


The establishment of WEU

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The establishment of Western European Union

Between the signing of the 1948 Brussels Treaty organising Western Union and the modified Brussels Treaty establishing Western European Union (WEU) in 1954, there were several events and diplomatic initiatives that help to explain the erratic course followed by political projects for common security and defence, and to account for the birth of WEU, Europe's first common security and defence organisation.

Firstly, the Washington Treaty and the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949 fairly soon led to US dominance over the defence of Western Europe and the North Atlantic and the imposition of indirect control over European defence initiatives. Symbolic of this state of affairs was the appointment of US General Dwight D. Eisenhower as Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR).

Secondly, tensions associated with the Cold War prompted statesmen to accelerate the incorporation of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) into Western defence bodies. On 24 October 1950, France proposed the creation of a common European defence structure for this purpose, albeit within the Atlantic Alliance. The plan for the European Defence Community was put forward for signature by René Pleven in May 1952 and involved Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the FRG. The objective was to strengthen Western defence by means of a German contribution to what was known as 'forward' defence ⁽¹⁾, in the hope of eventually setting up a federal defence structure (on the lines of the European Coal and Steel Community). An underlying objective was to prevent Germany from acquiring full sovereignty over its own troops.

Political opposition to German rearmament in France (chiefly from the Gaullists, the Communists and some Socialists), subsequent tensions in Parliament and disagreements between French senior officers sparked off a crisis, especially since the advent of the EDC would sound the death knell for European strategic independence, with resources being transferred to NATO (under Article 18 of the EDC Treaty), as was done previously with the Western Union Defence Organisation (WUDO) ⁽²⁾. What is more, the EDC did not hold sovereign political authority in Europe, even though the Ad Hoc Assembly ⁽³⁾ adopted, on 10 March 1953, a draft scheme for a 'supranational European Community' in the draft statute for a European Political Community.

The importance attached to nation-states, the mistrust of supranational aspects in the area of national prerogative, the French fear of 'disappearing' as an independent State and the absence of the British from the process were some of the arguments which led to the failure of the draft treaty tabled before the French National Assembly on 30 August 1954. The plan for Europe as an economic community was to progress further with the Rome Treaties, while Europe as a defence community relied largely on the Atlantic Alliance.

Even so, the German question continued to loom large. The need now was to incorporate the FRG, rearming under European control, by opening up the Brussels Treaty and, in particular, the Atlantic Alliance to German accession. The initiative had to come from the European side, however, given the nature of the case. The running in this was made mainly by Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden, with support from the Benelux countries.

At a conference of the Nine Powers ⁽⁴⁾ held in London from 28 September to 3 October 1954, several decisions, not necessarily applying uniformly to all the countries involved, were taken in the form of the 'Paris agreements'. These covered a proposal for settling the problem of the Saar, the monitoring of German rearmament by amending the Brussels Treaty, the ending of the occupation status in the FRG, measures to organise the stationing of the Allied forces in the FRG, an invitation to the FRG to join NATO and to Italy ⁽⁵⁾ to accede to the modified Brussels Treaty. The United Kingdom's undertaking to keep troops on the European mainland also reassured France as to German rearmament while at the same time preventing the withdrawal of US forces.

Among the Paris agreements figured the signing of the Protocol modifying and completing the Brussels Treaty of 1948. The 'modified' Brussels Treaty reassured France as regards authorising the FRG to rearm

under supervision (cf. the Protocols to the Treaty), confirmed the principle of automatic common solidarity in the event of territorial aggression, strengthened confidence between the European capitals, indirectly 'Atlanticised' the defence of Western Europe and temporarily enhanced diplomatic relations between London and the States which founded the European Economic Community (EEC).

In fairly short order, however, WEU found its tasks being watered down by pressure from the Atlantic Alliance bodies and the growth of the European Communities. The effect of this state of affairs was to make the European security and defence organisation barely visible, so that it gradually fell into a state of inertia. The refusal to duplicate efforts in the military, economic, cultural, social and political spheres was therefore to the detriment of the modified Brussels Treaty, even though the Council of WEU continued to ensure that NATO developed a European, and not solely American, perception of security. Meanwhile, the Parliamentary Assembly of WEU took care to see that all the powers of the Council of WEU were maintained.

Thus, WEU took a back seat between 1973 and 1984, after the Saar question had been resolved and after a number of discussions were held at the end of the 1950s and during the 1960s about the role of nuclear weapons in Europe, and indeed after the enlargement of the Communities. The modified Brussels Treaty organisation came to be regarded as a sort of tool for the exercise of Europeanist control within the Alliance, while at the same time becoming a transitional instrument which paved the way for the advent of the European Communities.

(December 2009)

- (1) 'Forward defence' is a concept which involved the commitment of nuclear and conventional NATO forces to the defence of the FRG's border with the German Democratic Republic. This concept developed over time, from meaning withdrawal to the west of the Rhine before launching a counter-attack, to the organising of Allied military units as near the 'Iron Curtain' as possible in order to defend NATO territory and attempt to reduce the geographical area which might have to be ceded to the enemy in the event of a military confrontation between blocs originating in the two Germanys.
- (2) The Five-Power Council of Western Union decided to merge the WUDO with NATO and SACEUR on 20 December 1950.
- (3) An Assembly consisting of the members of the Common Assembly of the European Coal and Steel Community plus nine members of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe.
- (4) The five States parties to the Brussels Treaty, the FRG, Italy, the United States and Canada.
- (5) Italy was already a member of NATO.