

Letter from Lord Bridges to Sir Christopher Audland on the future of WEU (London, 2 July 1971)

Caption: On 2 July 1971, Lord Thomas Bridges, head of the Western Organisations Department in the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, sends a letter to Sir Christopher Audland, Counsellor and Head of Chancery at the British Embassy in Bonn, in which he outlines the debate within the British Government over the future of Western European Union (WEU). Lord Thomas Bridges emphasises that as a forum for political consultation, WEU could lose its 'raison d'être' once the United Kingdom joins the European Economic Community (EEC). The letter also covers other WEU activities in the area of standardisation and control of armaments. In this context, Lord Thomas Bridges raises the issue of a potential conflict with the French, who see WEU as vital to maintaining the aspects of the Brussels Treaty that deal with control over German rearmament.

Source: The National Archives of the UK (TNA). Foreign Office, Western Organisations and Co-ordination Department and Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Western Organisations Department: Registered Files (W and WD Series). WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION (WEU). The future of WEU: Western Organisations Department memorandum. 01/01/1971-31/12/1971, FCO 41/880 (Former Reference Dep: WDU 11/13 PART A).

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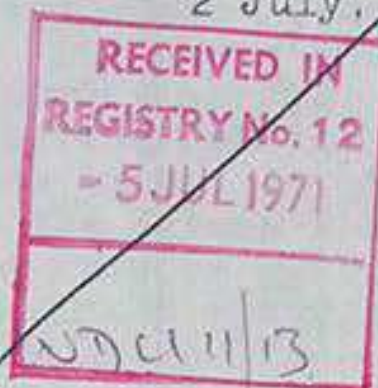
Western Organisations Department

Foreign and Commonwealth Office
London S.W.1

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C J Audland Esq
BONN

2 July, 1971



Dear Christopher,

THE FUTURE OF WEU

Now that the Luxembourg negotiations have ended in success, it is not too soon to consider the effect of British accession to the Community on Western European Union. I am not, you will understand, making any judgement about the substantive programme of work which remains to be done to complete the EEC negotiations: but just as we have for some months been considering the related consequences in the defence field, so it now seems necessary to look at the relationship between the Brussels Treaty and other institutions in the light of the changing political circumstances of Europe.

2. Membership of WEU has had its principal effect in the following areas in recent years: regular political consultation at both Ministerial and Permanent Representative level; the work of the WEU Assembly: the British obligation in Protocol II to maintain forces in Europe: the controls imposed on German re-armament: and the standardisation of armaments. I am not concerned in this letter with the WEU Assembly, except to remark that our participation in the parliamentary institutions of the Community will presumably in due course make the separate WEU Assembly unnecessary in practice. (Already, incidentally, one hears back-benchers commenting on the difficulties which the requirements of the European Parliament will create for them with constituents who begrudge their members too much time spent abroad.) The political consultation which has been the main visible function of the WEU got under way as a result of General de Gaulle's first veto: in these circumstances it has never been a very healthy plant and its raison d'être will disappear as soon as Britain has joined the Community as a full member and can participate in the harmonisation of external policies by members of the Community. I find it difficult to believe that Ministers will wish to participate in meetings which merely duplicate the work being done elsewhere (I note that the text of the Treaty itself establishes the WEU Council, but lays down no permanent arrangements for the frequency of its meetings). As regards the standardization of armaments, we would certainly like to see more fruitful results. The work of the WEU in this field has been singularly unsuccessful. Even the efforts of NATO have produced few concrete results. We think that progress towards standardization of armaments in Europe is likely to require new forms of collaboration or specialisation among European defence industries.

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3. The one essential aspect of the Brussels Treaty which cannot be readily subsumed elsewhere are the controls on German armaments in Protocols II and III. The questions on which I would particularly value your advice are how far these obligations are an irritant to German public opinion; how far the German Government are likely to go on finding it convenient in dealing with the Warsaw Pact and anti-German opinion in the West, to be able to go on pointing to their obligations as evidence that a resurgence of German militarism is ruled out; whether it would be feasible for the present German Government (or its likely successors) to repeat such obligations in a new form, and to honour them, or whether these undertakings by the Federal Republic must be expected to disappear if the Brussels Treaty were to undergo any substantial modification. Possibly there will be separate answers for the undertaking not to manufacture ABC weapons, and the production controls on rockets, submarines etc: you may think that German opinion would accept continuation of the first obligation, but not renewal of the second. Alternatively, if it proved impossible (for legal and political reasons) to dismantle the Brussels Treaty machinery, would German objections to the armament controls imposed under the Treaty make it unwise or impossible to use WEU (perhaps an enlarged WEU) as the vehicle for the Europeanization of defence within NATO? (There are of course substantial difficulties in this idea anyway, but we should find it useful to know how you assess German opinion.) Finally, is it conceivable that one might wind up WEU but transfer the central obligations to some other organ (NATO, or the Ten)?

4. From other posts in WEU countries we should welcome comments on the importance which Governments attach to the Brussels Treaty. Of these Member Governments, the French attitude to the WEU is the most difficult to assess. We know that the French Government have disliked our exploitation of the organization for political consultation; that France finds the provisions of the Treaty for the control of member states' nuclear weapons objectionable, and has so far managed (with questionable legality) to evade complying with them; and that there are other aspects of the WEU which are distasteful to France. On the other hand France would presumably be reluctant to remove any of the WEU controls over German rearmament. This is not so much because she expects these controls to be necessary, but because this is still a department of politics where the French electorate believe no precaution is unnecessary. We also believe that the French would dislike very much to be put in the position of being the only WEU Government to oppose the lifting of, say, production controls on submarines and rockets.

5. We should also be interested in comments from the Warsaw Pact posts to which copies of this letter are being sent. How strongly would Warsaw Pact governments react to a re-negotiation or abolition of the WEU obligations, in order to remove the discrimination against the FRG? Would the strength of the East European reaction be diminished if

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the Federal Republic had by then ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty? I assume that no re-negotiation would begin until after the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties have been ratified nor perhaps until a Conference on European Security has been held. In Bonn, you might care to consider the thought that removal of the Brussels Treaty controls might help along German ratification of the NPT: do you think there is anything in this idea?

6. I should emphasise that we do not, at present, envisage any early action to limit or alter our obligations under the Revised Brussels Treaty. Nor do we wish it to be thought by our partners in Europe that we harbour such intentions. This is not a subject on which we wish at present to encourage speculation. But speculation is already pretty widespread as we found in discussion with Italian officials during the recent Colombo visit. If you are asked about it, we suggest that you should say in reply that we are indeed pondering these matters but have not yet reached any definite conclusion. If asked about Mr Rippon's statement in Paris to the WEU Assembly on 16 June that the work of WEU could be expected to lie more in the defence field in future, you should explain that this referred to the decline to be anticipated in political consultation in the Council after enlargement, rather than any additional defence work which can be foreseen at present.

7. At this early stage, we are seeking no more than the preliminary views of our own posts. We would not wish you to put specific pointed questions to the Germans - and the same goes for other posts.

Yours etc
Tom Bridges

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