

'European defence' from Le Monde (19 March 1949)


Caption: On 19 March 1949, referring to the Treaty of Washington establishing NATO, the French daily newspaper Le Monde speculates on the role of the Europeans in this North Atlantic defence pact.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Beuve-Méry, Hubert. 19.03.1949, n° 1 289. Paris: Le Monde. "La défense européenne", p. 1.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/european_defence_from_le_monde_19_march_1949-en-53209dc2-a4dd-40c4-9402-3c8032d8bofe.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



European defence

The text of the Atlantic Pact to be published this afternoon will bring no surprises. Its broad outlines are already known: conformity with the United Nations Pact, geographical demarcation, and no contradiction with any other international agreement. Article 5, which is the most controversial, binds each signatory to lend assistance in the event of an attack on any one of the others, resorting to whatever action is deemed necessary, including the use of armed force. Although this last resort is not made mandatory, we know that it is a concession to the prerogatives of the American Senate and their desire to reserve the right to declare war.

The controversies surrounding this Article have, for the most part, missed their point. What is uncertain, and would remain so whatever form the treaty took, is not knowing whether the United States will declare war in every case (there is no reason to believe that they would act differently from the other Allies), but rather what form their military intervention would take. A treaty cannot specify whether such intervention will be conducted exclusively or mainly by the air force, the extent of the air force action or how it is to be deployed, whether land forces will be sent to Europe, how many troops are likely to be sent, where, and when.

These details are of importance above all to the nations exposed to the initial onslaught and who fear they would be unable to confront it alone. They fall under the heading of military preparation and strategy, not diplomacy. That is to say, the effectiveness of the Atlantic Pact will depend not so much on its being signed but on how it is implemented.

The sole significance of its being signed is that it affirms the solidarity of the United States and Western Europe – one that has been obvious since the war, what with the lend-lease operations, the Marshall Plan and their agreement with respect to policy on Germany, Austria and the United Nations. In short, the Atlantic Pact is simply the confirmation of an established fact; we would not have understood the violent opposition it aroused if the USSR and the Communists around the world had not retained their hope of breaking this solidarity, of seeing it atrophy rather than gather strength.

As aware as anyone of a world split in two, for which they were largely responsible, better organised than their opponents, under the hegemony of a single will, they would have liked to maintain their superiority. It displeases them that the others are organising themselves like them, that they combine and deploy their forces in the political and military world as well as in economic terms and that they in turn demonstrate an irrefutable superiority. Furthermore, those who will not be among the first signatories of the Pact, and even those who have no intention of signing it consider themselves to be implicit members of the Western Union. Sweden is maintaining its neutral status, and no one would consider asking them to give it up: Sweden's Commander-in-Chief, however, with an eye to a possible conflict, has assigned his army with no other task than to fight a holding action until the Western forces arrive.

Reactions in every country following the announcement of the Pact serve to remind us of what everyone already knew – there is always a fifth column ready to join the enemy. This would lend particular character to the conflict we wish to prevent, one which would call for special precautions. What is more, insofar as the protesters are simply peace advocates led astray by Moscow propaganda, they will soon understand, if they are fair-minded, that the Atlantic Pact is purely defensive and that none of the signatories have aggressive intentions. Fundamentally pacifist, without allies or an army, the American people were dragged into two great wars. It is to avoid a third such war that they are taking these steps today. As for the Western Europeans – their leaders and the masses alike – they cannot be suspected of wanting to fight more battles, given that they have already suffered so cruelly.

The signatories of the Pact will undoubtedly refrain from any provocative gesture that might give the lie to their intentions. Will those who feel targeted by it try to stir things up with retaliatory acts deemed necessary to uphold their prestige?