

**February 28, 1967**

**Note from Mr. Francis Perrin, High Commissioner for Atomic Energy, 'French foreign policy in terms of atomic armaments, particularly with regard to the proliferation of this armaments'**

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**Summary:**

Nonproliferation talks entered their decisive phase after the submission of a joint U.S.-Soviet draft to the ENDC on February 21, 1967. One week later, High-Commissioner of the French Commissariat à l'énergie atomique, Francis Perrin, assessed France's options. It was not "by accident," he noted, the original five UN Security Council permanent members—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union, and China—were in line for nuclear-club membership: "...they are the same profound reasons, of a geographical, demographic or other nature, which led to the choice [in 1945] ... of the countries with special responsibilities in the maintenance of world peace." After noting how advances in "India, Israel, Japan, Sweden, and also West Germany" portended the further spread of nuclear weapons—and acknowledging France had itself sought help with its weapon program—Perrin pondered whether proliferation might hasten nuclear disarmament by convincing the superpowers of its merits. In the end, however, fear of a "large and hostile" nuclear-armed PRC made him pessimistic. While he did not advise signing the NPT, it would be "very important" for France to affirm publicly, if unilaterally, "its constant policy since 1958 ... not to cede any atomic weapon or any atomic explosive device to a country which does not possess it, and not to help any such country to manufacture them." He dismissed internal opposition toward the NPT as defensive—"an a posteriori justification of the French decision to constitute an atomic armament." More significant was the likelihood West Germany would gain its own atomic arsenal, jeopardizing France's "dominant political position among the Europe of the Six" members of the European Communities and reviving Cold War tensions in Europe. He finished with an eye-opening analysis of how the Kosygin proposal for nuclear-weapon states to extend negative security guarantees to non-nuclear-weapon states' signatory to the NPT would not impede the use of French nuclear armaments against a West German blitzkrieg backed by the United States.

## **Credits:**

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## **Original Language:**

French

## **Contents:**

Translation - English

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**PRIME MINISTER**  
**OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER FOR ATOMIC ENERGY**

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Mister COUVE DE MURVILLE □□  
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To the Minister,

I have the honor to send you, herewith, a note which may serve as a memorandum for the audience which you granted me on February 21st.

Yours sincerely,

[SIGNATURE]

F. PERRIN.

French foreign policy in terms of atomic armaments, particularly with regard to the proliferation of this armaments.

Note from Mr. Francis Perrin,  
 High Commissioner for atomic energy

The current situation.

It so happens that the countries which currently possess atomic weapons, whatever it is, powerful or rudimentary, are the 5 countries which obtained in 1945 a permanent seat, with the right of veto, on the Security Council. This fact is not due to mere chance, because it is the same deep-seated reasons, of a historical, geographical, demographic or other order, which led to the choice, at the time of the founding of the United Nations, of countries with special responsibilities in the keeping of world peace, which successively led the USSR, England, France and China to make, as soon as possible, the material and political effort necessary to get atomic weapons for themselves.

For France in particular, it is indeed the same reasons, with regard to the conception

that it has, and which is fundamentally accepted, of its role in the world, which enabled it to obtain a seat on the Security Council in 1945 and led it to acquire an atomic weapon by its own effort. Other reasons, that have often been wrongly ascribed would be just as well, or rather just as badly, applied to countries which have not made this effort. For instance, to claim that a country can develop a powerful modern industry only if it supports it on the constitution of atomic armament and an assertion in total contradiction with the facts, as shown by the development of modern industries in Germany, Japan, or Italy, which in many areas are ahead of French industries.

#### Possibilities of proliferation and dissemination of atomic weapons

Despite the absence of the particularly strong incentives which pushed the permanent member countries of the Security Council to develop atomic weapons, other countries could later, probably within a few years, choose to carry out at least the beginning of atomic armament, which will become less and less difficult and expensive as installations for the industrial use of atomic energy develop. Such an eventuality can be seriously considered, for various reasons, in the case of India, Israel, Japan, Sweden, and even West Germany despite the Treaty of Paris and the Euratom control. A certain proliferation, in the fairly close future, of atomic armaments or rather of militarily atomic countries is therefore a possible eventuality.

Moreover, there have been, at certain times, some beginnings or inclinations for the dissemination of atomic armaments, some countries possessing such armaments having considered giving them to non-military atomic countries or helping such a country to manufacture them. This is how the USSR helped China from 1956 to 1959 to found the atomic industries (isotopic separation plant) which facilitated its first achievements and its first tests, how the United States envisaged, in some indirect ways (MLF), to involve Germany in the possible use of atomic weapons, how China at one time declared that it wanted to give atomic weapons to Indonesia, or help it to manufacture them, and that in France itself, when we were still only in preliminary studies, certain responsible personalities pushed for the organization of a collaboration in these studies with countries where there also existed the desire to create an atomic armament.

Is the proliferation of atomic armaments, natural or helped by dissemination, good or dangerous for the consolidation of peace in the world? Some have argued that the more countries possessing atomic weapons, the greater the pressure on the two major militarily atomic powers to organize general and complete atomic disarmament. Since such disarmament appears to be the only certain guarantee against the highest catastrophe which would see world atomic war, the proliferation of atomic armaments could be a useful, perhaps unavoidable, step towards the establishment of a secure and lasting peace between the great nations. However, in the world's current situation, with a huge and hostile China beginning to develop powerful atomic armaments, the possibility for general atomic disarmament seems extremely remote and the proliferation of atomic armaments must be judged only by estimating its influence in the short or medium term on the possibilities of starting a world atomic war. It seems unquestionable that for this long period, of at least fifteen years, which separates us from real disarmament, the proliferation of atomic armaments would notably increase the dangers threatening the world and could only incite the two great powers to increase their atomic weapons efforts.

It was this conclusion that led the United States and the Soviet Union to prepare an atomic non-proliferation treaty. But before considering this project of treaty, it is appropriate to examine the position that France must take vis-à-vis a possible proliferation of atomic weapons, taking into account its own interests, which include the reaction of world public opinion to the justification it can present for its position in this area.

#### France's interest in the face of the possibilities of proliferation of atomic weapons

France having, by a considerable effort, developed an atomic armament has a direct interest in that no new country becomes an atomic military power, which would diminish the prestige it has acquired much more than that of the two super great powers that are the United States and the Soviet Union. Any new proliferation of atomic weapons, would not only increase the risks of atomic war, but would also be

an additional danger for France.

Some French people, however, would favorably see new countries gaining access to atomic weapons, either simply because the United States are hostile to any new proliferation of atomic weapons as they were hostile towards the creation of French nuclear weapons, or because they would afterward see in it a justification of the French decision to create an atomic armament. But this position contrary to the national interest, can only be based on the ignorance of the fundamental difference which exists between the world situation of France and that of the countries which could in the future gain the possession of an atomic armament. It is also this lack of knowledge that can give way to fears that a public position taken by France against the atomic armament of any new country will get it accused of hypocrisy and cynical selfishness.

The bad consequences that would result for France from the proliferation of atomic weapons is particularly obvious in the case of West Germany. On the one hand, the accession of Germany to a national atomic armament, added to its economic power and its military power in conventional forces both superior to the French ones, would give it a pre-eminence which would cause France to lose its dominant political position in the Europe of the 6. On the other hand, a German atomic armament hardly tolerable by the Soviet Union would lead to a renewal of the cold war between East and West, even giving the risk to lead to a real global world war starting in Europe and in which France would almost inevitably be involved.

#### France's attitude towards the project of non-proliferation treaty.

The French government has decided not to associate France with this treaty project and not to sign it for reasons of general policy.

It is however important to recognize the advantageous consequences that the signing of this treaty would have, from the point of view of the development of the industrial use of atomic energy in France, and the difficulties that may result from not signing it:

The signing by France of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Atomic Weapons would give it unrestricted access to the qualification of militarily atomic power, although it still only has atomic weapons of reduced power, and it still needs several years to possess a thermonuclear weapon. As no control are implemented in the treaty project for militarily atomic countries, one can think that if France signed it, it could not only continue to receive fissile materials, enriched uranium and plutonium, which are essential for the continuation of its studies towards the industrial use of atomic energy or even to the development of the most economical ways of the production of electrical energy of atomic production, but even without a doubt being gradually freed from the clauses of peaceful use and controls that are currently attached to these supplies. This easing of trade restrictions of our supplies would almost certainly occur immediately for natural uranium, Canada for example no longer having any reason to demand control of the uranium supplies that it would like to be able to give us.

On the other hand, France's not signing the Non-Proliferation Treaty risks would cause increased difficulties for some of our essential supplies. For enriched uranium, we can estimate that the United States will have to continue to furnish us, according to our needs, through their agreement with Euratom which covers a period of 30 years, with a commitment for a considerable total tonnage. But as for plutonium, no quantitative commitment is in place; however, our needs for the manufacture of the first set of fuel elements for the Phénix prototype breeder reactor, approximately one ton of plutonium in 1970-71, may not be covered by our national production due to the delay in the commissioning of EDF-3, and we will undoubtedly be in a situation of great plutonium shortage until 1974.

The disadvantages that may result from not signing the treaty project will be more or less serious depending on how France explains its refusal. It is important for the development of French atomic activities that no systematic hostility be publicly presented vis-à-vis this treaty, that the government avoid denigrating it and above all support countries, such as Germany, which hesitate to sign it.

Moreover, it would also be very important for France, by a unilateral public declaration, to confirm what has been its constant policy since 1958 by undertaking

not to transfer any atomic weapon or atomic explosive device to a country that does not possess it and not to help any such country to manufacture it.

Finally, France would certainly acquire great moral prestige among countries not possessing atomic weapons by undertaking never to use its atomic weapons against such a country, or more precisely against a country having undertaken not to manufacture and not to acquire atomic weapons.

Such a commitment, which Kosygin would have suggested to include in the Non-Proliferation Treaty for all the powers possessing atomic weapons, would in fact entail for France no real diminishing of its military power, or of its power of deterrence in a situation of a possible attack by one of its neighbors who had given up manufacturing or acquiring atomic weapons (case of Germany, whether or not it signs the Non-Proliferation Treaty). On the one hand, such a commitment would not prevent France from using tactical atomic weapons against a conventional army, German for example, who would be invading its territory and on the other hand the destruction by means of strategic atomic weapons of large German cities, to prevent or stop an invasion of France, would almost surely result in the immediate entry into war of the United States against France, with perhaps even the destruction by atomic weapons of some large French cities, so that even in the event of an attack on France by a Germany who does not possess atomic weapons, we could not in reality use our strategic atomic weapons against Germany and that the threat of using them would have no deterrent effect, because it would appear that this threat would have no chance of being fulfilled.