

The regeneration of Western European Union

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The regeneration of Western European Union

Established by the Paris Agreements of 23 October 1954, at the same time as the accession of Germany to the Atlantic Alliance, Western European Union (WEU) was the only European defence body, comprising France, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Benelux countries and the Federal Republic of Germany. However, it was not equipped with any armed forces, so as to avoid overlapping with those of NATO, the only active defence operation.

However, the end of the Cold War between the two blocs presented Europe with the opportunity to assume a more active role on the international stage. In his report on European Union dated 29 December 1975, Leo Tindemans, Prime Minister of Belgium, suggested the holding of exchanges of views on defence matters. On the initiative of the French Government, steps were taken to 'reactivate' WEU, which had remained dormant for 30 years. Following the signing of the Single European Act, between 17 and 28 February 1986, which extended the sphere of foreign policy cooperation to encompass the political and economic aspects of security, the WEU Council adopted a 'Platform on European Security Interests' in The Hague on 27 October 1987. The Seven expressed their resolve 'to strengthen the European pillar of the Alliance'. Accordingly, it was not a matter of detaching European defence from NATO but of asserting its identity within the organisation. But to what extent? Differences of opinion separated France and Germany, who sought to strengthen WEU and equip it with defence capabilities, from the UK and the Netherlands, who feared that the USA would use the strengthening of Europe as an argument for a more widespread withdrawal of its troops which, in the long run, would weaken the common defence.

WEU still had no HQ or troops, but it wanted to play an active role in international crises, mainly by coordinating national activities such as minesweeping in the Persian Gulf during the Iran–Iraq war from 1987 to 1988, monitoring the naval embargo imposed on Iraq during the Gulf War from 1990 to 1991, and monitoring the embargo imposed on Serbia from 1992 to 1993.

The institution of the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) by the Maastricht Treaty conferred greater importance on WEU and raised the issue of its relations with the European Union. France and Germany felt that WEU should be an instrument of Political Union, its 'fighting force', and should be incorporated accordingly. The UK, supported by Italy, believed that WEU should be at the service of the EU but should also strengthen the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance. Accordingly, it was decided that, at least during a transitional period, WEU would retain its autonomy. Declaration No 30 annexed to the Maastricht Treaty lays down operational provisions for the organisation of, on the one hand, relations between WEU and the EU, and, on the other, between WEU and the Atlantic Alliance.

An operational role was finally conferred on WEU by the Petersberg (Bonn) Declaration of 19 June 1992; WEU member countries declared themselves 'prepared to make available military units from the whole spectrum of their conventional armed forces for military tasks conducted under the authority of WEU.' Besides military assistance for the common defence in the context of NATO or WEU, these military tasks could include humanitarian missions, peacekeeping, and the tasks of combat forces in crisis management. WEU member countries could also make available armed forces with NATO missions after consulting the Organisation.

To undertake this new role, WEU was enlarged to accommodate all the Member States of the European Union with different status according to whether or not they were members of NATO, as well as European members of NATO that did not belong to the EU. The seven founding countries of WEU were joined by Spain and Portugal in 1990 and by Greece in 1995. Iceland, Norway and Turkey, all countries outside the EU, became associate members through membership of NATO. Austria, Ireland, Finland and Sweden, the neutral European Union States, became simply observer countries, together with Denmark, despite the latter's membership of NATO.

WEU structures have been strengthened accordingly. The seat of the Council and the Secretariat was transferred from Paris to Brussels to allow for better communication with NATO and the European Union. A planning cell, in operation since April 1993, is responsible for maintaining the list of forces available to

WEU and for preparing a strategy for their deployment. It has a satellite centre in Torrejón, near Madrid, which monitors the Earth to gather intelligence on weapons and crises. The Chiefs of Defence Staff of the member countries meet twice a year, when they formulate opinions on military strategies submitted to the Council. Paris has remained the seat of the Institute for Security Studies, founded in 1990, and the Assembly of WEU, which consists of MPs from member countries and serves as the organisation's body for discussion and dialogue with the Council. Its activities include discussion of the annual report, submission of written questions, and voting on recommendations.

WEU's operational capabilities remain limited nonetheless, as it possesses no permanent peacetime military structure. In times of crisis calling for the deployment of armed forces under WEU, either NATO HQ staff are made available to WEU or the latter organisation uses its own staff. As for military resources, member countries have promised to place their conventional armed forces at the disposal of WEU. A number of multinational defence forces have been formed: the Eurocorps (see below), Multinational Division (Central) (United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands), the Anglo-Dutch Amphibious Force, the European Operational Rapid Force 'Eurofor' (France, Italy, Portugal, Spain), the European Maritime Force 'Euomarfor' (with the same members), and the Spanish-Italian Amphibious Force. The emphasis here is very much on heterogeneous groups.

WEU's power to act also relies heavily on its ability to make use of the resources of the Atlantic Alliance. This principle was recognised by the North Atlantic Council, held on 10 and 11 January 1994, which sought to strengthen the European division of the Alliance by means of a 'European pillar'. Yet it was only in June 1996 that the Council decided that 'Combined Joint Task Forces' (CJTFs) could be formed within NATO to serve operations placed under the political supervision and strategic command of WEU. European autonomy remains limited, however, with NATO resources being restricted to infrastructure for air forces and telecommunications. The USA is the country capable of long-range intervention, by such means as aerial transportation of heavy cargo and satellite reconnaissance. Europe is, therefore, reliant on the USA, as it can draw on no such resources of its own to acquire strategic mobility capability.

The European Union is, above all, divided on the devising of a common defence policy and, accordingly, how to make use of WEU. France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Belgium see this is a goal to be attained, whereas the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the 'neutral' countries that acceded on 1 January 1995 (Austria, Sweden, Finland) see it only as an eventuality. That is why the number of interventions made by WEU remains low. In 1991, the United Kingdom opposed France's proposal to send an intervention force to Yugoslavia under UN command. In 1997, the refusal of the UK and Germany to use WEU during the crisis in Albania led a number of European countries, on the initiative of France, Greece and Italy, to embark on a humanitarian mission under Italian command (Operation Alba). As a result, WEU has not been able to be used to carry out military tasks for maintaining or restoring peace ('Petersberg' tasks). Rather, it has been limited to police operations: enforcing the embargo and minesweeping in the Persian Gulf during the Allied invasion to liberate Kuwait in 1990 and 1991; monitoring the embargo against the former Yugoslavia on the Adriatic and the Danube from 1992 to 1996, in cooperation with NATO and the UN; sending a police contingent to aid the EU administration of the city of Mostar from 1994 to 1996.

Where armaments are concerned, European cooperation appears essential in order to streamline manufacture, reduce costs and allow for the interoperability of equipment among different national forces. The Independent European Programme Group (IEPG), set up under NATO in 1976 and which succeeded in establishing just a few bilateral agreements between France and Germany, was incorporated into WEU in 1992, becoming the Western European Armaments Group (WEAG). In November 1996, the WEU Council adopted the Charter of the Western European Armaments Organisation (WEAO), whose activities again consist in awarding research contracts, and which surely prefigures an actual European armaments agency. However, cooperation in this field is hindered by the resistance of national industries (in France, by the manufacturers of the Leclerc tank, GIAT industries, and of the Rafale fighter plane, Dassault), and especially by the preference often given to American equipment.