


The origins and development of WEU

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The origins and development of Western European Union

Western European Union (WEU) was born out of the Treaty on Economic, Social and Cultural Collaboration and Collective Self-Defence signed in Brussels on 17 March 1948. Although the Treaty did not officially set up an international organisation, in practice the arrangement was referred to as the Brussels Treaty Organisation, or Western Union. The Treaty was supplemented and amended by a protocol signed in Paris on 23 October 1954 (the modified Brussels Treaty), setting up Western European Union. The five original signatories to Western Union (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom) were joined by the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and Italy.

The establishment of WEU cannot be seen in isolation from the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The prime objective of the European countries was, in fact, to persuade the United States to support the defence of Europe and, in particular, to incorporate it into the Treaty with Canada and the Scandinavian countries. Because solidarity under the Brussels Treaty was too binding, the US Congress refused to sign up to it but did agree to accede to the Washington Treaty (on the Atlantic Alliance) in 1949, as Article 5 of that treaty was less demanding. US troops remained in Europe and supported the defence of the continent, but as part of a dominant transatlantic organisation.

Even so, the failure to establish a European army through the European Defence Community (EDC: 1952–1954) ⁽¹⁾, the integration of the FRG into WEU as a springboard to Bonn's entry into NATO (in 1955), the settlement of the problem of the Saar, the part played by WEU in the process of joint consultations between the founder States of the European Economic Community and the United Kingdom, not to mention the failure of the Fouchet Plan (1962) ⁽²⁾, were all powerless to prevent the 'Sleeping Beauty', the nickname that WEU was given at the time, from fading away into a dormant state.

The revival of WEU between the Rome Declaration of 27 October 1984 and the Hague Platform on European Security Interests of 26 October 1987 gave Europeans an opportunity to give thought to their own security, to support the idea of building an integrated Europe which included security and defence aspects, and, at the same time, to strengthen the European pillar of the Alliance. This was also the time when Spain (in 1990), Portugal (in 1990) and Greece (in 1995) joined WEU.

The modified Brussels Treaty Organisation was also modestly involved in a number of joint operations: mine clearance and embargo enforcement in the Gulf (1988–1990), the WEU/NATO Operation Sharp Guard in the Adriatic (1993–1996), the enforcement of the embargo on the Danube (1993–1996), the contribution of a police contingent to Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (1994–1996), a police mission in Albania (1997–2001), a mine clearance assistance mission in Croatia (1999–2001) and a general security surveillance mission in Kosovo (1998–2000).

Overall, WEU has been through three successive periods:

- a process of Western Union being divested of its powers and then of a WEU 'resting' in the shadow of the Atlantic Alliance (1948–1960);
- a period of quiet NATO and European Union (EU) dominance through the vitality of the pro-Atlantic culture and a switch in the ranking order which put the EU in the ascendant (in the late 1980s and the 1990s);
- a wholesale dismantling of WEU's structures by the EU bodies and support from European governments for a European security and defence policy (ESDP) then a common security and defence policy (CSDP) (1999–2011).

Of course, WEU was twice reactivated, but it never really managed to assert itself or to make the idea of a European defence system that did not involve the Americans a reality. It was revitalised in 1984 on Belgian

and French initiative and again in 1992, with the Treaty of Maastricht. On the second occasion, operational capabilities were developed (the Forces Answerable to WEU, the 'FAWEU', came to the fore), the Planning Cell and the Situation Centre were reorganised to become a WEU Military Staff and links and procedures shared between WEU and NATO were consolidated.

In the 1990s WEU saw its instruments, its bodies and its culture become gradually and quietly 'NATO-ised'.

In other words, this European organisation was, in turn, ignored, left in suspended animation, and overlooked when a number of tasks which it could actually have carried out were performed using groups of volunteers (Operation Alba in 1997). It was also hampered in its operations by individually tailored statuses being devised for its members (even though these favoured relations between NATO and EU Member States, and those countries in the enlarged Europe who were members of or applicants to join one of those two organisations). WEU was finally stripped of its substance to a large degree in 2000. The EU took up the baton with the defence aspects of the Treaty of Nice.

WEU, then, was an intergovernmental organisation dominated by NATO, but also for a long time in competition with the EU. It eventually became clear that this strictly European political and military structure could not be made into a substitute for the political integration which had for so long been lacking.

The fact remains that WEU was the laboratory for European defence cooperation; it was the body which brought Western Europe and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs) closer together by setting up a WEU consultation forum (Petersberg, 19 June 1992) and then a new partnership (Kirchberg, 9 May 1994); WEU also provided the EU with a whole range of politico-military and organisational policies, procedures and experience at the end of the 1990s. WEU was also the spur to the definition of the Petersberg tasks (Bonn, 1992) and the establishment of the FAWEU, as well as the creation of the Torrejón Satellite Centre and the Institute for Security Studies. It also shaped the cultural and relation-oriented heritage which WEU and NATO shared and which was, in the main, institutionalised in the last decade of the 20th century, to the advantage of the 15, 25 and then 27 members of the EU. Lastly, it was the guardian of Article V of the Treaty, which expressed the legally binding common solidarity of the six full Member States in the face of an external attack.

Although an intra-European Military Committee was set up within WEU from May 1998, generic plans (preparing the ground for possible future operations) were drawn up and national forces were seconded at the request of WEU (via the FAWEU), it could not have functioned in a great many situations except by availing itself of NATO resources. Proof of this is the indirect right of inspection enjoyed by the Alliance or, in a more subtle way, the practice of circumventing WEU by setting up ad hoc coalitions not under a European flag, as symbolised by the German and British refusal to involve WEU in Operation Alba in 1987. Some obstruction was also caused by the reluctance of certain Member States to intervene in the Great Lakes crisis in Africa.

Dependant as it was tactically, operationally and militarily on NATO, WEU was also 'encircled and overrun' by the European Union's community-based and intergovernmental structure. Thus, after Europe had embarked on political cooperation in 1970 and then acquired a common foreign and security policy (CFSP) in 1992, the question which arose was why WEU, the crucible for a controlled Europeanisation of Europe's own defences, needed to exist. At the end of the 1990s, WEU was prevented from pursuing any aim which might overshadow the EU. It became the means of 'intergovernmentalising' the CFSP before being compelled, as it was, to hand over responsibility to an EU which was to define an ESDP of its own, including preferential, direct links with the Atlantic Alliance. Underlying this was the blurring of the 'subsidiary guarantee' in the event of isolationist tendencies from north America, unless one was to envisage an extremely unlikely state of affairs which might trigger recourse to Article V of the Treaty.

As a 'laboratory for European defence cooperation' and the practitioner of an inclusive approach involving external players which constitute the wider Europe ⁽³⁾, WEU did, nevertheless, as the third millennium loomed on the horizon, pass on a set of politico-military and organisational policies, procedures and experiences on which the EU could draw. At the same time, WEU's relations with NATO laid the foundations for steady and cautious, ambiguous and complicated, yet inescapable and essential progress in the development of new

relations between the EU and NATO, for example:

- the implementation of the decisions taken in Berlin in June 1996 on NATO support for WEU-led operations;
- the establishment of close cooperation on defence planning, including generic plans;
- joint exercises designed to test the arrangements for consultation and cooperation between the two organisations.

The history of WEU is a unique case of an organisational structure with ambitions that were systematically obstructed, weakened and downgraded by certain governments, through Atlanticism, nationalism or even organisational rivalries between European countries. After being put through organisational ‘mutilations’ and a bankrupting of its powers, WEU is the perfect example of an organisation whose purpose was distorted and its activities sidelined, its credibility destroyed and itself ‘snubbed’, despite repeated attempts to transform itself so as to establish, in the service of European security, a capability for which there is such a crying need.

What lay behind this series of moves to weaken WEU was the national policies of certain countries that were unwilling to give too much power to a specifically European security and defence organisation or to use the resources and know-how it had to offer. According to this reasoning, rivalry over the scale of WEU’s room for manoeuvre had to be between the United Kingdom and France, each with its ‘satellite’ countries in support and resorting, on occasion, to the politics of equivocation.

As the first layer deposited by the flow of European unification (1948), the intergovernmental military arm of Europe’s security interests (1980), the European security pillar for NATO and the EU (1992), the instrument for the inculcating of a NATO culture (1995) and the residual organ undergoing a forcible ‘slimming cure’ (2000), Western Union and particularly WEU were the playthings of rivalries between Europeanists and Atlanticists, between NATO and the EU, until the organisation was severely weakened, to the EU’s advantage.

In the end, in 2000, WEU had to watch as its Member States ordered the inclusion of some of the modified Brussels Treaty organisation’s functions in the EU, after undergoing a remodelling of its administrative structure and statutes (Marseille Council). The residue of WEU was both parliamentary (the Assembly) and legal (the Treaty), while the Western European Armaments Group (WEAG) and the Western European Armaments Organisation (WEAO) were dismantled to make way for the European Defence Agency.

During the first decade of the 21st century, WEU retained certain functional and judicial attributes which temporarily protected it from disappearing completely, but the decisions which counted were taken elsewhere, in the EU and NATO.

This weakening meant that WEU’s Council of Ministers no longer met, its last Secretary-General gave very little of his time to it and certain countries waged a guerrilla campaign to reduce the operating budget of the WEU Parliamentary Assembly. The Assembly changed its name several times ⁽⁴⁾ to make itself more visible by stressing the links between itself, the national parliaments and the question of European defence, while, legally speaking, institutional legitimacy in parliamentary debates concerning the ESDP lay with the EU (via the European Parliament’s subcommittee on security and defence).

WEU’s future, then, remained uncertain and very exposed. The ten full Member States needed only consider that Articles V, IV and VIII (3) of the modified Brussels Treaty were obsolete for WEU to cease to exist. This was the case following the Treaty of Lisbon, even though its mutual defence clause is not worded in such a binding manner. Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union stipulates that the collective defence of EU Member States that are also members of NATO (the Ten of the former WEU) is realised in the framework of NATO (paragraph 2), and recognises that ‘If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory,

the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States. Commitments and cooperation in this area shall be consistent with commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which, for those States which are members of it, remains the foundation of their collective defence and the forum for its implementation.’

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- (1) The failure was attributed to a fear of political, economic and military integration occurring simultaneously with a few supranational features added on.
- (2) The first version of the plan was seen as being too Atlanticist (with its link to NATO) and the second version as too de Gaulian and intergovernmental.
- (3) Address by Javier Solana at the second part of the 46th session of the WEU Assembly, Paris, 5 December 2000.
- (4) The names were: the interim European Security and Defence Assembly (2000); the interparliamentary European Security and Defence Assembly (2003); the European Security and Defence Assembly (2008) with the words ‘National parliamentarians working together for Europe’s security’ on the spine of its paper-bound reports. These different titles were not recognised by the Council.