

# WESTERN EUROPE AND THE GULF CRISIS: TOWARDS A EUROPEAN FOREIGN POLICY?

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If European union means anything, it means having a common foreign policy that amounts to more than expressions of pious platitudes. Europe cannot expect anyone to take it seriously if it leaves the United States to defend its interests in the Middle East. (*Independent*, 3 August 1990)

When the Gulf crisis erupted, the European Community was in the process of debating political unity. Whatever its final form, unity would doubtless include a significant degree of coordinated foreign policy, and potentially an EC defence policy. The importance given by the individual member states to working together and presenting their ideas and actions as one in this realm of high politics has grown out of their experience in the theatre of international relations. Since the Gulf crisis was the first political crisis that the EC faced as one this episode can be established as a valuable case study.

This article explores how the Gulf crisis affected the potential of a European Community foreign policy; how it reaffirmed that the EC cannot go to war, through the disunity which erupted when the EC faced this prospect. The fundamental differences in policy, national character, and in means of dealing with the situations which arose clearly showed that in the end the Community was unable to play the role of mediator to which it had aspired.

The structural problems which arose were of significance in that it was necessary for various institutions to be involved where only one would have sufficed. This created a greater problem with decision-making than existed before, and led to independent national responses and the absence of consensus. A structural vacuum exists in the EC, in the absence of one institution endowed with binding power to create and implement foreign policy. Therefore, as a civilian power asked to go to war, the EC was unable to take a leading role. The only institution in a position to fulfil this role was European Political Cooperation, which ultimately is only a discussion forum, and has no powers of application.

## **Background: The Brewing of the Gulf Crisis.**

Prior to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on August 2, foreign naval vessels were stationed in the Gulf: under the auspices of the WEU effort (1987-88) to keep the Gulf waterway open during the Iran-Iraq war, Britain, France, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands maintained a military presence in the Gulf.

In the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq was desperate to alleviate the problems caused by the political and economic dilemmas that had developed and had been making accusations and demands for a few months. Saddam Hussein, Iraq's President, was not content with the outcome of the decade-long war with Iran,

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especially since the Shatt-al-Arab<sup>1</sup> dispute had not been settled to his satisfaction. The simple solution for Iraq was to take over the Kuwaiti islands of Bubiyan and Warbah, and gain the access to the Persian Gulf which Saddam Hussein coveted.

### Immediate Reaction of the EC

The immediate reaction of the EC member-states to the crisis was orderly and organized. Based on their experience of using economic means for political ends they were quickly able to install restrictive economic measures on Iraq and Iraq-occupied Kuwait. The Treaty of Rome called for the EC's external relations to be conducted by the use of economic instruments. For the most part, in the past, this had been accomplished via foreign agreements—as foreseen by Article 113 to include only trade agreements, and by Article 238 which allowed economic association agreements with third countries. Therefore, the only foreign policy that the EC could generate was through the external effects of their economic policies, as had been done in the past with Iran (1980), Poland (1980-1), and the Falkland crisis (1982). In these cases, the EC had worked with European Political Cooperation acting as a type of advisory body, but outside the Community framework.

### World Opinion and Expectations

World opinion played a key role in the interpretation of the EC's reaction to the Gulf crisis. One thing, however, is certain: the initial EC response was impressive. The Community condemned the invasion hours after it occurred, and two days later imposed its own 'sanctions'. The day after Security Council Resolution 661<sup>2</sup> was passed its provisions were incorporated into Community policy. Agreement was reached on how to handle the diplomatic missions in Kuwait and the hostage situation in both Iraq and Kuwait.

However these coordinated actions did not stop British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher from commenting that: '... at this critical time, Europe has not fully measured up to expectations' (*Financial Times*, 31 August 1990). Such comments reflected both the negative attitudes harbored by some European leaders and unrealistic expectations. The EC acted within its capacity, and at least in the beginning projected a unified front. Furthermore, a Belgian representative of the foreign ministry acknowledged that:

...the EC 'has a long way to go' before it will be able to wield power and influence commensurate with its size. Nonetheless, he asserts, 'a European framework is taking shape' (*Wall Street Journal*, 3 September 1990).

These discordant views reflect the varying expectations of EC integration held by observers. In the present case, such views affected the way in which this crisis was handled, and the cohesion which was expressed among the members of the EC. For example, the British reaction ultimately demonstrates that Britain was more closely linked to the United States than to its EC partners.

As a world power on the rise, the EC was expected to react as one. Views of the EC as an already-united federation were not absent and parallels between the EC and the US were often made. One British official commented that:

...even though the EC has stepped up efforts to coordinate its members' political positions towards Iraq, the cumbersome process has not been able to match the speed and clarity of statements and actions by individual members or by the US (*Financial Times*, 6 September 1990).

Obviously, the EC has neither the political cohesion nor the stable foreign policy of the United States. Yet there were visionaries who expected that the EC would take a leading role, or at least be a mediator.

Many nations looked to the EC to take a leadership role. It was perceived as more neutral than the US - whose historic support of Israel alienated the Arab world - and less militaristic (given the tendencies of the European states over the past few decades). Iraq's initial reaction, perhaps influenced by Europe's historic ties with the Middle East, was to look to the EC for help in de-escalating the crisis. Iraq's ambassador in Paris, Abdul-Razzak Al Hachimi, commented:

Europe cannot do without Iraqi oil. . . . Europe will be a loser in a war in the region, that is why we hope that Europe can take the initiative in cooling things down (*Wall Street Journal*, 14 August 1990).

Yet the EC could not play this leadership role, and perhaps here is where it was criticized the most. The EC states were able to present a unified judgement, but when asked to act upon this policy of condemnation the dichotomy between what was expected of the EC and what they expected of themselves rose to the surface. The conflict between taking a leading role in the de-escalation of the crisis (perhaps by sending European troops) and acting merely as mediators (as attempted in the Yugoslavian crisis) left the twelve EC states in a quagmire of indecision.

Since expectations for a greater involvement of the EC in the resolution of the crisis were high, the judgement passed was harsher. There was also a distinct sense of disappointment and frustration, which intensified when the Community discovered that it was involved in a war situation with which it had no capacity to deal.

### **Structure, Bureaucracy, and Decision-Making in the EC**

Inherent in the structural framework of the EC is the cumbersome bureaucracy that had to be surpassed in order for decisions to be made. Each aspect of the crisis was coordinated under a different forum. While each forum followed its own particular processes, almost all were comprised of the same representatives. Economic measures were adopted in the Economic Community, political matters were discussed under the auspices of European Political Cooperation, and military issues under the Western European Union, structurally outside the Community. This was the cause of frequent, unnecessary delays and redundant meetings in which representatives simply reaffirmed what had been said at an earlier meeting.

A structural vacuum therefore exists within the EC, a vacuum that EPC is often expected to fill. Yet, though EPC has had its successes in the past, the sector of 'high politics' is a delicate one since it usually implicates national sovereignty. Also, EPC is still only a process and not an institution, with only loose ties to the EC. The WEU, on the other hand, after its revival in 1984 was preferred as a foreign policy forum because it excluded the three problem states of the EC: Denmark, Greece and Ireland (Lodge, 1989, p.246). In addition the WEU had successfully coordinated a previous operation in the Gulf region during the Iran-Iraq war (1987-88.) Thus it seems that many eyes were set on a new revival of the WEU.

On 21 August, the Western European Union met for the first time. This was a critical point in European coordination, for all EC nations save Ireland were present. In the interest of continuity and proper cooperation, WEU President France had invited the non-WEU members of the EC to attend the meeting, and called for a ministerial meeting of European Political Cooperation after that of the WEU (Greece, Denmark, and Ireland were invited, as was Turkey).

The WEU decided to coordinate European forces, as had been done in the 1987-88 operation, in order to implement and enforce United Nations Security Council resolution 661. The fundamental aim was to ensure coordination among forces; the sharing of tasks, logistical support, and exchange of intelligence were also included

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(WEU Communique from Paris Meeting, 21 August 1990). The only area of disagreement was over the extent to which member states could enforce the embargo. However, the agreement to harmonize rules of engagement left only the British belief that the United Nations resolution did not go far enough as a point of contention between Britain and France.

The Community then announced its decision not to close diplomatic missions in Kuwait by the Iraqi deadline of 24 August, and that the missions would remain open in order to protect the rights of EC nationals still in the area. It also denounced Iraq's treatment of foreigners in both Iraq and occupied Kuwait (European Community memorandum, 21 August 1990). All of the ministers 'recognised that this would place their diplomats in danger, but argued that it was essential to show a united front' (*The Times*, 22 August 1990).

The united front portrayed at the early stages of the crisis crumbled under the weight of the disagreements and problems that were to come. Lacking an official military and defence role, EPC was upstaged by the WEU. Many nations kept silent in Brussels, waiting for the WEU to decide what type of coordination would ensue. This obviously caused a great delay in the decisions that were waiting to be made, and finally resulted in an independent national response which led to 'the piecemeal dispatch of warships, a babble of different instructions, botched national initiatives and a confused public argument over ends and means' (*The Times*, 22 August 1990). But there was a consensus, not only on the pressing issues of the moment—maintaining the embargo, the diplomatic missions, EC nationals not allowed to leave, and commitment of forces—but also with future prospects. It was agreed that though a diplomatic solution did not seem to be on the horizon a pre-emptive attack would be both premature and undesirable, and the best course to follow was to wait and see the effects of the embargo.

However, the structural problems, the inescapable bureaucracy, the problems in decision-making, the independent national responses, even the fears that EPC would interfere with national sovereignty did not impede the progress of the EC in its initial management of the crisis. The member states were able to maintain continuity and proper cooperation, they managed to harmonise the rules of engagement in the event that a naval military intervention was necessary, and effectively showed a united front—until the time came to dealing with a war situation.

### Going to War - The EC as a Civilian Power

The major crises that arose among the EC member-states essentially revolved around one major issue—the use of force. This was for two distinct reasons. First, to commit a nation to military action against another is an act of war. This encompasses all aspects of national policy, with domestic and foreign repercussions, for each individual nation. Second, the EC, having historically been an economic institution, is recognised as a civilian power, and has only in the last two decades openly acknowledged the political implications of its decisions. The necessity for a special political forum was covered by the formation of EPC in October 1970.<sup>3</sup> To bring to such an institution as the European Community an issue of war is to present it with an important new issue, and one with which it is not equipped to deal.

Until the late 1980s, the EC was viewed exclusively as a civilian power. It was not involved in any military cooperation, and did not openly deal with high politics. In the 1970s, EPC only covered low-profile matters, and here met with success in the two major areas with which it dealt: the Middle East, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. However, by the 1980s these areas were not enough, and the EC could no longer function effectively merely as a civilian power,

since it could not remain distanced from international politics. (Lodge, 1989, p.245) As economic issues become more and more difficult to distinguish from security issues, the distinction that the EC has defined between the two becomes more difficult to maintain. During the Gulf crisis the EC faced one of the early signs of such difficulties, mainly the politicization of an economic issue - oil. The political aspects of oil were not only faced by the EC but were (and still are) faced on an international level on a daily basis.

It is, therefore, not surprising that when the issue of going to war arose in January 1991, communications within the EC broke down. What is surprising is that the warning signals of this impending EC crisis were not heeded. The first major crisis which arose was whether national forces were allowed to use military means in imposing the embargo. This was especially important for the European forces, since most of them were naval, and thus the most likely to encounter an Iraqi attempt to disregard the embargo. France was the most outspoken against the use of force, requesting a more concrete description by the United Nations of acceptable military actions. This she was to receive on 25 August in Security Council resolution 665.<sup>4</sup> A promise was also made by the WEU to coordinate rules of enforcement.

This set the stage for the second crisis in January, when beyond all agreements within the EC and the Security Council, the French went ahead and launched their own personal last-minute attempt for peace, disregarding fears that Saddam Hussein would use any concessions as a delaying tactic. In addition the French undermined the prestige of the UN Secretary General Javier-Perez de Cuellar who had made a similar offer when he made his eleventh-hour visit to Baghdad.

Many interpretations surfaced as to the rationale of the French initiative. What is obvious is that it violated both the fundamental policy of consulting fellow EPC members before a major foreign policy initiative (as laid out by the London Report<sup>5</sup>) and an agreement of the previous day's foreign minister's meeting (where French Foreign Minister Roland Dumas was absent) where it was unanimously decided that there was no use in sending a mission to Baghdad. Second the French went against an agreement not to resort to the Security Council in order to not 'muddy the waters' of resolution 678,<sup>6</sup> and give Saddam Hussein stalling time. The French mission therefore made a mockery of the entire EPC process, and left the EC exposed to world criticism, as well as causing a division among the allies (a feat that even Saddam Hussein had not managed).

According to the British this was proof of 'a maddening French insistence on doing things their own way, in their own good time' (*Daily Telegraph*, 16 January 1991). Another view was that Mitterrand sought to "assert his role in the international arena following the post-unification glory of Helmut Kohl" (*Independent*, 11 January 1991). Other allies, however, quietly agreed with the French last resort: as one British diplomat summed it up, 'We don't like it, but if the French can help avoid war, we won't object' (*Independent*, 11 January 1991).

As one of the nations in the forefront of the unification effort it seems odd that France was the one to 'explode the cover of solidarity.' The French in turn blame the British and the Dutch for their adamant attachment to the US, and the complete absence of flexibility in their position that drove the French to act on their own.

As has been repeatedly noted the fundamental obstacle to consensus within the EC in the Gulf crisis was the inability - primarily an institutional one arising out of the limits imposed by the Treaty of Rome - of making the commitment to go to war. Whatever the reasons behind their hesitation - be it the history of long and costly colonial overseas involvement, or just simply a European isolationist tendency - the individual European nations were not committed enough to the European ideal to

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take such a great step and declare war. Instead most nations preferred to send a token representation rather than commit large numbers of forces to what was essentially American command.

### Conclusion

The major conclusion derived from the Gulf crisis is not that the new enemy is to be found in the Middle East, nor that there exists a need for a new European defence and security policy, nor that the world needs to continue to rely on American military might. The single most significant conclusion is the reaffirmation of the European Community's inability to go to war. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the international response - however disparate views were at times - were also unequivocal proof that the new world order that is surfacing after the essential end of the Cold War will not revolve around non-confrontational politics. Instead, this order affirms the importance of military might. It proved that though the US is an economic power in decline, it still derives international importance from its superior military structure and diplomatic prowess. In comparison, the European Community, though an economic power, is virtually insignificant in an international crisis since it has no military jurisdiction.

Other than this absence of a military machine it is impossible to even assume complete consensus among the twelve on such important and controversial issues, because of different policies, differences in national character, and means of handling such crises. And the French initiative was proof of this point, for not only in the EC meetings, but within the Security Council, France was constantly urging for more dialogue and for a very active involvement of the Secretary General.<sup>7</sup> On November 25, 1990, M. Roland Dumas said to the Security Council, 'Although my country is deeply committed to the search of a political settlement, in the final analysis law must prevail'.<sup>8</sup> This is a view certainly shared by everyone, yet as seen, interpretations differed.

As it has already been ascertained, Europe 'has a direct interest in the security of the Gulf and relations between the EC and the Gulf are ones that it cannot afford to ignore' (Yorke, 1986, p.2). However, the EC was unable to play the role of mediator that it may have intended to. The EC's role as 'a new political force with a sense of long history', as Mr. Gianni de Michelis accurately asserted,<sup>9</sup> was not realized in this crisis. Instead, in the confusion between the role the EC aspired to and that expected of it, the outcome reflected the different national policies with no EC strings attached.

The structural problems which arose, mainly in having to tolerate the existence of various institutions to deal with each aspect of the crisis, and the necessity of repeated meetings, proved to be not only frustrating, but also counterproductive, creating a serious problem in decision-making. In turn this problem with decision-making led to independent national responses, and the absence of consensus, which was after all the least that was expected of the EC. Another expectation was that the EC play the role of mediator, but in the absence of consensus it was improbable that this role could be fulfilled.

What the Gulf crisis has therefore proved is that the gap between the EC that is emerging and that envisioned by Monnet and his contemporaries is vast, and perhaps the chasm that separates theory and reality has now become as wide as the Persian Gulf itself.

### Notes

1. The Shatt-al-Arab is a narrow strip of land between Iraq and Kuwait, stretching down to the Gulf, which has been claimed by Iraq in order to gain access to the Gulf.
2. Security Council Resolution 661, imposing mandatory sanctions was adopted on August 6,

1990

3. European Political Cooperation was established by the Luxembourg Report in October 1970 after a suggestion for such a forum was made at a meeting of the EC Heads of Government in the Hague in December 1969. For more information on the background of EPC see Pijpers, A, et al. (eds.) (1988) *European Political Cooperation in the 1980s: A Common Foreign Policy for Western Europe?* Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff; also Allen, D. et al. (eds.) (1962) *European Political Cooperation*. London: Butterworth.
4. Security Council Resolution 665 calling for measures to ensure the implementation of Resolution 661 was adopted August 25, 1990.
5. London Report of European Political Cooperation, October 1981, part I, 'They emphasise their commitment to consult partners before adopting final positions or *launching national initiatives* on all important questions of foreign policy which are of concern to the Ten as a whole' (italics added).
6. Security Council Resolution 678, authorising the use of 'all necessary means' to compel Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, was adopted November 29, 1990.
7. United Nations Documents, Security Council, Provisional Verbatim Record S/PV.2932, 2 August 1990, and S/PV.2951, 29 October 1990.
8. United Nations Documents, Security Council, Provisional Verbatim Record S/PV.2963, 29 November 1990
9. Gianni De Michelis, Speech on behalf of the EC and its Member-States at the 45th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 25, 1990.

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