

33

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PRIME MINISTER

Strategic Co-operation with the French

I attach a brief which, in view of its classification, I would rather not take abroad with us on Monday.

I suggest that the main thing is not to appear either too enthusiastic or too dismissive about whatever Mitterrand has to say on strategic collaboration.

You will remember that de Gaulle thought he had persuaded Mr. Macmillan of the merits of Anglo-French nuclear collaboration and was rudely disappointed when Mr. Macmillan shortly afterwards went to Nassau to sign an agreement with the United States. I believe that memories of this still rankle with the French.

The French may genuinely want strategic collaboration; they may be trying to inhibit US/UK collaboration; or they may be seeking evidence to demonstrate e.g. to the Germans, that we are not true Europeans.

I therefore think that the best approach is to show cautious interest, try to get the French to say for once what they mean by strategic collaboration and perhaps propose further discussions either between Defence Ministers or persons whom you and the President both decide to appoint.

A-J-C.

20 January 1984

TOP SECRET UK EYES A

CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE BRITISH AND FRENCH GOVERNMENTS ON STRATEGIC ISSUESPOINTS TO MAKE

Welcome the chance to share your thinking on collaboration on wider strategic issues.

Strongly in favour of a robust European defence effort backed by a strong and technologically advanced industrial base.

The first of these objectives is one of the best ways to promote the continued solidarity of the Alliance as a whole: the second, intelligently handled, is fully compatible with it.

Specifically, we share the objective of closer collaboration on defence procurement as the Defence Secretary has made clear to M. Hernu. The problem is to make this efficient and to achieve genuine agreement on requirements and then on work shares. The latter, in particular, not easy but happy to join in a concerted attempt to bring it about.

On planning for war welcome anything that can be done more closely to align the operational plans of the French armed forces with those of her allies.

On nuclear matters welcome the official contacts that exist already and which have served to keep our national positions so closely aligned. Agree that these matters might be included in further discussions between Mr Heseltine and M. Hernu but obviously they include matters of great sensitivity to our two countries. Further only fair to say now that we would have to respect the obligations that we have undertaken to the Americans.

BACKGROUND

1. When Sir Robert Armstrong saw M. Attali on 17 January, the latter, making clear that he was speaking on the President's authority, said that when the President and the Prime Minister next met, the President would be proposing that there should be closer co-operation between the British Government and the French Government on a wide range of strategic issues.

M. Attali was not very specific, but it was clear that the issues to be discussed included strategic nuclear issues. He said that the President would also wish the discussions to extend to the possibilities of greater co-operation between the British and French Governments and, as appropriate, between British and French industries, on the development of new weapons and weapons systems, including nuclear submarines but extending also to other advanced technological military equipment. The President saw a need for closer co-operation in these matters with France's principal European allies, and was making a similar overture to the Federal German Chancellor.

2. The collaboration envisaged could be of three main kinds, involving the three countries in different ways:

- a. procurement of major conventional weapons, in the interests of preserving a strong and technologically advanced European industrial base, in the face of US (and Japanese) competition. If it is to be effective such collaboration must involve Britain, France and Germany but need not be - and in the case of the Future European Fighter Aircraft (FEFA) for example - confined to them;
- b. planning for war. This could mean a much more explicit commitment of French forces to the defence of Western Europe. This is of immediate interest to the Germans. We also would be directly concerned if French forces were to be committed to NORTHAG: NATO as such must at some stage be involved, though the present French attitude to full integration makes that difficult for them;
- c. nuclear matters: this might include any or all of procurement of submarines, missiles and warheads, targetting and operational deployments. These must be for the French and ourselves. But there is also the very difficult question of how French use of nuclear weapons is to be reconciled with the interests of its allies and that of course would involve Germany.

3. None of these themes is new: and it is not clear to what extent President Mitterrand, in raising them now, is contemplating fundamental changes in French policy. Clearly we have much to gain from a change

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in the right direction in the case of the first two. As regards industrial collaboration, the practice in Europe is already well established but a clear lead from the three heads of governments would help, in the next round of major projects, to ease the very difficult problem of how to share work.

4. On planning for war the possible gains for the Alliance speak for themselves but in encouraging the French it will be important not to lose sight altogether of the long-term objective of securing their full re-integration into the Alliance, and with that, the assumption by them of the full range of responsibilities as well as advantages of membership.

5. Nuclear matters. In principle, it makes sense for the UK and France to have a line of communication on all longer-term strategic, including nuclear, issues: as a minimum, we should avoid giving the impression that one of the two European nuclear powers will never be prepared to discuss nuclear weapons policies with the other. If President Mitterrand is seeking to open a dialogue on fundamental policy issues such as the eventual creation of a joint Anglo-French nuclear deterrent capacity, this would be a very significant political step which we would not wish to rebuff until all its implications had been thoroughly assessed - even though our response at the end of the day would probably be negative. But quite apart from the major political problems which any French move in this direction would create, there are also difficulties involved in the more mundane areas of possible co-operation which the President may wish to explore - although, again, it would be preferable to avoid a dismissive or wholly negative reaction. So far as technical collaboration is concerned, we do not believe that the French have anything of significant value to give us. Secondly, much of the information (e.g. SSBN design and deployment) of possible interest to the French is extremely sensitive.

We do not know how the Americans would react to any such approach: it is at least possible that they already have bilateral contacts with the French through which they transfer such information as they are prepared to release.

6. The President must be aware of our close links with the Americans. Further, even without these the very fact of the national independence of both countries would inevitably limit the degree to which we could operate or indeed co-operate in this particular field. The series of very restricted exchanges between senior officials which we have had with the French in March 1981, March 1982 and September 1983, suggest that they see things that way too: it would be sensible for these exchanges to continue. If nevertheless the President confirms it is technical or other sensitive information which is sought, then, since it is important not to be seen to be purely negative, it would be right to agree that this could be pursued in the further talks between M. Hernu and the Defence Secretary. Nevertheless it would be prudent to register now that in agreeing to that we would have to honour the obligations that we have to the Americans.

7. The meeting will be helpful in establishing more precisely what is in the President's mind. If it includes closer collaboration on procurement and war planning both can be welcomed: the Defence Secretary has already made it clear to M. Hernu that we share the first objective: the need is to make collaboration efficient, and to undertake it in ways that do not add to divisions in the Alliance, particularly as between Europe and America.



10 DOWNING STREET

34

From the Private Secretary

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

Co-operation between the British and French
Governments on strategic issues

Thank you for providing a brief on this subject for the Prime Minister's visit to Paris today.

This is just to record that the subject was not raised by President Mitterrand, possibly because the other subjects discussed (see separate record) occupied the available time.

I am copying this minute to Mr. Fall (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Mr. Mottram (Ministry of Defence).

A. J. COLES

23 January 1984