

The organisation of post-war defence in Europe (1948–1954) – Full text

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Introduction

At the end of the Second World War, Europe was on its knees. People were living in constant fear of renewed German aggression and the Soviet grip on Central and Eastern Europe fuelled a sense of anxiety in Western Europe.

A divided Western Europe, utterly drained and relegated to second fiddle on the international stage by the rise in power of the United States and the Soviet Union, soon realised that its recovery would come through unity. To consolidate its newfound peace, which had been bought at such a high price, the idea of a common system of defence seemed to be the only solution.

On 17 March 1948, the Brussels Treaty establishing Western Union, a system of mutual assistance in the event of armed aggression, was concluded between the United Kingdom, France and the three Benelux countries. This alliance marked the start of European military cooperation.

The five European signatories to the Brussels Treaty soon realised that alone they would be incapable of mounting any effective resistance to an attack from the USSR. So Western Europe turned to the United States, a move which would result in the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington in April 1949, establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

But in 1950, the start of the Korean War proved how pressing the need was for a European defence organisation that would necessarily include German armed forces. Moreover, the need for German rearmament was constantly repeated by a US Administration anxious to thwart the ambitions of communism in Europe. NATO did guarantee the defence of Europe in an Atlantic context thanks to massive American support, but it did not provide a practical solution to the problem of rearming the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), which was not a signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty. Therefore, while West German participation in European defence was on the agenda, the former Allies were of widely differing opinions as to how this should be brought about.

In 1950, René Pleven proposed that, following the signing of the ECSC Treaty, a European army should be created, with the eventual involvement of German units, and that the whole be placed under a single military and political European authority. Although it was accepted by most Western countries, the plan for a European Defence Community (EDC) was rejected by the French National Assembly in August 1954.

Western European Union (WEU), which allowed Germany to accede to the Brussels Treaty in October 1954, would never be able to compensate for the failure of the EDC and European military integration.

I. The first post-war military cooperation

After the Second World War, the establishment of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the massive presence of Soviet troops in those countries, gave rise to a feeling of apprehension in Western Europe. The French and British Governments reacted and were soon joined by the governments of the Benelux countries. On 17 March 1948, the Brussels Treaty establishing Western Union was signed, marking the start of European military cooperation. The creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on 4 April 1949 was a further step towards more effective military cooperation between Europe and the United States.

A. Western Union (WU)

On 4 March 1947, France and the United Kingdom signed a mutual assistance pact in Dunkirk. In the post-war climate, this friendship and cooperation treaty was openly targeted at vanquished Germany in order to forestall any new aggression on its part. The French Government sought to guard against what it still considered a potential threat from across the Rhine.

However, in the following months, tension continued to rise between the Western and Soviet blocs. In October, the recently-created Cominform took a fiercely critical stance towards the aid provided by the Marshall Plan, unveiled by the United States in June 1947, for the rebuilding of Europe. Cominform officials condemned what they regarded as the subservience of Europe to America, and both the USSR and its satellite countries refused help from the Marshall Plan. The Western European countries, wanting above all to stop communist expansion, sought to convince Washington that it should grant temporary financial and material aid to the Western democracies that had been seriously weakened by five years of war.

On 22 January 1948, Ernest Bevin, British Foreign Secretary, delivered a speech to the House of Commons in which he condemned the Soviet threat and asserted his determination to further the United Kingdom's cooperation with France and the Benelux countries through a Western Union that would expand the Dunkirk Treaty. A few days later, the Prague coup of 25 February 1948, when the communists forcibly seized power in Czechoslovakia, only heightened international tension and the dangers arising from the Cold War. The United States quickly made known its preference for a regional pact which would exceed mere military matters. Talks were immediately begun during which the British Government unveiled to France and the Benelux countries a plan for a mutual defence alliance in the event of external aggression. On 17 March 1948, the five countries signed the Brussels Treaty establishing Western Union, designed to guard against any armed aggression in Europe (i.e. not including the overseas territories), no longer just from Germany, against any of its members. At the same time, Denmark, Norway and Sweden discussed the idea of military cooperation within a Scandinavian defence union. Inspired by Finland's experience, but remaining divided about their neutral status, these countries wanted to protect themselves against any possible Soviet pressure and considered calling on the United States to provide them with the armaments required to deter any attack. But the regional plan failed once and for all in 1949 when the Americans announced their unequivocal refusal to arm a neutral alliance.

The Brussels Treaty, scheduled to remain in force for 50 years, provided for the organisation of cooperation among the five signatories in the military, economic, social and cultural spheres. A united Military High Command of Western Union, a kind of joint HQ, was created. However, the Brussels Treaty was soon left devoid of its newly-expanded authority after the signing of a succession of treaties establishing the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (April 1948), the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (April 1949), the Council of Europe (May 1949) and the European Coal and Steel Community (April 1951). But although the Brussels Treaty failed to create a customs union, it did partially meet the concerns of the Americans, who considered that it reinforced the position and willingness of the five member countries, all keen to receive economic and military aid from the United States.

B. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)

The five European signatories to the Brussels Treaty quickly realised that they could not repel an attack from the USSR on their own. The Berlin Blockade, which ended in May 1949, clearly demonstrated that strong Western solidarity could prevent a tense situation from escalating into a military conflict. The United States was therefore keen to sign a military alliance with its European

allies.

On 4 April 1949, 12 Foreign Ministers gathered in Washington to sign the North Atlantic Treaty, thereby establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), which incorporated Western Union. In addition to the five signatory states to the Brussels Treaty, the United States, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Norway and Portugal also joined NATO. Two events — the explosion of the Soviet Union's first atomic bomb in September 1949 and the start of the Korean War in June 1950 — accelerated the creation of NATO's integrated military structure. At the same time, the United States insisted on the inclusion of German troops. In 1955, after the failure of the European Defence Community (EDC), the Federal Republic of Germany officially joined NATO. In 1950, the US General and World War II hero Dwight D. Eisenhower became the first Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in Europe. The following year, the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) was established near Paris. In 1967, it was moved to its permanent location in Casteau, near Mons, Belgium.

The need for a Euro-American alliance was angrily disputed by communists around the world, and the NATO negotiations were accompanied by scarcely veiled threats from the Kremlin against the Western powers. But the climate of fear surrounding the ratification of the accession treaties by Western parliaments merely spurred them to move more quickly. The North Atlantic Treaty came into force on 23 August 1949 and opened the way for the defence of Western Europe on a transatlantic basis.

II. The genesis and failure of the plan for a European Defence Community (EDC)

In 1950, the Korean War and the communist threat proved how pressing the need was for a European defence organisation that would necessarily include German armed forces. Moreover, the need for German rearmament was constantly repeated by a US Administration anxious to thwart the ambitions of communism in Europe. But Europe still held vivid and painful memories of the war and of German military occupation. Keen that the establishment of a German army should be undertaken within the confines of a European structure, René Pleven, President of the French Council of Ministers, put forward to his European partners a plan proposing the constitution of a European army. But the attempt to transpose the European Coal and Steel Community model to the military field proved to be an ambitious plan.

A. The need for German rearmament

In 1950, a few weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States ordered France to accept the rapid rearmament of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), because they were increasingly afraid that the Soviet Union, which had had nuclear capability since late 1949, would launch an offensive military campaign in Western Europe. At the same time, the French army was embroiled in Indo-China, and British units were involved in Malaysia. The 14 Western divisions based in Europe did not seem up to the task of taking on over 180 communist divisions. The West German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, officially called for the right to raise an armed force capable of protecting the country from the threat posed by the East German 'People's Police'. The situation was far from simple. In 1950, the FRG had neither army, Ministry of Defence nor, of course, a general staff. It still had no Ministry of Foreign Affairs, yet its geographical position at the heart of Europe, as well as the fact that its eastern part had been annexed, meant that it was sure to be the literal battleground of any East–West conflict.

The member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) were also in favour of

German rearmament, with the notable exceptions of the French and Belgian Governments. The bulk of public opinion, too, especially in France, did not seem ready to accept a new German army, as memories of the Second World War and of German occupation were still too painful.

B. The plan for an EDC

In the summer of 1950, Jean Monnet, General Commissioner of the French National Planning Board and the man behind the Schuman Plan, sought to organise European defence on a supranational basis comparable to that laid down in the Schuman proposal. At the same time, the USA asked their allies to plan for the rearmament of West Germany. But Monnet was also trying to ensure that Germany, aware that its role was becoming increasingly indispensable, did not lose sight of the plan for a coal and steel pool or harden its position in negotiations on this matter. He put his proposal to René Plevin, French Premier and former Defence Minister, who in turn submitted it to the Council of Ministers before putting it to the French National Assembly on 24 October 1950.

Keen that the establishment of a German army should be undertaken within the confines of a European structure, the French Premier, René Plevin, put forward to his European partners a plan proposing the constitution of a European army of 100 000 men. The Plevin Plan was to combine battalions from various European countries, including Germany. The European army, though run by a European Minister for Defence and endowed with a common budget, would be placed under the supreme command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Negotiations began on 15 February 1951. With American support, the members of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) signed the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community (EDC) on 27 May 1952 in Paris. It differed from the initial French plan in several respects. The planned European army would consist of 40 national divisions of 13 000 soldiers wearing a common uniform, much more than originally proposed by France. The Treaty also provided for the creation of a Commissariat of nine members, having less extensive powers than those of the High Authority of the ECSC, a Council of Ministers, and an EDC Assembly with the task of drafting a plan for a European political authority. As those in federalist circles had wished, Article 38 of the Treaty provided for the development of a plan for a federal structure to oversee and democratically control the planned European army. The EDC Treaty, signed for a period of 50 years, could not, however, come into force until it had been ratified by the parliaments of all the signatory states.

C. The refusal to ratify the EDC Treaty

Whilst France's five European partners began the process of parliamentary ratification, an intense ideological dispute divided the majority of French political parties — so much so that Italy decided to wait for the results of the French vote before taking its own decision.

The *Mouvement républicain populaire* (MRP — Popular Republican Movement), led by Robert Schuman, fought for the ratification of the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community (EDC), which it considered to be the decisive step in moving towards federal unity in Europe and the best way to prevent a revival of German nationalism. Those in favour of the EDC also saw it as an effective way for European countries to break away from their rather humiliating position as protected, dependent allies, the mere object of competition between East and West.

On the other hand, the French Communist Party (PCF) and the *Rassemblement du peuple français* (RPF — Rally of the French People), created by General de Gaulle, combined their efforts to fight

against a project which in their eyes meant an unacceptable surrender of national sovereignty and which would once again leave the United Kingdom out of a highly strategic European project. At that time, memories of the Nazi occupation were still strong, and the rearmament of Germany was anathema to many. In addition, radical, socialist and independent MPs were split on the issue.

Nor was the international situation favourable to the EDC. Whilst France was suffering serious military setbacks in Indo-China, the nationalist right feared a further weakening of the French army. The death of Stalin in May 1953 and the signing of the armistice ending the Korean War four months later appeared to herald a period of détente in which the EDC no longer seemed quite as urgent. Furthermore, strong American pressure for ratification ended up irritating French MPs, who did not want to be told what to do.

In these circumstances, successive French Premiers delayed ratification of a Treaty openly criticised to an increasing extent by the French political community. Weakened by the successive governmental crises of the Fourth Republic, the new government under Mendès France, itself split between those for and those against the EDC, met with considerable difficulties in its efforts to have such a controversial bill adopted. At the eleventh hour, Mendès France, who himself had considerable reservations, even asked his European partners to modify certain aspects concerning the implementation of the Treaty and make it less supranational, but his efforts proved to be in vain. Not having been able to secure these amendments, Mendès France refused to take the political responsibility of turning ratification of the Treaty into a vote of confidence in his government.

While the Treaty had already been ratified by France's partners, with the exception of Italy, which was ready to do so, the political friction and impassioned debates came to a head on 30 August 1954, when the French National Assembly decided by 319 votes to 264 to postpone discussion of the document that would allow the President to ratify the EDC Treaty. This procedural artifice meant that France had, in effect, rejected the proposal for a European army that it had instigated. For the federalists, the 'crime of 30 August' put an end, for the moment at least, to a climate favourable to supranationality in Europe.

France's course of action met with considerable consternation in Western Europe and the United States. There was intense disappointment, and a rapid response was required. France, which had for many years been the champion of the European cause, found itself seriously discredited by its refusal to ratify the EDC Treaty. The establishment of Western European Union (WEU) on 23 October 1954 provided but a feeble substitute for the EDC.

III. The establishment of Western European Union (WEU)

After the failure of the EDC, the German question remained on the agenda. At a conference of the Nine Powers (France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States), held in London from 28 September to 3 October 1954, several decisions were taken. These included ending the occupation regime in the FRG and restoring the country's sovereignty, monitoring German rearmament by amending the 1948 Brussels Treaty, accession of the FRG and Italy to the modified Brussels Treaty and accession of the FRG to NATO. 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.

On 23 October 1954, at the end of the London Conference, the Protocol Modifying and Completing the Brussels Treaty was signed. The five original signatories of Western Union (France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg) were joined by Italy and the FRG. The Paris

Accords, which were seen as an alternative solution to the failed plan for a European army, established Western European Union (WEU). They marked the end of the regime of occupation in the FRG and endorsed the accession of West Germany and Italy to the Brussels Treaty.

Alongside the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs that already existed, the new Treaty created a consultative parliamentary Assembly, an Agency for the Control of Armaments and a Standing Armaments Committee. In order not to offend European public opinion, which was still hostile towards a now officially authorised German rearmament, the Paris Accords prohibited Germany from manufacturing or acquiring ABC (atomic, biological or chemical) weapons of mass destruction. This time, the French National Assembly accepted the rearmament of West Germany. West Germany was now able to establish its own army, the *Bundeswehr*, which joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on 5 May 1955. Despite France's rejection of the EDC project, the rearmament of the FRG went ahead all the same.

The Soviets, who conducted an intense propaganda campaign of their own throughout the entire process of negotiations on German rearmament, reacted immediately by concluding a treaty of cooperation and mutual assistance between the eight Eastern bloc countries (the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania and Hungary). Signed on 14 May 1955, this became known as the Warsaw Pact, and in many respects it mirrored the Atlantic Pact. The East German 'Garrisoned People's Police' (*Kasernierte Volkspolizei*), an army in all but name, became the National People's Army (*Nationale Volksarmee*).

The failure of the EDC and the establishment of WEU, closely linked to NATO, revealed Western Europe's inability to develop a defence system without the United States. Even though WEU was the first European organisation with responsibility for defence and security, the failure of the EDC marked the end of European political integration in the area of defence. It would not be until 1955, and the Messina Declaration, that the process of European integration could begin once more. The European states once again focused their efforts on economic integration, with the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom) under the Rome Treaties of 25 March 1957.