

'Britain seeking to coax France back to the defence fold' from The Guardian (19 June 1974)

Caption: On 19 June 1974, the British daily newspaper The Guardian reports on the initiative in British diplomatic circles to encourage France to return to a European defence system and suggests using Western European Union (WEU) as a forum for consultation and discussion to reconcile the views of France and its European partners on the question.

Source: MacManus, James. "Britain seeking to coax France back to the defence fold" from The Guardian. London: Guardian Newspapers. 19.06.1974, p.4.

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Last updated: 13/10/2016

Britain seeking to coax France back to the defence fold

From JAMES MacMANUS, Paris, June 18

A British diplomatic initiative is under way to persuade France to abandon its "go-it-alone" defence policy and return to a joint European defence system. While the Foreign Office seems to be under no illusion that France will formally return to NATO's integrated military command, there are now hopes that the French can be coaxed into a closer co-operation on defence matters beyond the confines of the European Economic Community.

A first step towards this would be French participation in the Eurogroup, a ten-nation NATO study group which concentrates on the logistics and economic aspects of European defence requirements.

France is not a member of the group for the good reason that neither General de Gaulle nor President Pompidou would submit French forces to NATO command even at that limited level. The presence of Giscard d'Estaing in the Elysée has clearly led the Foreign Office to believe that the French are now being enticed back into the European defence fold.

Although this would be within the NATO structure, the idea emerging from Whitehall is that a purely European defence identity must be built up alongside the American rôle in Europe.

The point emerged in a speech made in Paris today by Mr Roy Hattersley, Minister of State at the Foreign Office. He said that the European allies should strengthen their co-

operation in the armaments field through the Eurogroup. "We remain convinced that the Eurogroup and its subsidiary provide the best available means by which the work of developing greater practical European defence cooperation can be driven forward."

Ironically, Mr Hattersley was addressing a body that the French Government has always preferred as a vehicle for talks on European defence cooperation, the Western European Union.

The Union is an old established and largely ineffectual grouping of the original Common Market Six with Britain. From the French point of view, and the point was made last autumn by the then French Foreign Minister, M. Jobert, the WEU is ideal as a clearing house for an exchange of defence ideas because it has nothing to do with NATO.

But the British, supported by the Germans, are now pushing for the creation of a much more high-powered system of defence cooperation which would, it is hoped, end glaring

defects in NATO's command such as those created because every European country is geared to fight a different war with different equipment.

At a time when Britain, Belgium, and Holland are all preparing defence cuts, the economics of such a rationalisation are attractive.

There has been no official French response to Mr Hattersley's speech. Unofficially, the French have made no objection to such ideas being canvassed on their own ground. But the French President, although much more receptive than either of his two predecessors to Atlantic consultation and European defence cooperation, is unlikely to be rushed on the matter.

For one thing, he has to consider the predominant Gaullist block in the National Assembly which regards such ideas as anathema. Equally, he has already said that Europe must make considerable strides towards political union before France shifts from its independent stance in its foreign policy.