

'WEU, Europe's "Sleeping Beauty"' from El País (25 January 1993)

Caption: Published on 25 January 1993 in the Spanish daily newspaper El País, this article heralds the awakening of Western European Union (WEU) after 38 years of lethargy following the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty on 7 February 1992 by the 12 Member States of the European Union.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/weu_europe_s_sleeping_beauty_from_el_pais_25_january_1993-en-6e607cc6-3f25-4df3-b1a4-25300300fodf.html

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WEU, Europe's 'Sleeping Beauty'

The organisation is moving to Brussels and rousing itself from 38 years of lethargy.

Lluís Bassets — Brussels

WEU (Western European Union) will be both the military wing of the European Union and the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance. The Twelve took that decision in Maastricht on 11 December 1991 and also arranged for the organisation to be transferred from London to Brussels so as to improve coordination with NATO and the EC. Although the Treaty has yet to be ratified by Denmark and the United Kingdom, WEU has kept to the schedule, opening its new headquarters in the centre of the Belgian capital last week. WEU was established in 1954 after the failure of the European Defence Community, which was rejected by France's National Assembly. Its main achievements in the early years were mediation in the Franco-German dispute over the Saar region and its role as a forum for dialogue between the EC and a fractious United Kingdom. The Strategic Defense Initiative approved in 1983 by US President Ronald Reagan without any consultation with European allies, the Euromissile crisis triggered by the possible withdrawal of the American nuclear umbrella and NATO's own enlargement to include countries like Spain brought WEU once again into the defence debate in the mid-1980s. The Gulf War did the rest. WEU really began to exist when the European allies felt the need for an organisation that would allow them to operate 'out of area' — something that was impossible at the time in NATO, which was devoted specifically to Atlantic defence.

Prior to the Gulf War, WEU undertook landmine disposal operations during the Iran–Iraq conflict. From 1990 it coordinated European participation in the embargo on Saddam Hussein's regime, and it is currently responsible for coordinating naval surveillance in the Adriatic in pursuit of the arms embargo on the Balkan countries.

Nevertheless, none of this greatly impresses the small but active team of officials who ensure that WEU operates efficiently. Over the last six months, while they were preparing the move from London to Brussels in a climate of uncertainty about the future of the Maastricht Treaty, NATO began to rouse itself from the state of confusion into which it was plunged by the demise of its closest enemy, the Soviet Union.

Rivalry with NATO

NATO doctrine on 'out of area' intervention has begun to change, putting the organisation clearly into competition with WEU. The Alliance is already preparing to control and organise air surveillance over Bosnia with a view to prohibiting overflights — a mission for which WEU would have been perfectly suited in other circumstances.

WEU says that it wants to be a bridge between NATO and the EC, but it is clear to everyone that a communication task of that kind will include a measure of possibly healthy rivalry. If the Maastricht Treaty is ratified by the United Kingdom and Denmark, and if the Twelve decide that the European Union shall establish the beginnings of a common foreign and security policy (CFSP), WEU will start moving and will have considerable possibilities to convert itself into Europe's future defence institution, in coordination with NATO.

If, however, the Treaty collapses, or if the CFSP remains in the realm of theory, WEU may lapse back into somnolence, and the European partners will have to manage as best they can, trusting in the benevolence of their American allies.

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