

The Beyen Plan

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Following the demise of the European Defence Community (EDC) on 30 August 1954 and the conclusion, on 23 October 1954, of the Paris Agreements on Western European Union (WEU), the process of European integration came to a standstill. However, the European Parliament, the assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), continued to explore various avenues of sectoral integration, but the military and political routes to reactivation of the integration process were impassable, at least for the time being. In the eyes of most observers, therefore, the only option was to return to the path of economic integration. The British, however, were proving reluctant to commit themselves, while France, discredited to some extent by the faint-hearted attitude of some of its political classes, had lost its touch.

That was when Johan Willem Beyen, the Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs, seized the political initiative. He updated the idea he had already mooted in December 1952 and February 1953, during the formulation of plans for a European Political Community (EPC), of a form of economic integration that differed from the kind of sector-based integration achieved by the Six in the ECSC framework. Beyen's proposal was that the Six should open, on a resolutely supranational basis, a general common market with neither customs duties nor import quotas. His plan was chiefly inspired by the Ouchy Convention of 1932 in which the Economic Union of Belgium and Luxembourg (BLEU) and the Netherlands had agreed on annual 10% reductions in the customs tariffs levied on each other's exports and on mutual granting of most-favoured-nation status. Being very much an exporting country, the Netherlands was seeking to foster export growth by obtaining new outlets in Europe. At the same time, the Dutch intended to maintain their role in the forefront of European integration, but Beyen was convinced that the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) could not provide the right framework for real economic integration coupled with scope for political progress.

On 4 April 1955, having come out strongly in favour of the principle of promoting European growth and productivity, Beyen sent a memorandum to Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs, and to Joseph Bech, the Luxembourg Minister for Foreign Affairs, in which he advocated the establishment of a customs union designed to lead towards economic union. In his view, economic integration across the board was the best way to reinforce a sense of European solidarity and unity. In terms of strategy, Beyen proposed that the three Benelux countries rapidly adopt a joint initiative. In Leiden on 21 April, he publicly unveiled his project before the Dutch national council of the European Movement. Two days later, the heads of the diplomatic services of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands agreed at The Hague that they would jointly draft a memorandum as quickly as possible on the reactivation of the European integration process, particularly in the realms of nuclear energy and economic affairs. On 28 April, considering that the project was now sufficiently advanced, Beyen declared to the First Chamber of the States General that the governments of the Benelux countries would soon be approaching the other three member governments of the ECSC to propose a conference of the States of Western Europe on European economic integration.