

# WEU - all dressed up but still nowhere to go?

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LUXEMBOURG, May 10 (Reuter) - The Western European Union, long dismissed as an obscure talking shop on defence, has finally put together all the elements needed to give it a real job in the turbulent post-Cold War world.

Within the last year, it has acquired forces of its own, access to the vast military resources of NATO and a formal mandate to work on behalf of the European Union under the terms of the Maastricht treaty.

At a meeting in Luxembourg on Monday, the WEU went one step further by offering political and military links to the countries of Eastern Europe that go beyond anything currently on offer to them from NATO's "Partnership for Peace".

The only problem is that no one is asking the WEU to do much. It sits on the sidelines as the United Nations turns to the U.S.-led NATO when it needs serious military muscle.

"The WEU is not an equal partner in the sense of having equal military capability," British Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind said at the meeting of the group's foreign and defence ministers in Luxembourg.

Bosnia is a case in point.

While NATO has assembled a massive show of air power to protect Moslem "safe areas" and U.N. troops, the WEU is limited to a minor role in helping enforce sanctions against Serbia with a small naval force in the Adriatic and police on the Danube.

Germany and France both said at the Luxembourg meeting it was time to make the WEU live up to its potential.

German Defence Minister Volker Ruehe said the group could be used for rescuing Europeans trapped in troublespots like Rwanda or Yemen, instead of leaving it up to individual countries.

"We should do everything we can to do such operations jointly," he told reporters.

Diplomats say there are several reasons why the nine-nation WEU, founded in 1954, has failed so far to fulfil its promise.

When the Cold War ended, the United States and Britain argued that it should not be given a major role as the European Union's future defence arm since this would undermine NATO.

In addition, the Brussels-based WEU had no forces or military structure of its own, leading many to the conclusion that it was simply not equipped to

handle any crisis in Europe.

Some of those problems have now been solved.

U.S. President Bill Clinton has taken a much more encouraging line on European integration than the previous administration, while the WEU now has forces it can use.

These include the "Eurocorps", set up by France and Germany, and other units which could be used either by NATO or the WEU. In addition, NATO leaders agreed at a summit in January that the European defence group could, in certain cases, make use of alliance assets such as headquarters units and bases.

Nevertheless, the WEU still lacks a clear profile and sense of purpose, mostly because the member states do not agree how it should develop or when it should be used.

Britain in particular is wary of developing the WEU because it opposes the development of a more independent defence policy under the European Union.

Monday's meeting agreed to set up a discussion in the coming months of how a common defence policy might develop but, at British insistence, made clear this must not conflict with NATO.

The 12 governments of the European Union will meet to review the Maastricht treaty in 1996 and one of the major questions will be defence and the role of the WEU.

Those talks will be complicated further by the presence of traditionally neutral countries such as Sweden, Austria, and Finland, which are expected to join the EU next year.

"It will make decisions much harder to take and there is not really a clear political view about European defence," said one diplomat. "The WEU is full of promise that may well remain unfulfilled for some time to come."

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