

The EEC and the two blocs

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The United States and the Soviet Union adopted opposing positions towards European unification and the creation of the Common Market. In their struggle for influence in Western Europe, which remained at the heart of their diplomatic priorities, the two Great Powers reacted quite differently to the emergence of a European hub.

From the outset, the United States supported the moves towards integration made by the Six, and Euro–American trade links were established under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The European Economic Community (EEC) very quickly became the world's second largest economic grouping after the United States and it asserted itself as a major player in international trade relations. However, the rapid growth of the Common Market and the prospect of enlargement of the Communities to include the United Kingdom in the early 1960s threatened to put the US economy in a difficult position. It was for this reason that in 1962 the US President John F. Kennedy proposed an Atlantic partnership between Europe and the United States. Whilst the US Government was prepared to accept an equal relationship between the European Community and the United States in the area of trade, there was no question of sharing leadership where military matters were concerned. The grand design of the US President involved Europe's participation in the creation of a Multilateral Force (MLF) under US command within NATO. Despite the positive response to the proposal from the United Kingdom and France's partners in the Community, it ultimately met with failure on account of opposition from the French President, Charles de Gaulle. In the press conference that he held in January 1963, he challenged US leadership in the area of strategic forces and opposed the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities, thus considerably reducing the scope of the US proposal.

By contrast, ever since the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), the Soviet leadership had condemned any hint of European integration. They viewed the revival of the West German economy within the Common Market with great displeasure and deplored the United States' hold over Europe. It was only in the early 1960s, with détente in the relations between East and West, that the first contacts between the EEC and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) were established, but trade relations were essentially bilateral. Likewise, still in the context of détente, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with several Western European States, particularly with France and the Federal Republic of Germany.

Even though the EEC managed to assert itself as a major international player economically, it was another matter politically. France and the United Kingdom pursued their own nuclear programmes and conventional strike forces were too weak with regard to the doctrine of massive retaliation to guarantee the defence of the European continent without United States assistance. The build-up of tension between the two Great Powers during the Berlin crisis and the Cuban crisis put the Community under pressure, to the extent that Europe was at risk of finding itself at the centre of the conflict opposing the United States and the Soviet Union. It was only with the conclusion of the missile crisis and the beginning of the phase of peaceful coexistence that tensions eased. In the absence of a common foreign policy and as a consequence of its military weakness, the Community's status was often limited to that of an observer during clashes between the two Great Powers.