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### **The United Kingdom, an Integrating Europe, and the NPT Negotiations**

The mid-to-late 1960s were a troubled time for the United Kingdom's perceived status as a global power, with late 1967 being arguably the nadir. The Labour Wilson government's application to join the European Economic Community (EEC) was forcefully rejected when French president Charles de Gaulle repeated the declaration he made to Conservative leader Harold MacMillan in 1963: "Non!"<sup>1</sup>

The "East of Suez" decision the same year accelerated the British military withdrawal from Asia and the Middle East, another sign of the UK's diminished global power and capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Further exacerbating the situation, the "special relationship" between London and Washington came under strain as Wilson repeatedly turned down US President Lyndon B. Johnson's entreaties to commit British forces to the war in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, the successful negotiations that resulted in the 1968 Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) represented something of a bright spot in foreign affairs for the United Kingdom. Wilson's administration sought (not always successfully or to their satisfaction, it must be said) to play a key role in the treaty's formulation, although it was pushed and pulled by conflicting imperatives. Most significant of these was Britain's future relationship with an integrated Western Europe. Second, there was potential conflict between NATO legal obligations and the restrictions imposed by a potential non-proliferation treaty. Finally, of great

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<sup>1</sup> Aspirant members of the EEC required the unanimous support of existing member states, hence De Gaulle being able to exercise an effective veto over Britain's application. Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World. Volume 2. Labour's Foreign Policy since 1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 84; On the rejected MacMillan government application, see N. Piers Ludlow, *Dealing With Britain: The Six and the First UK Application to the EEC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). On France and Wilson's attempt to join the EEC, see Helen Parr, 'Saving the Community: The French Response to Britain's Second EEC Application in 1967,' *Cold War History*, 6:4 (2006), 425-454

<sup>2</sup> Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World*, 76

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Colman, *A 'special relationship'? Harold Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Anglo-American relations 'at the summit', 1964-68* (Manchester, 2004), 168; Sylvia A. Ellis, 'Lyndon Johnson, Harold Wilson and the Vietnam War: A Not So Special Relationship?' in Jonathan Hollowell (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Anglo-American Relations* (Basingstoke, 2001), 181; Geraint Hughes, *Harold Wilson's Cold War: the Labour Government and East-West Politics, 1964 - 1970* (London, 2009)

concern was the potential impact of such a treaty on Britain's civil-military nuclear complex.

The documents described below and republished on the Wilson Center Digital Archive focus on the "European question," as it was a factor that persistently dominated British official thinking on the NPT.

**J. A. Thomson to Mr. Street, 'German Views on Non-Proliferation', 28 October 1966, The National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA), Record of the Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/1877472 (document kindly provided by BASIC).**

Before and after de Gaulle's November 1967 veto of Britain's second EEC application, Britain's position in Europe and its relationships with existing EEC states shaped the UK's role in the NPT negotiations. Prior to 1967, London canvassed opinion in EEC capitals, particularly in Bonn. As the NPT negotiations wound their way through the Eighteen Nation Committee on Disarmament (of which the United Kingdom was a member) in 1967, British representatives reported deep-seated concerns in Bonn, Brussels, the Hague, Luxembourg City, Paris, and Rome that a non-proliferation agreement might threaten the continued functioning of EURATOM, namely that its power might be subsumed into the IAEA, opening non-nuclear-weapon states (NNWS) up to commercial espionage conducted by inspectors representing the nuclear-weapon states (NWS).

**'Non-proliferation and our entry into EEC', 22 February 1967, TNA, Records of the Foreign and Commonwealth office (hereafter FCO) 10/193 (document kindly provided by BASIC)**

The Wilson government was continually focused on the issue of demonstrating that Britain should be seen as a "European" power with interests compatible with the existing EEC membership. This high-level Foreign Office note queried what the UK could do when pulled in different directions by the need to finalize a non-proliferation treaty while avoiding unnecessary damage to its European interests. This memorandum was drafted against a background of rumblings from EEC capitals that by tacitly supporting NPT proposals put forward by U.S. officials the Wilson government was being anti-European.

**'Note for the record' (1), 1 March, 1967, TNA Records of the Prime Minister's Office (hereafter PREM) 13/1888 and 'Note for the Record' (2), 1 March, 1967, TNA PREM 13/1888**

These two documents note the vigorous discussions between senior UK government figures, including Harold Wilson, Foreign Secretary George Brown, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Lord Chalfont, and chief scientific adviser to the government Solly Zuckerman. Brown argued that "our posture on the matter should be distinctively European rather than one of supporting the United States against other European countries." Wilson was even more explicit, stating that "our approach should be that of a European power discussing the matter with European partners and not seeking to fight American battles." Wilson was keen to let Washington take the lead so that his government might avoid upsetting the French,

as had happened with the debates over De Gaulle's 1966 withdrawal from the NATO command structure.

**'Non-proliferation', 18 May 1967, TNA PREM 13/1888**

By the early summer of 1967, Foreign Secretary George Brown felt compelled to comment that "if the situation should arise in which there is a direct confrontation between the United States and Russians on one side—and the members of EURATOM on the other, on the issue of the acceptability of EURATOM safeguards we should have to consider our position very carefully: the whole success of our European policy might depend on the choice we made. For the present it should therefore be a major aim of our policy at Geneva to see that things do not reach such a state."

**Brown to Wilson, 21 September 1967, TNA PREM 13/2441**

When the USSR and the USA submitted a draft non-proliferation treaty in the early autumn of 1967, British representatives were enthusiastically arguing that as a prospective member of EURATOM, any British position must axiomatically take account of European interests. As the negotiations moved forward, though, Wilson's government found itself caught in a three-sided trap of its own devising: fearful of being labelled "bad Europeans," anxious about being seen by Washington as "unreliable allies," and concerned about Moscow viewing them as part of the "treacherous West." Balancing out these competing concerns was becoming foremost in the minds of senior ministers.

**Letter from Derek Day to Michael Palliser, 2 October 1967, TNA PREM 13/2441**

Responding to a request from Michael Palliser (Wilson's Private Secretary), the Foreign Office's seasoned Europe-watcher Derek Day argued that the government needed to balance three – sometimes conflicting – UK interests. First, there was the position as a European power, particularly with regard to the ongoing EEC application. Second, there was the UK's status as a nuclear power, in which the UK shared "special responsibilities" with the US, exemplified by the UK's acquisition of Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missiles as its primary nuclear deterrent. Third, there was the desire to see a non-proliferation treaty concluded, which sometimes meant disagreement with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Day contended that the United Kingdom seemed to have been successful in positioning itself as understanding European anxieties, with Bonn having congratulated Wilson's administration on bring "good Europeans." Day's assessment was seen and lauded by Wilson, who hoped that it was correct.

**'Non-Proliferation: Memorandum by the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs', 26 January 1968, TNA Records of the Cabinet Office (CAB) 148/36**

Subsequent to De Gaulle's November 1967 veto of Wilson's EEC application, senior British ministers still saw the European question as having considerable importance. Shortly before his departure from the role of Foreign Secretary, George Brown reported to the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee that the ructions over Article

3 of the NPT would be "particularly awkward for us as potential members of EURATOM and the E.E.C." De Gaulle's second "Non!" only served to postpone Britain's membership of the EEC, as Edward Heath's Conservative government successfully campaigned for accession, which took place in 1973.