

The Eurocorps

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Eurocorps

The early days of European cooperation in the defence field

The origins of Eurocorps lie in the history of Franco-German reconciliation after the war. On 22 January 1963, the President of France, General de Gaulle, and the German Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, signed the Élysée Treaty. Its purpose was to strengthen relations between the two countries officially, and in it they committed themselves to working together in a great many areas, including that of defence, with exchanges of personnel between their respective armies and cooperation in the defence industry field. Following the failure of the European Defence Community (the EDC), which France rejected in 1954, this was the first foundation stone in the building of a project which went beyond the purely national framework and lay outside the Atlantic Alliance.

In 1987, French President François Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl decided to step up military cooperation between France and Germany. At the Karlsruhe summit on 12 and 13 November 1987, it was decided to set up the Franco-German Brigade (BFA/DFB). In the same spirit of strengthening ties and to mark the 25th anniversary of the Élysée Treaty, the Franco-German Defence and Security Council (CFADS/DFVSR) was set up on 22 January 1988. The Franco-German Brigade officially came into being on 12 January 1989 and was declared operational in 1991.

The establishment of Eurocorps, a Franco-German initiative

The early 1990s was a period of major geopolitical upheavals: the end of the Cold War led to the planned disengagement of the French forces stationed in Germany, while the first serious crises and the first armed confrontations were breaking out in Yugoslavia.

On 14 October 1991, the two Heads of State or Government wrote a joint letter to the President of the European Council expressing their wish for the clear and specific inclusion of a common foreign and security policy in the draft Maastricht Treaty. They also told the President that they intended to step up their military cooperation even further and spoke of the establishment of a Franco-German army corps to serve Europe. Although the initiative behind it was a bilateral one, this structure would be immediately opened to the other countries in Western European Union (WEU).

On 22 May 1992 in La Rochelle, at the 59th Franco-German summit, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl announced the official decision to set up Eurocorps, which was formalised in the 'La Rochelle Report'. A provisional staff was established in Strasbourg as early as 1 July 1992.

An immediate success: WEU and NATO agreements, new framework nations

The Petersberg Declaration of 19 June 1992 defined the role of WEU as the defence component of the European Union (EU). The 'Petersberg missions' comprised humanitarian and evacuation missions, peace-keeping missions and combat force missions for crisis management, including operations to restore peace. A Franco-German memorandum published on 30 November 1992 proposed that Eurocorps be placed at the service of WEU. The decision was taken officially on 19 May 1993 at the meeting of the WEU Council of Ministers in Rome.

In the meantime, on 21 January 1993, France and Germany signed an agreement with the Supreme Allied Command in Europe (SACEUR) defining the conditions for the use of Eurocorps within the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). This text spelled out what Eurocorps' missions were and set out the powers it would have to plan engagements, the terms on which the corps would be assigned to a Supreme NATO command, the responsibilities of the Eurocorps commander and his relations with the commander-in-chief of NATO forces in peacetime. This Franco-German initiative soon aroused the interest of other European nations. On 25 June 1993, Belgium became a full member of the organisation.

On 1 October 1993, Eurocorps was officially established in Strasbourg under the command of German Lieutenant-General Helmut Willmann. The official ceremony for the establishment of Eurocorps took place in Strasbourg on 5 November 1993, in the presence of the German, Belgian and French Defence Ministers.

The next country to join Eurocorps, on 1 July 1994, was Spain. On 14 July of that year, German, Belgian, French and Spanish soldiers paraded down the Champs-Élysées to mark France's national day. The symbolism was particularly strong and publicly marked the success the organisation had achieved in the two years since it had been set up.

Luxembourg became the fifth framework nation on 7 May 1996, confirming the interest aroused by this European-level structure.

An operational staff: first missions and early successes

Eurocorps was declared fully operational in 1995 and maintained its high level of preparedness by taking part in several exercises. It took part in an engagement for the first time in 1998, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, under NATO command. Nearly 470 Eurocorps troops, on a rotating basis, were on the staff of the Stabilisation Force (SFOR), representing some 37 % of those working at that particular headquarters.

At the same time, major decisions were being taken within the European Union with a view to setting up a truly European security and defence policy. On 29 May 1999, at the Franco-German summit in Toulouse, Germany and France proposed that Eurocorps be placed officially at the disposal of the EU, a suggestion which was forwarded officially to the Cologne European Council of 3 and 4 June 1999.

The Cologne Council decided that the EU should step up its intervention capacity and establish response forces to act in the event of a crisis. The decision was confirmed and taken further at the Helsinki summit in December 1999, following the signing of the 'Luxembourg Report' on 22 November 1999 by the five Eurocorps framework nations. The report specified the measures to be adopted to turn it into a rapid reaction force.

It was in Kosovo in 2000 that Eurocorps first took command of an operation, at the decision of the NATO Council of 28 January 2000. From March to October 2000, nearly 350 Eurocorps troops formed the nucleus of the Kosovo Force (KFOR) staff headquarters at Priština and Skopje. Spanish Lieutenant-General Juan Ortuño-Such headed the operation.

Eurocorps asserts itself through further development and certification by NATO

In parallel with this, and carrying on with the work started in 1999, Eurocorps developed its structures and procedures. In 2002, after undergoing very demanding training, its staff was certified as a NATO High Readiness Force (HFR). As such, and in accordance with NATO standards, Eurocorps opened up posts to countries in the Alliance, who were thus able to acquire associated nation status.

At the beginning of 2004, the North Atlantic Council asked Eurocorps to take command of the NATO mission in Afghanistan. From August 2004 to February 2005, some 450 Eurocorps troops formed the bulk of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul, in the sensitive context of the holding of the first elections in Afghanistan. French Lieutenant-General Jean-Louis Py was appointed to lead the operation.

In 2006, Eurocorps was certified as a NATO Response Force (NRF). Its operational capacity was put to the test in the course of a very large-scale exercise, 'Steadfast Jaguar', on the Cape Verde islands in the Atlantic. Eurocorps was the first headquarters to attain full operational capacity at that time.

From 1 July 2006 to 10 January 2007, following a decision by the North Atlantic Council, Eurocorps formed the land-based component of NATO Response Force 7 (NRF 7).

On 5 May 2008, Spanish Lieutenant-General Pedro Pitarch, the Eurocorps commander, was invited to address the European Parliament in Brussels. He stressed the importance to Europe as a defence body of the concept of enhanced cooperation set out in the Lisbon Treaty. In the months that followed, the European Parliament approved two resolutions which proposed, respectively, placing Eurocorps under permanent EU command (5 June 2008) and stepping up Eurocorps' capacities so that it could constitute the nucleus of a force of 60 000 men at the service of the European Union (19 February 2009).

The Strasbourg Treaty, an assertion of the special character of Eurocorps

On 26 February 2009, there was a major development in the life of Eurocorps with the entry into force of a basic agreement signed by the five framework nations known as the 'Strasbourg Treaty', which defined the status of the corps. Eurocorps was given full legal capacity and a wide degree of independence in the management of finances and equipment. The general in command was given added responsibilities. It is the only military organisation at this level to have been the subject of an international treaty.

From 1 July 2010 to 10 January 2011, Eurocorps once again formed the land-based component of NATO Response Force NRF 15, following a further course of highly condensed preparation.

Straight away, there was a further phase of intensive training, prior to a new operational deployment in Afghanistan. From January 2012 to January 2013, 50 % of the staff headquarters personnel were posted in the coalition's command structures in Kabul. French Lieutenant-General Olivier de Bavinchove, Eurocorps' commanding officer, acted, among other things, as chief of staff of the ISAF.

Preparations for the future

As a fully multinational structure with solid operational experience that is capable of adapting to any political and geostrategic developments, Eurocorps is regarded as one of the best headquarters at its level.

The success achieved by the five framework nations (Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Spain) have made it a model for European cooperation on defence issues. With its four associated nations (Greece, Italy, Poland and Turkey), it is a solid foundation that could provide the basis for all future developments. It is set to develop further, as Poland is to become a framework nation in 2016 and the United States and Romania will be joining it as associated nations in the near future.