

The relationship between WEU and NATO

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The relationship between WEU and NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Western European Union (WEU) share a common predecessor in Western Union (WU). This was the first collective defence organisation established between France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg by the Brussels Treaty of 17 March 1948^[1]. Its headquarters were in Fontainebleau.

The negotiations on the Brussels Treaty brought out the differences in attitudes and interests between the European partners regarding the nature of the future organisation and the way the initiative was seen by its promoters; either as an effort by Europeans to prove to the Americans that they were willing to defend themselves and to secure their support — at the time WU was a precursor to an Atlantic defence system (this was the position taken by George Bidault, at the time Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ernest Bevin, British Foreign Secretary); or as the first stage in European integration, which would develop not just militarily but also economically, culturally and socially (the view of Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian Prime Minister).

The Brussels Treaty, which was concluded for a term of 50 years (Article X), provided for economic cooperation (Article I), a declaration of intention on social matters (Article II), the development of cultural exchanges (Article III) and mutual and automatic assistance in the event of attack (Articles IV and V), and established a standing body for mutual consultation (a Consultative Council) whose task was to bring the Treaty to life (Articles VII, VIII and IX).

In the next stage, the setting up of WU's structure, the same divergences of view among the Europeans were apparent. Benelux, headed by Paul-Henri Spaak, the Belgian Prime Minister, proposed to exploit to the full the various stipulations of the Treaty, to make sure, in particular, that a major, permanent body with specialist services in all fields (economic, cultural, military and others) was set up. The British and French governments did not want to regard the Treaty as relating to anything other than mutual assistance and were only willing to talk about the military aspect. France stated its lack of interest in the — albeit significant — social and cultural developments achieved under the Brussels Treaty and took care not to give them the slightest publicity^[2]. Yet the social and cultural developments which took place under the Brussels Treaty were far from negligible^[3].

Militarily, the work done under the Brussels Treaty reflected the strategic differences of opinion between France and Britain as to the strategy for defending Europe in the event of an outside attack, by the Soviet Union. . France and the Benelux countries advocated a forward defence strategy, in other words one which was carried as far towards the east of the European continent as possible. The United Kingdom backed the principle of peripheral defence, in other words falling back on the British Isles, Spain and North Africa. Each was primarily concerned about the defence of its national territory. In any event, US aid was essential in making up for the Europeans' lack of material resources. As the French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault and the British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin had hoped, the Brussels Treaty convinced the United States of Europe's 'good will' and helped to smooth the path to adoption of the Vandenberg resolution (11 June 1948) authorising the United States to commit itself in Europe in peacetime. In June 1948, United States and Canadian delegations took part in the Brussels Treaty proceedings as observers, up to the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington on 4 April 1949. The Brussels Treaty included an 'automaticity' clause, which the Atlantic Treaty did not^[4]. It was also to remain in force for 50 years, as against ten years for the latter^[5]. In 1949 it was therefore decided, as a precaution, that the two treaties should co-exist. Nevertheless, the defence of Europe was explicitly made secondary to Atlantic defence, as the European general staff was incorporated into the overall NATO command structure and placed under its command^[6].

General background: relations between WEU and NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), established by the Washington Treaty of 4 April 1949, was the heir to the strategic thinking (the discussion over forward defence or peripheral defence) done in Fontainebleau by the General Staff of Western Union (WU). The countries on the European mainland, which were in the majority in the Alliance, could not be asked to agree to a strategy which would entail first abandoning their national territory in the event of an attack. It was therefore the strategy of defence ‘as far to the east as possible on the Ems/Weser line’ which was adopted in the first Strategic Concept drawn up by the Standing Group^[7] in October 1949^[8]. This form of words was a compromise which was satisfactory to everybody: as it was not precisely defined, ‘east’ could just as well be on the English Channel for the British as in Germany for the mainland powers. But the scale of the rearmament needed to defend Europe, coupled with the shock of the Korean War in June 1950, caused the US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, to ask the NATO allies for West Germany to be rearmed. At the Atlantic Council which opened on 14 September 1950, only France refused.

From its earliest days, then, the history of the European army was part of the history of the Atlantic Alliance, as it was proposed as a way of avoiding the direct entry of Germany into NATO. Advocating the establishment of a European Defence Community (EDC) between the five WU Member States and Germany], the Pleven plan was an amalgam of two desires: to move forward with European integration and to contain German rearmament outside the Atlantic Alliance. France’s European partners, especially the Netherlands, agreed to sign up to it only because the EDC structures had to be welded to those of the Alliance^[9]. The U.K. did not participate to the Pleven Plan or the EDC talks. In France, European and Atlantic arguments were always intertwined in the debate over the EDC. France signed the Treaty establishing the EDC in Paris on 27 May 1952^[10]. The EDC plan was rejected by the French Parliament on 30 August 1954. All eyes and all the talk naturally then turned immediately to NATO. As soon as the ‘No’ vote had been adopted, Pierre Mendès-France took the floor in the National Assembly to reaffirm France’s loyalty to the Alliance.

After the failure of the EDC, another way of incorporating Germany into the Western security system had to be found. At the London conference of September 1954, which was attended by the powers which were signatories to the Brussels Treaty, the United States, Canada, Germany and Italy, it was decided to invite the last two of these to join WU. The final act of the conference was given official form in October in what were known as the Paris Agreements, amending the Brussels Treaty and turning Western Union into Western European Union (WEU). The three main objectives of WEU were specific: to create in Western Europe a firm basis for European economic recovery; to afford mutual assistance in resisting any policy of aggression; to promote the unity and to encourage the progressive integration of Europe^[11].

From 1954 to 1973 WEU acted as a broker for concerted action and cooperation in Europe. It facilitated the incorporation of West Germany into NATO by contributing to arms control, thereby allaying French fears. It played a part in resolving the Saarland question. It acted as a link between the founding states of the European Economic Community (EEC) and the United Kingdom. With the accession of the UK to the EEC in 1973, the part played by WEU dwindled considerably. It fell to NATO to assume the predominant position in the defence of Europe. 1966 saw also a major development in relations between France and NATO, French president Charles de Gaulle held a press conference at the Élysée Palace during which he announced France’s withdrawal from the integrated military structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and demanded that all NATO bases be removed from French territory. SHAPE was relocated from Paris to Brussels. However, France remained a member of NATO and its political structures.

In the late 1970s, the two superpowers (USA and USSR) sought to extend their respective influence. The Soviet policy in Africa and the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan led to a cooling of relations

between the US and the USSR. In the United States, the ‘America is back’ rhetoric adopted by new President Ronald Reagan set the tone for the Cold War in the 1980s. This period was marked by a new arms race. In Western Europe, the election of Margaret Thatcher Conservative Prime Minister and her vision of Europe leads to period of tensed relationship with the EC^[12]. In transatlantic relations, 1979 saw the start of the Euromissile crisis, which inevitably left its imprint on the history of European policy, NATO and the Cold War. This crisis was marked by the French President Francois Mitterrand's endorsement of the deployment of US Pershing missiles in Europe in a 1983 speech to the West German Bundestag. ‘1983 saw the beginning of the last major strategy discussion between the Soviet Union and the West and within the Alliance itself, where, before it was approved, the affair raised many questions and reservations^[13].’

At the initiative of the Belgian and French governments, a joint meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence was held in the WEU framework in Rome on 26 and 27 October 1984. It led to the adoption of the Rome Declaration, the founding charter for the revival of WEU.

Until WEU was revived, however, NATO was the main framework within which action to strengthen cooperation on security and defence matters was taken or planned. France played an active part in this field, in the face of indifference and sometimes hostility from the other European powers. A revitalised WEU was seen as complementing NATO, not competing with it. It was a way of solving two problems: that of the neutral West European countries (Austria, Finland, Ireland, and Sweden) which were not in NATO — those countries were associated with the work of the WEU as observers, which made it possible to develop a more consistent security policy than in the EC — and that of the more ‘Atlanticist’ countries, which preferred to see a European defence policy developing via a complex institution which was not widely known, rather than through the EC or the EU.

[1] VAISSE, Maurice. L'échec d'une Europe franco-britannique ou comment le Pacte de Bruxelles fut créé et délaissé. In: POIDEVIN, Raymond (ed.), *Histoire des débuts de la construction européenne, mars 1948-mai 1950*. Paris: LGDJ, 1986, pp. 369–389; VARSORI, Antonio. *Il Patto di Bruxelles, 1948: tra integrazione europea e alleanza atlantica*. Rome: Bonacci, 1988, 366 p.; WIGGERSHAUS, Norbert, FOERSTER, Roland G., SCHULZ, Birgit and HEINEMANN, Winfried (eds). *The Western security community, 1948-1950: common problems and conflicting national interests during the foundation phase of the North Atlantic Alliance*. Oxford: Berg 1993, 461 p.

[2] The following story is a good illustration of this misalignment of views. In September 1949, the Cultural Committee of the Brussels Pact proposed that a commemorative stamp be issued. The reply from the Quai d'Orsay was unequivocal: ‘The Directorate for Europe considers that in the present circumstances, when the bodies set up under the Brussels Treaty are due to be restructured in order to be merged into the very much wider framework of the Atlantic Treaty, it is not appropriate to give special publicity to the Brussels Treaty.’ [French Ministry of Foreign affairs, Europe, 1949–1955, Background, 61, Note from the Directorate for Europe to the Directorate-General for Cultural Relations, 30 September 1950, No 1237]. It is clear from this how low expectations of the Pact were in France and how little interest there was in the proceedings of the Cultural Committee.

[3] These included, for example, social security for students, allowances for immigrant workers, the harmonisation of labour inspectorate services or the standardisation of labelling on medication. In the cultural sphere, Western European Union organised meetings between students and young people in the Member States. The conditions for the issuance and use of collective passports for young people were relaxed as early as 1 April 1952. Another important step was the creation of the cultural identity card in 1950, giving its holders a number of privileges (free or reduced-price entry to museums and exhibitions, concerts or theatres, easy access to libraries and archives, admission to university canteens, exemption from fees in certain educational establishments, access to foreign exchange and travel at reduced prices, and so on). RAFLIK, Jenny. Le traité de Bruxelles, prélude à la construction atlantique ou véritable étape de la construction européenne? In: GUIEU, Jean-Michel and LE DREAU, Christophe (eds). *Le ‘Congrès de l'Europe’ à La Haye (1948–2008)*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 67–78.

[4] NATO Treaty, Article 5:

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the

right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. http://www.cvce.eu/obj/traite_de_l_atlantique_nord_washington_4_avril_1949-fr-b9081831-6c1f-44fa-993a-50db7376de1a.html

The Brussels Treaty, Article 4:

If any of the High Contracting Parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, the other High Contracting Parties will, in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, afford the Party so attacked all the military and other aid and assistance in their power. http://www.cvce.eu/obj/traite_de_bruelles_17_mars_1948-fr-3467de5e-9802-4b65-8076-778bc7d164d3.html.

[5] Article 12 laid down that the Treaty could be reviewed after it had been in force for the first ten years to take account of the development of both universal and regional arrangements for the maintenance of international peace and security. Article 13 gave the signatory states the right to denounce the Treaty after it had been in force for 20 years.

[6] WEU. History of WEU. Origins of WEU: from the Brussels Treaty to the Paris Agreements (1948–1954). [Online] <http://www.weu.int/History.htm>.

[7] NATO's strategic planning body.

[8] PEDLOW, Gregory W. (ed.). *NATO Strategy Documents, 1949–1969*. Brussels: NATO, 1997.

[9] DUMOULIN, Michel (ed.). *La Communauté européenne de défense, leçons pour demain?* Berne: Peter Lang, 2000, 434 p.

[10] Significantly, both supporters and opponents of the plan for a European Army almost all claimed to be Atlanticists.

[11] WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION, 1954, *Modified Brussels Treaty (Paris, 23 October 1954)* [online]. [Accessed 15 December 2015]. Available from: http://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/modified_bruussels_treaty_paris_23_october_1954-en-7d182408-0ff6-432e-b793-0d1065ebe695.html

[12] Taking office in 1979, Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative Prime Minister, immediately demanded a reduction of the British contribution to EC budget: 'I want my money back!' On 20 September 1988, at the beginning of the 39th academic year of the College of Europe in Bruges, the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, delivers a speech on the future of Europe and condemns the bureaucratic and centralist tendencies of the Community tendencies of the Community system. http://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/address_given_by_margaret_thatcher_bruuges_20_september_1988-en-5ef06e79-081e-4eab-8e80-d449f314cae5.html

[13] De ROSE, François. *La Troisième Guerre mondiale n'a pas eu lieu. L'Alliance atlantique et la paix*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995, p. 42.