



Assembly of Western European Union The Interparliamentary European Security and Defence Assembly

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Western European Union: an alliance with a time limit

From mutual assistance pact to core component of European defence

Western European Union (WEU)'s title has become a misnomer. Indeed, the original mutual assistance pact composed of Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Germany has now become a pan-European consultation forum on security issues involving 28 countries. Sooner or later, however, the ten full member states wish to see WEU merged with the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

WEU's origins are to be found in the 1948 Brussels Treaty, a collective defence pact against a possible Russian or German threat. The October 1954 Paris Agreements paved the way for German and Italian rearmament and transformed the original Brussels Pact into Western European Union (WEU), which under the growing threat of the cold war now included the Federal Republic of Germany and Italy among its members. It was a stopgap solution following the failure of the French *Assemblée Nationale* in August 1954 to ratify the European Defence Community (EDC) due to Gaullist and communist opposition.

Indeed to begin with WEU remained first and foremost a defence alliance. But as NATO became much more important as the real framework for western European defence, WEU gave up its own defence structures and for many years led a shadowy existence.

At the end of the 1980s, with the wars in Yugoslavia and the Gulf, WEU enjoyed an unexpected revival when it was mandated to oversee several joint European military and police operations in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans. At the same time interest was growing in Europe for a common defence identity. In a declaration appended to the



Maastricht Treaty in 1991, the WEU full member states announced that WEU would in the future play a dual role as the European pillar of NATO and the defence component of the EU. It was to be progressively integrated in the EU's security and defence policy and elaborate and implement all decisions and actions of the Union with defence implications.

Integration in the EU

For that purpose Javier Solana, the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy ("Mr CFSP") and Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, has since 1999 also been the Secretary-General of WEU. At the same time the most important WEU bodies were moved from Paris to Brussels in order to be incorporated in the newly created EU structures. The "double-hatting" principle continues at

ambassadorial level, in that the government representatives within WEU are also those who sit on the EU's Political and Security Committee (better known by its French acronym COPS). The WEU Military Committee has been absorbed into the new EU Military Staff and the Satellite Centre in Torrejón has become an EU agency.

WEU also developed the concept of the so-called Petersberg missions (humanitarian, peacekeeping and peacemaking operations) which still provides the basis for the EU's crisis-management activities. The EU has since conducted operations above all in the Balkans (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo), as well as in the Congo (Operation Artemis) and Georgia (Operation Themis).

WEU has two essential characteristics: the WEU Treaty, in contrast to the NATO Treaty, makes provision (in Article V) for a mutual assistance obligation in the case of an armed attack against one or several member states. In addition, the WEU Assembly exercises parliamentary scrutiny. The 388 Assembly members meet twice a year to debate the report submitted by the WEU national representatives and to adopt recommendations to the governments. The Assembly does not, however, have any budgetary powers.

Mutual assistance and parliamentary scrutiny

The EU Constitutional Treaty, which will probably come into force in 2009, contains two solidarity clauses: mutual assistance in case of an attack from outside and in the fight against terrorism. However, there is no automatic mutual assistance obligation.

In the articles on the Union's external action the EU Constitutional Treaty stipulates that "a participating Member State which is the victim of armed aggression on its territory shall inform the other participating States of the situation and may (!) request aid and assistance from them"¹. The automatic nature of the mutual assistance only applies therefore to those EU states that are also full members of WEU.

In addition to the ten full WEU member states – Greece, Portugal and Spain also having become full members since 1954 – there are also associate countries (new members of both the EU and NATO, as well as NATO states that are not members of the EU) and countries with an observer status (Cyprus, Denmark and Malta, as well as the neutral EU member states).

Further steps in the development of the ESDP are planned under the 2010 headline goal: the creation of a 1 500 to 2 000-strong rapid reaction force, improving the interoperability and complementarity of the different national armed forces, setting-up of the European defence Agency by the end of 2004 and the creation of a European *gendarmerie* force.

Notwithstanding the political vicissitudes that have affected WEU throughout its 50 years of existence, time and again it has shown the political pragmatism needed to adapt to the requirements of European security policy. WEU will have accomplished its mission once the EU has fully developed its defence identity, and perhaps even a genuine common defence. WEU's prime objective in other words, is to render itself superfluous.

¹ Translator's note: this is in fact a quote from an earlier version of the EU Treaty. The current version (Article I-41 para 7) reads "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".