

'N. African base for Russians?' from The Guardian (4 December 1967)

Caption: On 4 December 1967, as debates are held in the Assembly of Western European Union (WEU) on the question of Mediterranean defence and following France's withdrawal from the integrated military command of the Atlantic Alliance, the British daily newspaper The Guardian speculates on the future of the former French military bases on Algerian soil and expresses concern over Soviet military aid to Algeria.

Source: "N. African base for Russians?" from The Guardian. London: Guardian Newspapers. 04.12.1967, p.9.

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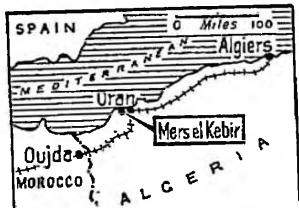
N. African base for Russians?

From our own Correspondent

Paris, December 3

The rejection of the Atlantic alliance implied in the announcement this week of France's adoption of what is in effect an anarchic defence policy gives a fresh dimension to the meeting of the Assembly of Western European Union which opens here tomorrow.

Notably, it adds point to the memorandum on the defence of the Mediterranean and NATO's Southern flank to be submitted tomorrow by Mr Frans Goedhart



(Netherlands), rapporteur of the committee for defence and armaments. Its theme is the constant and increasing Russian presence in the Mediterranean.

Mr Goedhart, writing before the publication of the article in which General Ailleret, the French Chief of Staff, said that France must build up her defence unhampered by any ties with an alliance, and in the knowledge of several statements by members of the French Government that it did not plan to leave the alliance, suggests that it is "not even completely clear that France would fight alongside its allies in the event of an East-West conflict."

Mysterious

Also he finds it "mysterious" that France had decided to evacuate its naval base of Mers-el-Kébir and hand it over to Algeria by February since the Evian agreements of 1962 allow it to retain the base until 1975.

In October, the French Ambassador in Algeria, M. de Leusse, said his Government had taken its decision because French policy was to regroup bases and Mers-el-Kébir was no longer a strategic base. It had "become useless" and cost a great deal of money. In fact it is the most up-to-date and best equipped naval base in the Mediterranean area, which, even if it no longer has any great strategic value for France, is of considerable value to the alliance as a whole or to a potential enemy, because of its key position.

The French Government is to retain until 1975 the use of the air base at Bou-Sfer, but has already handed over to the Algerian Government the bases of Colomb-Bechar and Hamma-guir. Mr Goedhart believes it to be "far from impossible" that the Algerian Government, particularly in view of its increased dependence on Russia—might make Mers-el-Kébir available to the Soviet Mediterranean Fleet.

He asserts that since the Israel-Egypt war, Russia, who was already giving military aid to Algeria, has flown in large numbers of MiG fighters and helped Colonel Boumédiène to build up the armaments of his land forces; they have accompanied these new weapons with military instructors and technical advisers. Mr Goedhart quotes a report that the Algerian Air Force is being trained neither in French nor in Arabic but in Russian.

In these circumstances, he believes that if the Soviet Government were to seek the use of Mers-el-Kébir for its Mediterranean Fleet, it would be difficult for Colonel Boumédiène to refuse such a request. If it did indeed become a Soviet base, it would mean that, within a short time, Russia would have built up not only a permanent fleet in the Mediterranean but a group of bases at both ends of it to provide all the facilities its warships needed.