

Letter from Pierre Gaston Billotte to Edgar Faure (Paris, 24 January 1956)

Caption: On 24 January 1956, General Pierre Gaston Billotte, French Minister for National Defence and the Armed Forces, sends a confidential letter to Edgar Faure, President of the French Council, and to Antoine Pinay, French Foreign Minister, in which he emphasises the need for France to be militarily independent in terms of nuclear weapons, irrespective of its commitments within Euratom.

Source: Ministère des Affaires étrangères; Commission de publication des DDF (sous la dir.). Documents diplomatiques français. Volume I: 1956, 1er janvier-30 juin. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1988. 1109 p. p. 74-76.

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GENERAL BILLOTE, MINISTER OF NATIONAL DEFENCE AND THE ARMED FORCES,

to MR EDGAR FAURE, PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL, and MR PINAY, MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS.

D.n° 0146 A G/AL. Top secret.

Paris, 24 January 1956.

Efforts aimed at securing European cooperation in the field of atomic energy have given rise to a number of ideas which, if adopted, would seriously jeopardise our future defence capability. It is, therefore, my duty to alert you to the consequences of these ideas straight away.

I have not yet received the report of the committee of experts who were given a remit to review implementation of the resolution adopted at Messina on 2 June 1955. But the texts which the members of the Action Committee for the United States of Europe have pledged to uphold with regard to their respective governments and parliaments provide for the signatory countries to renounce the right to manufacture atomic weapons and to place all their atomic energy production under the control of a supranational authority.

To begin with only the six powers represented at Messina would be subject to this system, but they would encourage other powers to join it, Britain in particular. Nevertheless, if this plan were to be adopted, France would have her hands tied for an indeterminate period, gaining nothing much in return and pledged to give up manufacturing weapons which the USA, Great Britain and the USSR continued to manufacture.

In national defence terms, it is unthinkable that the French Government could give a pledge of this kind in the absence of any universally agreed ban on atomic weapons which included essential monitoring arrangements and guarantees. Given that a decision on whether or not France will manufacture atomic weapons is not even imminent at the moment, France cannot give up this option or the freedom to pursue atomic research for military purposes.

If we did, France would be totally dependent on her allies for the atomic weapons essential to her defence. This would mean that her opinions and wishes would carry little weight in the councils of the Atlantic Alliance. Our armed forces would be fatally devalued and relegated to the status of a minor player. Their morale, already undermined by the superior resources of our US and British allies, would be seriously damaged.

There is even a possibility that the countries which possess atomic weapons might refrain, for fear of reprisal, from using those weapons to attack each others' territory but not the territory of the other nations in the enemy coalition, which would thus become the battlefield on which all manner of destruction was unleashed. This is a consideration which, in time of war, might sorely test the resolution and the morale of the French nation.

But if we had even a modest atomic capability, it could be that this would serve as an effective deterrent to the aggressor and at the same time strengthen our alliance.

French membership of the European Atomic Energy Community as envisaged would also mean our losing the essential advantage that we have over Germany by virtue of the Paris Agreements.

France would align herself with Germany in undertaking not to manufacture atomic weapons. The system for the control of armaments provided for in the Paris Agreements would be obsolete, because responsibility for this would rest with a supranational authority. The only WEU member not subject to this restriction would be Great Britain. If efforts to secure a general ban on atomic weapons failed, so that France later had to revoke its undertaking to renounce them, there would seem to be no case for preventing Germany from doing the same. There would also be much ground to make up scientifically.

In the last analysis, given NATO's current thinking, which is based on use of atomic weapons to defend the free world, and given that the current understanding of warfare assumes that atomic weapons will increasingly be used tactically and defensively as well as strategically, countries which have pledged not to manufacture and not to carry out research on these weapons — a vital part of modern warfare — will at the same time have given up all ability to defend themselves effectively and abrogated responsibility for this to other powers.

For this reason, I think that it is vital, in order to safeguard French defence policy, that the French Government should play an active part in the efforts towards securing European cooperation on atomic energy currently being made but should not give up the freedom to act which we need for our security unless there is a guarantee from all the other powers that they are willing to renounce atomic weapons.

Copy of this letter to:

Mr Pinay, *Minister for Foreign Affairs*