

## 'The French initiative' from the Vrij Nederland (20 May 1950)

**Caption:** On 20 May 1950, the Dutch magazine Vrij Nederland speculates on the feasibility and differences of the Schuman Plan compared with the other initiatives for European integration currently under way.

**Source:** Vrij Nederland. 20.05.1950. Amsterdam: Vrij Nederland. "Het Franse initiatief", auteur: Vos, H. , p. 7.

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## The French initiative

by Ir H. Vos

The paths which the old Europe is treading in search of a greater degree of unity are many and varied. If you count all the bodies and organisations that exist, that are currently or were formerly in the making, they add up to a respectable total. Will the new French initiative fare better than many that have gone before?

In the immediate aftermath of the war, each of the European countries had its own domestic difficulties to resolve. Each country needed to achieve a new social, political and economic balance. Each country needed to rebuild and renovate at national level. Internationally these early years, 1945–1947, were the age of worldwide organisations: the United Nations and Unesco were established, whilst in the area of finance we had the Bretton Woods Agreement, and the foundations were laid for world trade agreements and the FAO.

But it soon became apparent that Europe's problems could not be solved, either nationally by partially rebuilt old institutions, or internationally by a new world body, which in any case remained weak owing to the growing hostility between the Soviet bloc and the West. European institutions were needed.

It was typical of the subsequent pattern of events that the constructive push towards greater European unity did not come from Europe itself. The initiative came from the USA. The Marshall Plan brought both dollars and goals to the table, because the prime objective of this Plan was to be more than a source of interim financing. In view of the newly published French proposal for a joint authority to manage the French and German steel industry, it is worth remembering that the Marshall Plan called for European cooperation in four big and important economic sectors: coal, electricity, iron and steel, and food production. It is a familiar lament of central figures responsible for implementing the Marshall Plan that so little has come of that cooperation so far.

### Other ways first

It is as if Europe preferred to try other ways first rather than pool its basic industries, as the Marshall Plan originally wanted.

For we have not stood still in the years since the Marshall Plan first secured our continued survival. There has been one proposal after another. Some of them have been acted on in part, whilst others have sunk almost without trace.

Take first of all the plans for economic unions and customs unions. Benelux was a textbook case here.

There was talk of a Scandinavian economic union, but it never happened.

There was talk of a Franco-Italian customs union, but little is heard of that these days.

A French initiative, in any case too political to bring France, Italy and the Benelux countries together, was *a priori* doomed to failure given the current position of the Low Countries: if it had come into being, the new grouping would have found itself at odds with both West Germany and Britain.

There is of course some merit in the idea, now current since the formation of the Benelux grouping, that countries with a common border and roughly the same level of social and economic development should forge closer ties with one another. But the development of Benelux which was, moreover, delayed by financial tensions between the dollar and sterling countries, also showed that formation of these smaller units within Europe would be very time-consuming. Whilst these economic units retained their special significance for the countries that were part of them, they lost their — exaggerated — value as the only correct way to prepare for a single European union.

Enthusiasm for economic unions decreased, and other plans came to the fore: efforts to tackle problems

from the world of finance and trade. For a while there was talk of a general European customs union. The committee appointed to consider the idea is probably still hard at work. And maybe that work will not ultimately be in vain. It produced a system of exchanging trade assets and liabilities, and slightly improved the system of payments as a result.

But attempts to make all European currencies convertible, which were still ongoing last year, now seem to have stalled. The liberalisation of trade has become a favourite agenda item. Some results have been achieved — restrictions have been restricted — but not one of Europe's sovereign states has relinquished the ability to tighten the restrictions again as it sees fit. We see instances of this every day.

Whatever the worth of the methods tried out so far may ultimately prove to be, it seems impossible to move the pace of European cooperation along fast enough — either through economic unions between neighbouring countries or through a common *general* monetary or economic policy.

*We ask again: will the new French initiative fare any better?*

The fact that this initiative is a French one is significant. Not too much can be expected of the smaller European countries in this respect.

The Scandinavians have their own particular concerns, in connection with their relations with Finland and Russia.

The Benelux countries are less able to be energetic owing to the Indonesian question and the issue of the monarchy.

Switzerland is too much of a special case.

As initiators that leaves the big four: Italy, Germany, Britain and France. Relations in Europe — including economic relations between these countries — are certainly not such that Germany or Italy can take the initiative at this early stage. Britain and France will have to take turns in the leading role. France will find it economically harder, but politically easier, to be a driving force for Europe. Great Britain will always have to factor concern for its empire into the equation.

### **Different sides**

There are different sides to the French proposal. The first, as already stated, is that it comes from France. If it is successful, this will be important for France's position in Europe and also for the anti-communist struggle in France. Because even among the French Communists there are some with a sense of the glory of France ...

The French proposal is primarily targeted at Germany. The aim is to combine the German and French steel industries into a single powerful whole. If successful, this may mark the beginning of a decline in Franco-German hostility, apparent in France as a fear of Germany's iron and steel industry.

But — thirdly and most importantly — the French proposal takes an approach to Europe that is *different* from the initiatives described above. Its aim is the pooled management of an industry, technically and economically.

To use a term current in Dutch politics, the French proposal seeks to obtain European unity by the decentralisation of functions. It builds on the pre-war situation: the steelmakers of France and Germany were not exactly strangers to each other. And it incorporates the best part of the Marshall Plan's objectives: the pooling of important basic industries.

Since it is unthinkable that this organisation will be left solely to the coal and steel companies, but equally certain that government and worker organisations will have a say in how it is run, the project is something of

a historical milestone. It will give the Strasbourg-based European parliamentary organisation plenty to do. If coal and oil, electricity and transport and a proportion of food production follow, as envisaged under the Marshall Plan, it may prove extremely important for the economic structure of Europe and the combating of unemployment there.

The Schuman Plan is noteworthy as a political stratagem, but even more so as an opportunity for a new direction in the economic development of Europe.