

The Role of the Western European Union

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1. Introduction

We are all very well aware that the situation in Europe has changed dramatically in the last five or six years. It has, certainly in this region, become worse in some respects, because of the terrible war been going on. But it has also encompassed the fall of the Berlin wall, the end of the Warsaw Pact and, indeed, the whole new attitude that all countries have had to adopt because of the changes which have taken place. We refer to it very much as a modern litany: German reunification - which was a huge undertaking - the collapse of the Soviet Union - which was the biggest event since the end of the second world war and almost the biggest event of the century - the subsequent dissolution of the Warsaw Pact as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the demise - I hope permanent, but I am not necessarily persuaded of that - of communism.

Our security environment today is very different from what it was. The danger of a nuclear holocaust, which was very prominent in our earlier lives, and which we lived in dread of and always feared that it just might happen, today seems no more than a horrific dream, gone, we hope, forever. But other dangers have come to haunt us in its place. Lesser dangers, certainly, but more varied, unpredictable, difficult to counter or to contain and difficult to explain to an audience sometimes.

They could take the form of an incursion somewhere in the world of the utmost significance, with one side tackling another. Another example might be the bombing of the building in Oklahoma City in the United States. There are all kinds of possibilities which undermine the *status quo* of which we are all aware and that is why we all believe in a defence concept. The new risks include the present instabilities we know about and have seen in Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the IRA's action in Northern Ireland and attitudes in some other parts of the globe. They are also present in mafia-type crime and terrorism, which is increasing all the time. Terrorism, drug-trafficking, the possibility of mass migration in Europe, which could have enormous consequences for some of our countries - all of these are potential time bombs which may explode when we least expect it to happen.

Unfortunately, public perception is rather more removed from such considerations than ever it was during the period of nuclear confrontation. Even if we did not feel exactly safe, we knew what the rules of the game were. We knew there were the two big powers with sudden punch available to them. We hoped it wouldn't happen. But we knew where we were, so to speak. The change that has taken place is that in the minority of the member countries of my Organization, defence budgets are being whittled away as a result of the public clamouring for the so-called "peace dividend".

In other words: "Why are you wasting our money on spears and guns? Melt them down into ploughshares! Better still - spend it on hospitals, social security or any kind of activity other than defence. And it has been increasingly difficult for our governments to hold on to a rational defence policy in such circumstances. How do we convince voters of the need to keep our defences in working order and our forces ready for any eventuality? This applies to any democratic country in Europe and greater Europe. How, in particular, do we preserve transatlantic solidarity which we were able to take for granted during the cold war? Do we need a new "transatlantic charter" as some, including Malcolm Rifkind and Alain Juppe, have suggested?

In the WEU Assembly we are very keen to develop our bilateral links with North America as well as trying to enhance our relations with Russia and the countries of the CIS.

2. European defence identity

I would submit that reactions such as these have led to the decision by WEU member nations to give substance to our Organizations - to use WEU as the body where European defence issues may be addressed by the European states in an exclusively European context, where this is necessary.

In recent years, such European cooperation in WEU started with naval operations in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war and increased considerably during and immediately after the Gulf war itself, both in the Gulf and the Red Sea. I was very lucky and fortunate to be able to see these myself because, before becoming President of the WEU Assembly, I was Chairman of its Defence Committee for four years.

Today WEU is present, and is currently engaged in winding down fairly dramatically a joint operation with NATO in the Adriatic called Sharp Guard, the purpose of which was to blockade Serbia and Montenegro. We initiated and carried out sanctions enforcement on the Danube, cooperating with Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania. And today WEU is helping in the European initiative to administer Mostar by reestablishing the police force there. With the moves towards some sort of settlement in former Yugoslavia, these actions are now winding down, but other operations will follow now that the WEU Council has defined the type of mission to which WEU is particularly suited. Operational capabilities are being reinforced to cope with these eventualities.

The sort of action we are looking at includes humanitarian and rescue tasks, crisis management through the timely deployment of combat forces, and peacemaking activities. This could of course also imply direct support for the United Nations Security Council and for the OSCE.

The decision taken at the January 1994 NATO summit, which was held in Brussels and which was attended by the President of the United States, to promote WEU and a nascent European defence identity, has greatly enhanced the possibilities and could be put to good use when negotiations within NATO and consultations with WEU on combined joint task forces (CJTF) have been completed. This is perhaps one of the keys to our future role and how we should operate in Europe.

There are two other specific areas where we need to make progress. WEU needs both an armaments policy and a space policy if it is to become a strong enough pillar of the Alliance and an adequate operational arm for the European Union, because we are in fact going to play a much more significant role than in the past as the European pillar of NATO and the agency for the EU where defence is concerned. I want to see us becoming the bridge between the two, while retaining our own independence. I know it is a popular idea, often put about by the EU, that WEU is going to be absorbed and taken over by the European Union. I do not believe that to be the case. I think our role is a distinctive one and that it is very necessary for us to remain separate from the EU. Otherwise, we might find ourselves in a situation in which countries such as Croatia, which legitimately aspire to become associate partners of WEU and perhaps, eventually, full members, may be given the cold shoulder for quite a number of years because in the view of the European Union, Croatia is nowhere near to being qualified to become a member of the EU. I may be doing it an injustice, the EU may be thinking of inviting Croatia to join within the next six months, but I don't think that is so. Therefore, I think your future, particularly in the short term, where defence is concerned, probably lies with us.

3. Healthy scepticism

In conventional defence, Europe's two glaring shortcomings are a lack of strategic lift and a lack of adequate intelligence. We are working actively to remedy the situation, although even if we achieve the political will, we will not necessarily have the wherewithal without making considerable sacrifices in other areas.

In spite of NATO's major success story, the allies were never able to make significant progress on procurement cooperation. The infamous "transatlantic one-way street" is largely responsible for such a situation and often proved the easier and cheaper option in procurement terms.

Since the end of the cold war, European and American security concerns have become less coincidental in other areas, as exemplified by recent events. We must therefore not lose sight of WEU's dual role defined in our own Declaration at Maastricht. WEU must be developed jointly as both "the defence component of the European Union and the means to strengthen the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance". I mentioned already where I think the dangers lie, with those countries which at the moment do not qualify to be either members of the EU or NATO. As a British citizen who has a healthy scepticism of some aspects of the EU, I do not relish the thought of European defence being managed by

commissioners in Brussels telling our various countries what to do and what not to do. And I think the electorate in all our countries, whatever their personal politics, would be against that as well. I think we have to try to maintain a balance between the two vocations that I have mentioned and ensure that we do not privilege one aspect more than another. In other words we must be responsible in our attitudes towards both NATO and the EU without being subservient to either. As time goes by, we can develop the role of WEU on an internal European basis with NATO being in a situation to take on any big operation which comes into focus.

The EU Intergovernmental Conference which has now started will be considering a whole host of European institutional arrangements. Among them, by no means the most important in the eyes of many other politicians and the public, is the future of European defence and security, and that of WEU which I think will be decided towards the end of this year or in the early part of next year. Most of our member countries, including the United Kingdom, have put their cards on the table already, and while a certain amount of compromise will obviously be necessary, I think that there is a very good chance that we will be able to retain our independence and not be absorbed in the EU. It is absolutely essential to us to keep the Atlantic Alliance well to the fore in all our new arrangements, because whether one likes it or not, the United States is crucial to the integrity and future of Europe as we know it, if things suddenly go wrong.

There is a danger that WEU could be dismembered as the European Union swallows up the soft options in security terms and consigns the hard core of European defence, as represented by WEU, to oblivion.

We must remember that whatever is decided by the Intergovernmental Conference has to be ratified by all our national parliaments, and in many cases by national referendum. We must therefore be very careful not to repeat the mistakes of Maastricht in trying to sell our people something which they are likely to reject. I have found what I call a healthy scepticism about some things European in my own country, and, strangely enough, also in France, Germany, and, I suspect, a number of other countries as well, despite what their governments and politicians are saying. As I said, the development of a European defence identity must strengthen NATO, not weaken it. We must keep our American friends on our side in everything we do and not alienate their support for Europe. If we do, we would be in a catastrophic situation, in my opinion.

Of course, WEU's core membership reflects the current balance with our ten full members belonging both to the European Union and to NATO. These are Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. big countries and small countries.

In an immediate outer circle come members of the European Union which have for the time being chose not to become full WEU members. These are our observers. Four of them - Ireland, Austria, Finland and Sweden - because they have traditions of neutrality and have never joined NATO, and the fifth, Denmark, for other reasons. Also within this circle are three European allies who are

not members of the European Union but who are in NATO - Iceland, Norway and Turkey. They are associate members of our Organization.

The WEU Assembly has asked the Ministerial Council to review membership rules with a view to admitting all European countries already in NATO as full members of Western European Union. I am glad to say that the three associate members are already fully integrated in certain WEU Council working groups.

4. WEU and Croatia

I was asked what the future held for Croatia. Perhaps I could give some indication of that by saying that we are now seeing an increasingly important role being played by our associate partners who joined us some 18 months ago and who have been very assiduous in their attendance and participation. These associate partners, who are in fact the central European countries, are: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

When the associate partnership arrangement came into being, we in WEU were very careful to avoid the danger of splitting up the central European and Baltic states. We found a formula which brought greater Europe together. I am convinced that present plan to enlarge NATO by penny packets is not the best solution. It would result in new divisions in Europe and would be bound to weaken rather than strengthen the links. But, I think your way forward is associate partner membership. This has to be negotiated through some form of arrangement with the European Union, which I think is quite possible.

Every other Tuesday in our Permanent Council in Brussels, all 27 countries which are members of the WEU family sit down together to try and take practical cooperation on European security and defence a stage further. This is actually happening where ambassadors of those associate partner countries argue and debate just as freely and on equal terms as ambassadors of the full member countries and this is extremely important. A "White Paper" on European security has been produced and sets the parameters for the common European defence policy we are also trying to elaborate.

WEU structures have already been reinforced with a military Planning Cell in Brussels, a Satellite Centre for the analysis of imagery at Torrejón, near Madrid, and the creation of the Western European Armaments Group which has been set up under WEU's aegis to replace the old Independent European Programme Group and elements of the Eurogroup. We thus have the embryo of the European Armaments Agency already in the making.

5. Conclusion

It would be very remiss of me not to mention the work of the WEU's Parliamentary Assembly, which I preside and which is made up of members of national parliaments. People sometimes ask me if we really need an Assembly in WEU. Well, of course we do. Ministers and officials would not be there without being put there by parliamentarians. Parliamentarians are representatives of the people, they are elected or rejected by the people.

And we elect governments and appoint ministers, ambassadors and officials. But they are not charged to be able to do things on their own. They still need government and parliamentary support. And anyone who is a minister and thinks he is so important that he can do what he likes, will very soon find that in democracy his wings can be singed and, indeed, clipped and even cut off by the parliament of his own country if he gets totally out of hand. And so, the Assembly is an important source of stimulus for action by our Council. We make many recommendations. Many are rejected. But a fair number are implemented and certainly have influence on policy that is implemented. And we can claim that it was largely because of our campaign that the associate partners came into being. We are still there fighting to retain the position of WEU as an entity. Had we not done so, it might well have gone to the wall because of political expediency at ministerial level. We are very hopeful indeed that we are succeeding in that particular direction. We provide a rather unique forum for informed and constructive debate of critically important European security and defence issues and actively involve all the 27 countries I mentioned previously, plus others which are clamouring at our door. Those with goodwill and something to contribute, those with aspirations to make Europe a safer place are very much welcomed and will receive every support from our Organization.

We are little known where the public is concerned as the media is not terribly interested in us. A large number of people from my own country or my particular part of Europe only know what NATO is, or think they know, but they know nothing about other organizations. They are aware that there has been a bloody and nasty conflict in the Balkans but they are not too sure who is responsible for what. Serbia has a bad name and people ask why the war criminals are not being brought to book. It does not mean that people cannot live together. It just shows that fighting can break out anywhere, at any time, because of past grievances. These are things which we somehow have to try to overcome. My Organization is never going to be a household name. But it is vital that it is known by people of influence and politicians so that they can appreciate what we are trying to do. Although peace is never glamorous and outrage and unhappiness are always a better story for the media than peace and tranquility, we are in a situation where, if we can maintain the peace, we willingly forgo the publicity, even the prayers, in the interests of the people we are trying to represent. I therefore stick to my view that, if we handle this correctly, if we go forward in the right way, we can ensure peace and security in greater Europe for a very long time. Certainly in the next 50 and maybe even 100 years. That is a price which would be a world record. It has never happened before. Europe has never gone 50 years without a war. It is time that stopped and people's interests became paramount. This is possible if we approach the problem in the right way. We are quite determined that we should remain in existence and we would do what we can to further the defence and security of Europe in a flexible, pragmatic and worthwhile way.