a sacrifice by the community without any equivalent contribution to common security.

This, therefore, was the background against which his Government set the Belgian proposal. It of course raised a number of problems, such as whether and how the work of the Standing Armaments Committee could be absorbed into the European Economic Community, whether it could be absorbed by the Political Co-operation Committee, whether it could, or should, be absorbed on the basis of a report from the Belgian Prime Minister, who towards the end of the year, would review problems of European construction and possible ways of combining forces effectively with the Atlantic Alliance. These were all matters of interest and, for that reason, the Italian authorities believed that the Belgian proposal should be studied closely and in detail.

/It was noted ...

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Commenting that, as he saw it, delegations had had a very useful exchange of views, the CHAIRMAN said that there was clearly no difference of opinion among members of the Council on the objective. He invited consideration as to the way they should move forward.

For his own part, his main purpose was to see that before governments embarked on new work or a new study, and gave people new responsibilities, they should know exactly what they intended them to do, and that there would be no duplication of work done elsewhere.

He therefore repeated his suggestion that, in the first place, the Council at permanent representative level should be invited to study the proposals submitted by the Belgian Government and to report their conclusions to their governments. In studying these proposals, the Permanent Council would have in mind what would be the scope for the Standing Armaments Committee's activity, and they would relate what was being done there to the work being done elsewhere.

These seemed to be the immediate tasks. The Chairman had gathered that there was some support for that proposition, but he would be very glad to know whether M. van Elslande had any comments, and see whether he thought it would be the best way forward for his very valuable paper at the present time.

M. van ELSLANDE thanked his colleagues for their positive response to the Belgian proposal.

Naturally, he was under no illusion that agreement would be reached that day on the whole of a very important question which, in his view, should be approached with the proper deliberation required by serious problems. At the same time, he thought that there was general agreement on the aims to be pursued at least.

/M. Destremau and ...

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Without wishing to modify the Chairman's proposal, M. van Elslande wished, therefore, to urge that the Permanent Council should first consider the possibility of giving such instructions either to the S.A.C. or to an ad hoc group. He believed that any serious study including the political aspects of the problem should start there.

Thanking M. van Elslande for his comments, the CHAIRMAN observed that the Belgian Minister's proposal was broadly in line with what he had himself said, with this modification: while it seemed to Mr. Callaghan that it would be for the permanent representatives to decide to recommend whether data should be brought together, the Belgian idea of inviting W.E.U. to begin gathering information together now would have the effect of anticipating the job the Ministers were asking the permanent representatives to undertake.

It was surely for the Permanent Council to decide, or to recommend to governments, what information should be brought together, and then, after that stage, it would be for W.E.U. to start doing so. Otherwise, the duplication that was feared by governments would inevitably occur.

So, if M. van Elslande would be prepared to accept the suggestion in that spirit, namely, that the permanent representatives would, in their study of the proposals, make recommendations as to the nature of the data that should be collected, the Council might be agreed. The only difference was that the Chairman was proposing that the question should be taken in two stages rather than in one.

M. DESTREMAU felt that a good start had been made and that the proposed operation should not be delayed too long. There seemed to be general agreement on the formation of an ad hoc group, and agreement that the S.A.C. should resume studies which, in fact, had been started some time ago. The study, which was based on what was already a fairly modest proposal, should not be divided into two parts and the French Government would be in favour of moving forward as quickly as possible. In his opinion, it should be possible for a report to be submitted to the autumn meeting.

/Observing that ...

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Observing that the Council were on the contrary not agreed that the S.A.C. should start again on the studies which had been begun some time ago, the CHAIRMAN recalled that the proposition was a different one, namely, that the permanent representatives should consider this matter and that they should work out in the light of the Belgian note, which most delegations had not had time to study in detail, whilst they agreed with the objectives, what would be the nature of the work that the S.A.C. should do, taking account of what was being done elsewhere.

M. van ELSLANDE thought that it might nevertheless be interesting to take up the suggestion made by M. Destremau in his last speech, that the permanent representatives should report to the Ministers at their autumn meeting.

The CHAIRMAN asked if there were any objections. He observed that if the report came to the governments first, they would not necessarily have to wait until the next meeting of the Ministers before examining it.

M. DESTREMAU remarked that in discussing an autumn sitting, it should be remembered that the Assembly would be meeting in December and that, in the past, the Council had met twice and sometimes even four times a year at ministerial level. He wondered whether it might not be advisable to hold two ministerial meetings this year, particularly as the Assembly was in a mood of some irritation; furthermore, the wishes of the people had to be respected and account must be taken of the fact that the representatives of member countries to the Assembly of Western European Union had criticised the Council for not providing them with sufficient information on its work and for not always giving as much attention as they would like to their reports, which were frequently of a remarkable character.

/Against this background, ...

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Against this background, if it was really believed that armaments problems should be considered afresh as quickly as possible, M. Destremau thought that the idea of a second meeting of the Council of Ministers should not be ruled out.

The CHAIRMAN remarked that it was for the Council themselves to decide how often they wished to meet. For his own part, he did not know whether it would be possible to get many more meetings in, but it was not as though this work was not being done. He assumed that if the Council wished to meet at ministerial level, this would be arranged through the new Chairman in Office.

The main task was to study the Belgian note in detail, as a first step, and the permanent representatives could then come forward with proposals. The new Chairman in Office would then be able to decide when he should perhaps call a meeting.

It was so agreed.

IV. RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COUNCIL AND THE ASSEMBLY

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Agreeing with M. DESTREMAU that the dialogue with the Assembly was not entirely satisfactory and that the Council were not doing all they should, the CHAIRMAN said that there were two reasons for this. One was that much of the work on political co-operation had passed to the Nine, and the second was, as he understood it, the need for unanimity in agreeing answers to recommendations and written questions put by the Assembly. All governments knew the difficulty in getting unanimity on the kind of issues dealt with by the Organisation; they experienced it in other fora too.

/This situation had ...

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Against this background, if it was really believed that arrangements should be considered afresh as quickly as possible, M. Destremau thought that the idea of a second meeting of the Council of Ministers should not be ruled out.

The CHAIRMAN remarked that it was for the Council themselves to decide how often they wished to meet. For his own part, he did not know whether it would be possible to get many more meetings in, but it was not as though this work was not being done. He assumed that if the Council wished to meet at ministerial level, this would be arranged through the new Chairman in Office.

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