

'Will France link arms with NATO?' from The Guardian (24 November 1975)

Caption: On 24 November 1975, the British daily newspaper The Guardian publishes an article by Conservative MP Julian Critchley, Chairman of the Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments of the Assembly of Western European Union (WEU), in which he outlines the issues involved in the standardisation of armaments, particularly the establishment of a secretariat for European defence markets, and speculates on France's position on this question. He believes that France will not take part since the idea was mooted by the Eurogroup, a body of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Source: Critchley, Julian. "Will France link arms with Nato?" from The Guardian. London: Guardian Newspapers. 24.11.1975, p.10.

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Will France link arms with NATO?

JULIAN CRITCHLEY MP on European defence and the French disconnection

French Alphajet prototype: waste in resources?



ON NOVEMBER 5 the NATO Ministry of Defence—minus M Bouges of France—meeting at The Hague, proposed the setting up of a European Defence Procurement Secretariat. For the longer term they commissioned a study into the tasks which a European defence procurement organisation might undertake. Will France join? While the need for standardisation through specialisation and rationalisation is now widely recognised, it is also true that no real progress can be made without France.

I suspect the French answer will be "No." The Hague initiative springs from the Eurogroup, a NATO body which France has refused to join. Giscard is not a free agent. He is dependent upon the Gaullists for his parliamentary majority, and the UDR is showing signs of disquiet over defence.

France will cooperate with NATO provided progress is judged to be pragmatic; an act which could only too easily be interpreted as a surrender to the military organisation of the Alliance, and

tantamount to France rejoining NATO, would break the non-Socialist majority in the Chambre. Yet it is essential that France be persuaded to take part in some form of European arms procurement. She will only do so if the initiative comes from France, and the institution chosen has its origins not in the Eurogroup, but in the EEC.

The necessity to standardise weapons is simply stated. Inflation has meant that less than a third of the allied defence budgets is spent on arms. Each generation of arms is far more expensive than the last. NATO's superiority in the quality of its arms — its only advantage over the forces of the Warsaw Pact — is being steadily eroded by Russian re-equipment.

It has been estimated that between six and seven thousand million dollars are wasted each year within NATO because of duplication. What is worse is that the present trend is towards destandardisation, as the relatively prosperous countries of Europe embark upon the manufacture of arms.

This serves to make joint

operations with the different countries of the allied coalition more difficult. As each army has its own maintenance and supply systems, it can rely for its logistics upon its neighbour. There is an immense waste in financial and human resources owing to the duplication and multiplication of research and development. Short production lines (save in the US) mean low profits, thus obliging Britain and France to compete against one another in the sale of arms — in particular, to the Middle East.

The case for standardisation is proven. What remains is the will to determine how it can be achieved. The problem can be approached in two ways: it can be tackled, as at present, by the laborious process of reaching agreement on the joint production of individual items. This has produced useful, but limited results.

The alternative is to set up a political institution, which would impose rationalisation upon the countries of the alliance. One answer is, of course, to buy American, but that would be politically

undesirable for Europe. If Europe is ever to compete with the United States in an "Atlantic" arms market, then the prior condition is the setting up of a European arms industry.

Yet, how can this be done? A common foreign policy for Europe implies a common defence policy. Once this process began, the Americans would be likely to insist that Europe should be primarily responsible for the conventional defence of the alliance, with the United States covering the flanks of NATO and providing the strategic nuclear deterrent.

This loosening of the American involvement would compel the Europeans to combine their research and development, and rationalise their production of the latest conventional arms, anti-tank weapons, surface to air, and ground to ground missiles, and specialised aircraft. Such a division of alliance responsibilities, a "new NATO" would be the signal for French participation in the defence of Europe.

In the meantime, which of the three ways open to Europe makes the most

sense? The European Defence Procurement Secretariat, as proposed by Mr Roy Mason, has the support of everyone, save France. The French armaments industry is the biggest in Europe. The loss of the F5 replacement order was a blow to French confidence, and there is talk of an approach to the United States for the joint production of a fighter. Yet, one such project would not solve the problem. If France will not join the Secretariat, then she will seek some other way to preserve the viability of her armaments industry.

There are two other choices. The Standing Armaments Committee of the Western European Union (the Seven — including France) might be resurrected along the lines suggested by M Jobert in 1973 — a proposal which his allies firmly rejected. However, recent French Government statements have dropped all reference to WEU, and, while calling for standardisation, seem to suggest thereby that the Quai is looking to Brussels and to the Commission for the answer.

It might now be best, were

the Foreign Ministers of the Nine to consider where and how the essential European Arms Procurement Agency should be set up. The first step might be to adapt the so-called d'Avignon procedure, which though separate, is still linked, through the European Council, to the European Community.

Without the will, there can be no political institution, which, in its turn, could impose upon the rival armaments industries of Europe the need to standardise weapons. Giscard cannot draw closer to NATO, but he has changed out of recognition France's policy towards the EEC. And I see no reason why the Americans should not extend the "two-way street," with all the generosity that entails, to an embryonic European armaments industry, that would be the symbol not of American withdrawal, but of a greater European contribution to the common defence.

● Julian Critchley is the Conservative MP for Aldershot, and Chairman of the Defence and Armaments Committee of the Western European Union Assembly.