

'Pooling the arms' from The Observer (16 January 1955)

Caption: On 16 January 1955, British Labour MP Denis Healey comments in the British Sunday newspaper The Observer on the implications of the plan to set up an armaments agency within Western European Union (WEU). He deplores the weaknesses of the French plan, which will not be supported by the United Kingdom, Germany or the United States, but argues that this should not be a reason to shelve the idea.

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POOLING THE ARMS

By DENIS HEALEY, M.P.

TO-MORROW the members of Western European Union will meet in Paris to discuss the creation of a European Arms Pool. The revised French plan, unfortunately, is not calculated to encourage support from Britain, Germany, or the United States. But it would be tragic if the obvious weaknesses of the French proposals were made an excuse for dropping the whole idea.

The Paris Treaties already involve the creation of an agency to control the arms issued to the forces of Western European Union. This will be the first practical exercise in the international limitation of armaments. Its success would not only reduce the risks attending German rearmament, but would also provide invaluable guidance for an attempt at universal disarmament through the United Nations. But the new agency will be hamstrung from the start unless its work is supplemented by some prior control over the processes of arms production.

A Common Front

Moreover, interdependence in defence and arms production is the surest way to a common foreign policy. The West's greatest difficulty in the future will be to maintain a common front in negotiations with Russia. France and Germany already disagree about the aims of such negotiation. But if the European Powers share a single defence organisation, it will be much more difficult for one Power to break away and deal with Russia at another's expense.

Economic facts reinforce these political arguments. The West is now committed to maintaining simultaneously an atomic deterrent against global war and a conventional deterrent against local aggression. This double burden will soon prove intolerable unless its weight on individual States can be reduced through greater specialisation, and by standardisation of armaments on which this depends. Though Nato has long been working for this, after four years it has little to show but the adoption of a common rifle-round by all its forces and the adoption of a common rifle by its European members.

With all this to gain, the Paris meeting has a high responsibility.

But France's rejection of E.D.C. has rendered certain elements in the French plan quite impracticable. No scheme which requires submission to a federal type of authority could now win acceptance—least of all by Britain. And no form of discrimination against Germany would be supported by any of France's neighbours—least of all the Germans themselves.

Defence Industries

So it is futile to demand an authority with supranational powers over the whole range of Europe's defence industries; defining a defence industry is in itself a daunting task. Even if the authority's powers were limited to new defence production, they would far exceed those of the only supranational authority in existence, the Schuman Plan. Moreover, limiting the Pool to new production would mean discriminating against Germany, since she alone would have no defence industries outside control.

In fact, the major purposes of an Arms Pool do not require so ambitious an organisation. They require control only over the production of the most critical and expensive arms—those such as atomic weapons, guided missiles, aircraft, tanks, and heavy artillery, without which no country can fight a modern war. We need a machinery through which the European Governments can choose common types for these weapons, and then organise their production internationally so as to reach the best balance between political, economic, and strategic considerations.

Sharing Out

The political arguments require production to be so distributed that no single country can alone supply its needs in all the critical weapons. In many cases it would be possible also to divide the production of individual weapons internationally. Even in a single country, the hull, engine, guns, and electronic gear of both tanks and aircraft are often produced in different factories. On the Continent, particularly in the Rhine basin, it would be equally possible to divide them between different countries with little loss in efficiency.

The economic argument requires

production to be located where the necessary manpower and material are available. This may well conflict with the strategic argument for producing arms well away from the possible fighting area—an argument which has been used to justify the demand for German capital and expertise in French North Africa. But in terms of modern war, a few hundred miles one way or the other matters less than the presence of strong air defences—which it would be most extravagant to reproduce in Africa. And here again the decisive question is what Germany will accept as non-discriminatory. At the moment German industrialists may be reluctant to produce arms on German soil, but it is certain the German Parliament would reject any scheme which denied them the right to do so.

America's Role

In any case, the main aim of European arms production is to equip the forces needed to prevent a war, so it is wise to give the political and economic arguments priority over the strategic. If, after all, war should come, there is not likely to be much heavy arms production for long on this side of the Atlantic. The danger that essential parts of Western arms industry might fall into hostile hands would be much less serious if America agreed to duplicate these parts of Europe's arms production. In any case, a European Arms Pool should operate within the Nato framework, so that it would act as a stimulus, not an alternative, to Nato's work in the same field. Indeed, Western European Union as a whole must always be seen as a pressure-group inside the Atlantic Community, not as an excuse for America's disengagement from Europe.

The Paris meeting will be the first test of Britain's sincerity in the new policy of European union which she launched last autumn. Britain must not again wait four years before producing a practical alternative to a French plan in which not even its authors really believe. The difficulties of producing an Arms Pool may be as great as the rewards. But it is worth reminding the sceptics that a far wider Arms Pool has been working for many years—on the other side of the Iron Curtain.