

Extract from minutes of the 582nd meeting of the WEU Council (23 September 1981)

Caption: On 23 September 1981, at the 582nd meeting of the Council of Western European Union (WEU), Sir Ewen Fergusson, Assistant Under-Secretary of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, discusses the recent visit to Moscow by a British delegation. On the matter of the reduction in long-range Soviet missiles deployed in the western regions of the USSR, the British Government continues to hold the view that the Soviet offers should be rejected. The latest proposal, made in December 1979, required that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) drop its plans for the deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles but excluded Soviet SS-20 missiles, which could be targeted on Western Europe from the east of the USSR. On the question of the geographical zone of application of a future conference on disarmament in Europe, the USSR has proposed extending the zone to the air space and the sea and ocean regions adjacent to Europe. French ambassador Emmanuel de Margerie welcomes this exchange on major topical issues which he believes demonstrates WEU's usefulness and vitality.

Source: Council of the Western European Union. Extract from minutes of 582nd meeting of WEU Council held on 23 September 1981. VI. Other Business. CR (81) 13. 2p. Archives nationales de Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954-1987. Foundation and Expansion of WEU. Year: 1975, 01/02/1975-30/12/1982. File 132.15. Volume 5/7.

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The Secretary-General, M. Kompetatney, was in the Chair.

VI. OTHER BUSINESS

2. Exchange of information on political questions

Believing that the Council were not paying enough attention to the major political and other problems of the day, Mr. FACK wanted to put one question to his British colleague and to launch a suggestion in the direction of the German representative.

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(i) A visit had been made very recently by the Leader and Deputy Leader and a number of parliamentary colleagues of Her Britannic Majesty's loyal opposition to Moscow. The Netherlands authorities understood that very important matters of arms control and disarmament had been discussed, and various statements had subsequently appeared in the press. The Ambassador therefore wondered if it would not possibly be to the benefit of the Council as a whole if his British colleague could give some more information on the subject in the intimate atmosphere of the Council room.

Mr. FEROUSSON stated that, before their visit to Moscow, Mr. Foot and Mr. Healey had called to see him at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He had been present the previous day, 22nd September, when Mr. Healey called to see the Lord Privy Seal, Mr. Atkins, after the visit.

To the extent that theatre nuclear forces and the C.S.C.E. talks in Madrid were discussed in Moscow, and to the extent that anything new came out of the visit, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office would of course ensure that member governments to NATO were appropriately informed.

The visit had taken place at the highest level as far as Her Majesty's loyal opposition was concerned, and an initial reaction to remarks made by Mr. Foot had been given by Mr. Hurd, Foreign Office Minister of State, both on radio and television on 18th September.

On modernisation of T.N.F., the key issue was whether there was anything new in what Mr. Brezhnev had said about Soviet willingness to agree to a reduction in Soviet long-range missiles deployed in the Western regions of the USSR. Having gone through this in very considerable detail, and taking into account the fact that Mr. Brezhnev's remarks to Mr. Foot and Mr. Healey were given to the visiting delegation after the talks, and having therefore been able to study these carefully, the United Kingdom Government did not believe that they contained anything new. The offer in fact dated back to the speech made by Mr. Brezhnev in East Berlin on 6th October, 1979. In advance of the decision taken by NATO in December 1979, Mr. Brezhnev in

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his speech in East Berlin made the same general offer of reductions on condition that NATO's plans for the deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles should be dropped. As the Council would recall, the North Atlantic Alliance rejected the offer in December 1979 because the Alliance would have been left with no leverage to affect the scale of Soviet reductions, and the offer only applied to the western region of the Soviet Union whereas the Soviet mobile missile SS-20, which had caused the Alliance so much preoccupation, could be targeted on almost all Western Europe from east of the Urals.

As could be seen, the West's rejection of that Soviet offer had proved to be the right course and the Soviet Union had been forced to the negotiating table. It was hoped that out of the meeting that was now taking place in New York between Mr. Haig and Mr. Gromyko a firm date would emerge for the start of negotiations between the Soviet Union and the United States.

The British Government continued to believe that Soviet offers of this kind of reduction should be rejected because otherwise there would be no incentive on the Soviet side to negotiate in earnest. In any case there was still time for negotiations to reach a point at which a reduced level of deployment, even conceivably a 'zero-option' level, would be possible since there were two years still to go before deployment of NATO's modernised long-range nuclear weapons was due to start.

As far as a conference on disarmament in Europe was concerned, there appeared to be a significant omission in what Mr. Brezhnev had said, namely coverage of North American territory. He seemed to have said, à propos the geographical zone of application of a future conference on disarmament in Europe, that the zone of application of these measures should be extended, for example to the sea and ocean regions and the air space adjacent to Europe. It was hoped that this reflected the need on the Soviet part to adopt a more realistic negotiating stance in the Madrid talks to be resumed at the end of October. A Western text on geographical coverage had been put to the Soviet Union in July, while the Soviet Union had tabled a text which was clearly unacceptable. It was doubted in fact whether that immediate reaction on the Soviet part was ever meant to be suggested as their final negotiating position, but obviously in the run up to the resumption of the talks at the end of October, and during the resumed conference in Madrid, this question was one that was going to have to be negotiated very seriously by the Western partners.

Mr. FACK remarked that all member governments were grappling with these extremely complex matters of security, arms control and disarmament. He was therefore particularly grateful for the information given to the Council, and was sure that his colleagues felt the same way.

M. de MARGERIE said how valuable for the Council's work he felt it was that his colleague the Netherlands Ambassador should have raised this question and that the United Kingdom representative should have given him the very interesting information they had just heard. These were, indeed, the great questions of the moment. This was what mattered, these were the major problems of which governments and public opinion should take account. The Ambassador said that, for him, the exchange which had just taken place was what he might call a breath of fresh air in the work of the Council. He would like to thank his colleagues and to add that if the Council's work could occasionally touch on the big questions which ought to be of concern to the member countries, W.E.U. would thereby have shown its usefulness and vitality quite convincingly.