

'The metamorphosis of Western European Union' from Le Monde (23 June 1992)

Caption: On 23 June 1992, the French daily newspaper Le Monde speculates on the new role of Western European Union (WEU) resulting from the new European defence identity provided for in the Treaty on European Union and outlines the steps taken by the nine WEU states to develop a common defence policy.

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The metamorphosis of Western European Union

Still a long way to go before WEU becomes the military arm of a unified continent

If the process of European unification continues, Western European Union (WEU) should become the institution responsible for developing the defence policy of the Twelve and, eventually, for implementing a joint defence. Uncertainties remain, however, in an organisation in which the French, on the one hand, and the British and Dutch, on the other, advocate very different approaches, one completely European, the other heavily Atlanticist. For now, WEU retains a dual function, as a primary vehicle for a European defence identity and as a reinforcement of NATO's European pillar.

In any case, at their recent ministerial meeting on 19 June 1992 in Bonn, the Nine (Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom) solemnly affirmed their resolve to take due account of the defence of the European continent, without debarring themselves from intervention in areas remote from Europe. They hope to see 'the effective implementation of conflict-prevention and crisis-management measures'. France makes no secret of its hope that the dynamic released in this way will, in the short or medium term, overcome many of its partners' Atlanticist reservations. WEU will therefore have to find the right path as it goes along, the hope in Paris being that clarity of practice will prevail over the vagaries of deployment theories.

The establishment of a Military Planning Cell in Brussels, made up of some thirty officers from the nine member States and headed by General Caltabiano of the Italian air force, with a French second-in-command, demonstrates the European commitment to developing an operational capability. The Planning Cell will establish training programmes, carry out an ongoing assessment of potential troop requirements and prepare operations. 'Clausewitz has had his day! Politicians will no longer entrust the survival of the nation to the military. Today we need political/military institutions that will enable us to deal with many types of crisis,' explains a high-ranking officer who is a regular at WEU meetings. This is an essential development in a world where the idea of a clearly identifiable threat (East-West confrontation) has been replaced by the more intangible notion of threats from all corners.

The Permanent Council, composed of ambassadors from the Nine, will be free to meet at any time with the military advisers to ensure timely preparation of ministerial meetings. Regular meetings of the Chiefs of Defence Staff of the Nine and the increasing emphasis on military cooperation should allow WEU to increase its operational capabilities. The idea, eventually, is to specially prepare specific units for these missions, a source of considerable irritation among the British. 'The British may delay the train, but they never miss the last car,' remarks one observer.

Resurrection

In this vein, the Franco-German corps is the first unit that could be put at the service of WEU, even if it could also be assigned to NATO. Addressing the WEU Assembly, Mr Pierre Joxe made a point of emphasising that this corps, far from being confined to France and Germany, was to be seen as a 'global concept' which was 'by nature' open to the other members of WEU. He did, however, add that 'The European corps is not meant to provide the basis for a "European army"'. '(...) It is, in fact, just one of the units able to act within the framework of WEU. It is therefore not exclusive of other projects that would put other European units, whether connected with NATO or not, at WEU's disposal.'

In an interview in *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Mr Joxe reiterated that this force 'will operate under the authority of a NATO command in the event of an attack', in accordance with the agreements still to be concluded with NATO.

WEU is thus faced with the beginnings of a metamorphosis directly tied to the evolution of the political identity of the Twelve as defined in Maastricht. This is not the first time, for since it was established WEU has experienced many changes. It was originally a direct product of the Cold War. In 1948, the Prague coup and the Berlin blockade put paid to the dream of a peaceful Europe rising out of the ruins of Nazi Germany.

A month after the coup d'état that swept through Czechoslovakia, the Brussels Treaty gave birth to Western European Union, 'the beginnings of a European military system'. WEU introduced a mandatory military assistance clause in the event of an attack on one of the Member States. But Franco-British differences — already! — and above all the emergence of NATO, established in 1949 by the Treaty of Washington, were soon to deprive WEU of its military mission.

WEU plodded along lethargically until the 1980s arrived and shook up the old order. In 1984, twice-yearly meetings of the WEU Council (Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers) were introduced. On 26 October 1987 in The Hague, the Ministers went on to adopt a Platform on European Security Interests. Finally, in Maastricht in December 1991, the nine member States of WEU gave new momentum to the Hague Platform, making it an integral part of the process of political union, but without really overcoming fundamental differences.

The war in the former Yugoslavia

The Gulf War had already shown, in August 1990, that the European naval forces tasked with enforcing the embargo could be effectively coordinated through WEU (six of the nine countries involved operated under French command). But it had been necessary to force Britain's hand. A year later, just a few months before Maastricht, the war in Yugoslavia exposed the fragility of WEU, which proved incapable of fully exploring the idea of an intervention force under its banner. The crux of the problem was political — in the shape of British, German and Dutch misgivings — rather than military: the establishment of a WEU intervention force did not present insuperable problems, even if it was no easy matter (four options had been turned down after meetings of the Chiefs of Defence Staff).

The members of the WEU Assembly, who do not themselves have any decision-making power, for their part adopted, at the beginning of this month, a Resolution asking the Ministers of WEU to consider military action to enforce the embargo on Serbia. 'We are talking about an air and naval contribution,' emphasised the rapporteur for the Defence Committee, Mr Jaap de Hoop Scheffer. Certain members of the WEU Assembly also raised the possibility of securing complete control of Yugoslav airspace as well as creating safety zones for civilians, as was done in Iraqi Kurdistan. The German Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr Klaus Kinkel, President-in-Office of the WEU Council, recently conceded the possibility of 'immediate' armed intervention in the former Yugoslavia. But he quickly added that it was necessary 'to avoid German intervention at all costs', considering the weight of history. In the end, the Nine ruled this option out at their meeting in Bonn. WEU, the military arm of a united Europe, still has a long way to go.

Pierre Servent