

A common defence organisation

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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.

Europe still held vivid and painful memories of the war and of German military occupation. The Communist threat had, however, become more apparent from the late 1940s onwards, and Western Europe became aware that German rearmament was in its interest and a matter of some necessity. Even so, despite the 1948 Brussels Treaty, which set up a system of mutual assistance in the event of armed aggression, the Five (the United Kingdom, France, and the three Benelux countries) could not deal with the threat alone. Thanks to massive American support, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), established in Washington in April 1949, did guarantee the defence of Europe in an Atlantic context, but it did not provide a practical solution to the problem of rearming Germany, which was not a signatory to the Treaty. Therefore, while 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. Moreover, the situation was far from simple. In 1950, the Federal Republic of Germany (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, made it sure to be the literal battleground of any eventual East-West conflict.

In the summer of 1950, spurred on by the outbreak of the Korean War in June which had made the Communist threat a reality, Jean Monnet, General Commissioner of the 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 the negotiations relating thereto. He put his proposal to René Pleven, French Premier and former Defence Minister, who in turn submitted it to the government before putting it to the French National Assembly on 24 October 1950.

René Pleven proposed that, following the signing of the ECSC Treaty, a European army 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 in October 1954 allowed Germany to accede to the Brussels Treaty, would never be able to compensate for the failure of the EDC and of European military integration.