

**December 10, 1964**

**Memorandum of Conversation between President  
Johnson and Prime Minister Harold Wilson**

**Citation:**

"Memorandum of Conversation between President Johnson and Prime Minister Harold Wilson", December 10, 1964, Wilson Center Digital Archive, NARA, RG 59, Executive Secretariat Conference Files, box 364, CF 2460 Visit of Prime Minister Wilson Dec 7-8, 1964 Admin. & Sub Misc & Memcons; excised version published in Foreign Relations of the United States. Contributed to NPIHP by Bill Burr.

<https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/177775>

**Summary:**

During this conversation Wilson, McNamara, Rusk, and Ball continued the discussion of the British proposal for an Atlantic Nuclear Force, including possible command arrangements. Other topics included the impact of the Chinese nuclear test and a nonproliferation agreement.

**Credits:**

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

**Original Language:**

English

**Contents:**

Original Scan

DECLASSIFIED  
Authority 979551  
By GEC NARA Date 1/4/12

SECRET

December 10, 1964

## MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

## Participants:

|                              |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| The President                | The British Prime Minister |
| The Secretary of State       | The Foreign Secretary      |
| The Secretary of Defense     | The Defense Secretary      |
| The Under Secretary of State | Lord Harlech               |
| Ambassador David K. E. Bruce | Sir Burke Trend            |
| McGeorge Bundy               | Sir Harold Caccia          |
| William R. Tyler             |                            |
| Richard E. Neustadt          |                            |

## Place:

The Cabinet Room, December 8, 1964, 11:30 a.m.

The President opened the meeting by telling the Prime Minister that the British paper was being looked at carefully, that some explanations were needed, and that later in the day he would indicate to the Prime Minister the points he was concerned with and try to establish the areas of agreement without commitment.

The President then called on the Secretary of State to raise some of the questions he had.

The Secretary asked the Prime Minister how he envisaged the role of the force outside Europe; the control arrangements for the firing force; the command arrangements, including the role of SACEUR; and the way in which German needs would be provided for in the underlying concept. The Secretary said he presumed U.S. agreement was needed for firing the force. The U.S. for its part was not only concerned with proliferation, but also with possible Franco-German nuclear cooperation, which was equally bad.

The Prime Minister said the latter was, if anything, worse and had to be avoided. He went on to say that with the emergence of the Chinese bomb, the need to consult with the U.S. on the next steps was urgent. Perhaps thought had to be given to nuclear interdependence in Southeast Asia. Further and careful study had to be given to the questions it raised.

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED  
Authority 979551  
By SEC NARA Date 1/4/12

- 2 -

SECRET

Returning to the British paper, the British Foreign Secretary said that as far as the control question was concerned, the British agreed that U.S. consent for firing was absolutely necessary. In fact, he would like to have in writing something which could be embodied in the agreement. The British would like this to be as explicit as possible.

As for nuclears outside the alliance area, this was open for scrutiny and discussion. The British felt some bombers needed to be held out for conventional roles. The nuclear factor was not entirely clear, but for psychological reasons this vagueness at this time was necessary, particularly as a deterrent to Sukarno. It occurred to the British that perhaps Anglo-American forces in the Far East might be needed. In any event, the British wanted to discuss with the U.S. the nuclear problem in the Far East.

The British agreed with the U.S. that our main purposes were (1) to stop the Franco-German alliance, and (2) to provide something attractive to a post-De Gaulle France. These were basic political and strategic matters. The principal problem was presentation, and the points should be stated in general terms rather than just for German consumption.

As for command arrangements, the British preferred to keep the force outside of the SACEUR command structure (1) to avoid a French juridical right to veto and (2) to create another field for German equality. Moreover, the British did not want SACEUR to have artillery which could destroy half of the Soviet Union. The British recognized, however, that a mechanism for coordination with SACEUR had to be carefully worked out and discussed with SACEUR. They were certain agreement on these points could be reached.

Healey joined in the discussion to talk about the importance of nuclear forces outside of Europe. He did not know whether the Germans were prepared to accept a UK nuclear role outside of Europe. If Germany insisted that the British could not keep such forces outside of Europe, the British would have to look to others for assistance. The V-bombers with their potential nuclear role served to deter Sukarno. If this deterrent were excluded, however, the risk of escalation would be greater and Britain would have to discuss with the U.S. the substitution of a deterrent to escalation.

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED  
NND 979551  
Authority  
By CEC NARA Date 1/4/12

SECRET

-3-

Healey then turned to the question of the Chinese and their nuclear capability and the implications for India and Japan. They, of course, had the choice of third power guarantees or making their own provisions, but the British role would be limited if it had no nuclear capability outside of Europe.

Replying to Secretary McNamara's question as to the size and type of forces that would be needed outside of Europe, Healey, thinking out loud, said that since Blue Steel would be committed wholly to ANF, there would be V-bombers, Canberras and Buckaneers, as well as carrier-borne aircraft. He added that if the British decided to have a nuclear capability outside of Europe they would probably prefer to have it in an allied framework.

Healey then turned the discussion back to the British paper and went on to discuss firing control. He urged that the U.S. keep its veto for non-dissemination reasons. In fact, none of the nuclear powers should renounce its veto. He foresaw at least three vetoes -- the U.S. and the British as suppliers and then the non-nuclear countries who could decide among themselves how to exercise the veto. Perhaps for the sake of equality the Germans might have their own veto. This raised the question of whether the veto should be physical (PAL) as well as juridical. It was important to discuss and understand how the force would be recovered if NATO collapsed.

As for SACEUR's role, he reiterated the earlier British statement that the French could prevent it from coming into being or operating. It would also mean a basic change in mission extending SACEUR's authority to engage in strategic operations. In the end, the British might be guided by German wishes.

Secretary Rusk said that for the very same reasons, the U.S. tended to look favorably at a SACEUR arrangement. The force could be given to SACEUR via the assignment route. Risks could be minimized by making forces available to SACEUR simultaneously with the order to fire. In any event, this was more a matter of semantics than substance and could be worked out by the lawyers.

Healey thought this could be worked out. After delivering a dissertation on the dangers of whetting of German appetites, he went on to describe how the

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED  
NND 979551  
Authority  
By GEC NARA Date 1/4/12

- 4 -

SECRET

British proposal would meet German wishes -- (1) practical equality with Britain (a nuclear power of 20 years' standing) in the matter of control; (2) cooperation in targetting and the development of strategic doctrine; and (3) a degree of physical ownership of weapons not unlike that which the nuclear powers had.

Mr. Ball commented that the British had signalled an unresolved problem for the Germans -- their reaction to nuclear commitments abroad. Healey responded that renunciation of nuclear weapons outside of Europe would raise new problems for the UK which would have to be worked out in close consultation with the U.S.

The Secretary of State agreed that given the Chinese bomb, it was very important to look at the consequences to other countries in Asia, particularly to India and Japan.

In this connection, the Prime Minister said that before leaving for Washington he had talked with the Indian Prime Minister who told him he was under strong pressures to go nuclear. Clearly the Chinese bomb had shifted the balance of power in Asia and the only alternative was a protective nuclear umbrella provided by the existing nuclear powers, with Russia playing an important role. The Indian Premier himself preferred not to go nuclear and hoped the British Prime Minister would convey his sense of the problem to the American Government during this visit.

Shifting the conversation slightly, Gordon Walker stressed the importance of nuclear capability for Britain in her world role. This question had not been touched upon in his discussions with the Germans. He planned to do so later, but he stressed this was a shared problem with the U.S.

Secretary McNamara then asked the British about their problems on tactical nuclear weapons. Replying, Healey said the main purpose of the multilateral force was to satisfy German needs in connection with the strategic deterrent. Therefore, the focus was on the strategic force and the British thought this was right. They preferred to leave tactical battlefield weapons arrangements as they were. The new government broke with the previous administration proposals for multi-lateralizing interdiction weapons. The principal concern of the UK was to get the alliance around a dangerous corner and it was prepared to do anything that had to be done.

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED  
NND 979551  
Authority  
By REC NARA Date 1/4/12

- 5 -

SECRET

The Prime Minister then intervened to say he planned at the earliest moment to go to Bonn. He then told the President that before leaving for Washington, he had a visit from the Soviet Ambassador, who first talked about the need for high-level talks between governmental leaders, and then seemed to be angling for an invitation for the Soviet leaders to visit Britain. The Prime Minister assured the President that he had made clear to the Soviets that Britain talked from within the alliance and not as an intermediary. He felt there might be increased pressures for a Soviet visit to Britain and he would appreciate U.S. views on this subject. For these reasons and more, he felt it urgent to visit Bonn at the earliest possible moment. He thought he might go to Paris later but this was more difficult to arrange. At this juncture he was thinking of going to Bonn the first part of the year and to Paris in March or April.

Secretary Rusk then turned to the subject of non-proliferation, saying he felt it was important to look for a non-proliferation agreement in the context of the force and then later expanding the agreement more broadly. He then asked the British specifically whether they had any serious concern about inadvertent proliferation.

The Prime Minister, speaking to this point, said that when he was in opposition he said some hard words about this. But before he went to Moscow last summer, the Prime Minister said he was urged by the U.S. not to say anything about the multilateral force which would imply that it conflicted with non-proliferation. He said when he went to Moscow he actually went further. He not only denied that the multilateral force put the German finger on the nuclear trigger; he told the Russians this concept would put German fingers on the safety catch, and said so at the highest level in the USSR. He assured the President that the UK would go to any lengths to stop proliferation and prevent any development which would make it possible to overrule the U.S. veto.

Healey interjected to say that there were essentially two types of components -- the national, operated by the nuclear powers which would not result in proliferation, and the mixed-manned in which non-nuclear powers provided part of the operational crews -- and this could lead to proliferation.

Gordon Walker added that the consent to the U.S. in firing had to be built into the force. This was absolutely essential to the entire case. The British would consider PAL. But they also wanted to see on paper the sort of thing the U.S. imagined would be in an agreement. (The Prime Minister said language saying "now and forever" was needed to

SECRET

DECLASSIFIED  
NND 979551  
Authority  
By CEC NARA Date 1/4/12

SECRET

-6-

make the concept workable.)

The Foreign Secretary then turned to the question of the German views on the surface fleet. He was not quite sure about how insistent the Germans were upon having such a fleet. He said this required testing. He hoped the U.S. could say to the Germans it did not matter to the U.S. which units were included so long as it met the basic objectives. The British wanted an opportunity to see whether the German views were derived from what they thought were American requirements or their own needs.

The Prime Minister tried to change this presentation a bit and said that the UK did not want to be competing with the U.S. in Bonn by putting one plan against the other. He thought the object should be to make clear to the Germans and others that we agreed on objectives and were concerned with finding the best way to realize these objectives.

Turning to the subject of mixed manning, Secretary McNamara said categorically that the security problem made mixed-manning of Minutemen impossible.

Gordon Walker said the British accepted that position and realized mixed-manning had to be limited to bombers or the fleet.

Healey admitted that the UK recognized that the aircraft were obsolescent but the fact was that it did involve non-nuclear powers in another technique; it served the useful purpose of exposing the non-nuclear nations to the nuclear problems.

At this point the President suggested that the meeting adjourn until 3:45.

SECRET