

Differences in nuclear policy

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Differences in nuclear policy

Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands had different interests as regards nuclear policy. As a member of the United Nations Security Council, and because of its status as a nuclear power, France attached much greater importance to this sector than did the other Member States which, above all, wanted to restrict atomic energy to exclusively peaceful purposes. France wished to adopt a European formula for sharing the costs of scientific and civil research so that it might devote itself more effectively to the establishment of a national atomic shield. The programmes of the Six on nuclear research and development were haphazard and, in most cases, merely responded to national and commercial interests. Out of the Six, France – which had its own natural uranium reserves – was the country which developed the largest nuclear programme. However, the system of ownership for the means of electricity generation also varied from one country to another. Whereas they were nationalised in France and Italy, nuclear power stations in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium were often privately owned. Euratom had no control over the military installations of the Member States.

France's strategic interests

In France, the governments of the Fourth Republic supported military nuclear research. From June 1958, with General de Gaulle's return to power, research and development activities increased further. France wanted to maintain a nuclear strike force independent of the United States and also of the Community, which had signed a five-year nuclear cooperation agreement with the Americans in November 1958. The French Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) had been established as long ago as 1945, largely at the instigation of General de Gaulle. It was designed to give France the opportunity of reaffirming its status as a major power which was being called into question. As soon as he took office, General de Gaulle immediately terminated the project for Franco-German-Italian nuclear cooperation. The first French atomic bomb was exploded on 13 February 1960 at Reggane in the Algerian Sahara. It took several more years, however, before France had the equipment required for it to use its strike force: nuclear-powered submarines, Mirage aircraft, ballistic missiles, etc.

Although some votes were cast for the establishment of a European pool of nuclear weapons, most French politicians and military chiefs wanted to prevent the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) from becoming involved in the production of national nuclear weapons. The French Atomic Energy Commission wished to maintain its privileged position. The United Kingdom was the only country in Western Europe to benefit from technological progress in nuclear research. France followed the British nuclear programme with interest and sought possible cooperation in weapons development. It was divided on the issue of whether to let its European partners benefit from its technological progress which, at the same time, it wanted to strengthen in order to counterbalance economic development in Germany. Under the October 1954 Paris Agreements, the FRG was not allowed to possess any ABC weapons (atomic, biological and chemical).

The economic interests of the six partners

In the 1950s, advocates of nuclear energy were convinced that this new energy source would gradually replace oil and coal. These predictions were all the more justified because the oil crisis, which followed the Suez Crisis in the summer of 1956, automatically led to a surge in prices of petroleum products. The suspension of oil deliveries from the Middle East made Europeans suddenly aware of their energy dependence. Reducing this dependence therefore became the main aim of European energy policy.

However, after political disputes had calmed down again in the Middle East, oil prices fell and nuclear energy lost its competitive edge. Contrary to the most alarmist predictions, world oil reserves actually proved to be sufficient, primarily because of the discovery of new oilfields in Iran, Niger and Argentina as well as increased Soviet production and the development of deep drilling technology. From then on, world supply, which considerably exceeded demand, caused oil prices to fall inexorably. At the same time, lower freight charges made it possible for even more petroleum products to be shipped to Europe. The competitiveness of nuclear energy also suffered because the construction of nuclear power stations took

longer than planned. In other words, nuclear energy no longer appeared to be the universal panacea. On the contrary, between 1958 and 1968, the degree of Community dependence on imported oil practically doubled.

The European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC or Euratom) was of interest to France's European partners for varying reasons. Belgium and the Netherlands saw the possibility of using it to develop their own civil nuclear industry. In fact, Belgium had been a partner in a special agreement since 1944 with the United States which supplied it with enriched fuels for reactors in exchange for uranium from the Belgian Congo. In Italy, oil continued to play an important role, primarily because of the predominance of the state-owned *Ente nazionale idrocarburi* (ENI) industrial group. At the beginning of the negotiations, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) pinned great hopes on the European Atomic Energy Community. Later, the major German electricity distribution companies began building their own nuclear power stations, preferring to deal with American partners who were able to offer more advanced technology than the French.