

Germany's accession to NATO: 50 years on

Helga Haftendorn analyses the debates and events surrounding Germany's accession to NATO 50 years ago.

West Germany's accession to NATO 50 years ago on 6 May 1955 took place against the backdrop of both East-West conflict and the project of European integration. The second round of NATO enlargement, by which the Federal Republic became the Alliance's 15th member, was an important step in the country's post-war rehabilitation and paved the way for Germany to play a substantial role in the defence of Western Europe during the Cold War.

Both NATO and the German Federal Republic were created in 1949. When signed in April 1949, the Washington Treaty was a traditional alliance agreement in which the 12 NATO Allies promised to take adequate measures in the event of attack against any member by an external enemy. At the time, it lacked a political structure, a joint command and military forces earmarked for Alliance defence. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation itself, that is the structures underpinning the Treaty, only came into being after the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 when the threat of attack by Soviet forces in Central Europe appeared imminent.

Helga Haftendorn is professor emeritus of political science and international relations at the Free University of Berlin and former director of its Center on Transatlantic Foreign and Security Policy Studies. She is the author of numerous books on German foreign policy and NATO, including the forthcoming "From Self-restraint to Assertion: German Foreign Policy since 1945" (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).



History in the making: On 23 October 1954 the North Atlantic Council invited Germany to join the Alliance

Like NATO, the Federal Republic was a child of the Cold War. The establishment of two states on German soil was a result of the inability of the Four Powers – France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States – to administer Germany jointly as had been agreed at the 1945 Potsdam Conference. The Berlin Blockade of 1948 and 1949 was but a foretaste of conflict to come and the Korean War confirmed the most pessimistic views about Soviet intentions.

In 1949, any thinking aloud about German membership of NATO risked generating so negative a reaction as to be self-defeating. Nevertheless, in both Washington and Bonn such thoughts were harboured. The United States wanted to use German manpower to reinforce the modest military presence left behind in Germany for occupation duty after the bulk of wartime forces had been withdrawn and demobilised. But even cautious US suggestions to consider a German military contribution met strong French resistance. Less than five years after the end of the Second World War, no one in France could envisage German rearmament.

In Bonn, Chancellor Konrad Adenauer had no illusions about the aggressive design of Soviet communism and the extent of the military threat. He was concerned that the 30-plus Soviet divisions deployed east of the iron curtain were superior to the armies of the West in terms of both manpower and equipment. He urged the occupying powers to increase their forces and to extend a security guarantee to include the Federal Republic. He also asked his military advisers to draw up various concepts for German defence. This included both the invigoration of police forces and the creation of German military units to be integrated into a European army. Though the Three Western Powers agreed with Adenauer's analysis of the Soviet threat and saw the need for German armed forces, they did not dare to say so publicly.

When the situation in Korea deteriorated and the likelihood of a Soviet attack on the West increased, the North Atlantic Council decided to turn the Atlantic Alliance into an integrated defence organisation and to establish common military structures and forces to which the Federal Republic was expected to contribute. As a first step, the Allied High Commissioners representing the Three Western Powers in Germany were asked to consult with the Federal Republic and work for the establishment of German combat units. The NATO members

also expressed interest in a French proposal for a common European army but recognised that realising such an ambitious project would take time.

Options for German rearmament

While the US military – as well as their German colleagues – preferred to see Germany join NATO, both former UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill in a speech at Strasbourg and French Prime Minister René Pleven urged the creation of a European army. Along the model of the European Coal and Steel Community that had been agreed in 1951 between Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, a European Defence Community (EDC) was to be created and a European army under the supreme authority of the EDC established.



Beating the blockade: The Berlin Blockade of 1948 and 1949 was a foretaste of the East-West conflict to come

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Military integration was to take place at the level of small combat units. Command would be entrusted to a European Defence Minister, responsible to a European Assembly and Council of Ministers. An integrated General Staff under a French officer was also planned. Procurement, equipment and training would be jointly managed. Pleven's proposal made the deployment of German soldiers possible without, however, creating a West German army.

At the time, there were actually three options on the table. The least controversial proposal was that of creating a German federal police equipped to deal with domestic contingencies and provide the manpower for a future German army. The second involved inviting West Germany to join NATO and integrating its forces into those of the Alliance. And the third corresponded to the Pleven plan for creating a European army with German contingents. The Allies managed to bridge internal differences by deciding to negotiate with the Federal Republic both on a NATO solution and on a European Defence Community. But there was no agreement on which option should have priority.

For Adenauer, a German military contribution was as much a means to an end as an end in itself. In the first instance, he saw it as a means to improve West Germany's security in the face of Soviet rearmament of Germany's Eastern zone. Secondly, he viewed it as an opportunity to hasten the end of Germany's occupation and thereby to re-establish German sovereignty. And thirdly, he expected it to pave the way for European integration. In the negotiations on German rearmament, Bonn was not prepared to have its soldiers serve as mercenaries or as Allied "cannon fodder" nor to have them openly discriminated against.

In 1951, talks between the Allied High Commissioners and German military experts on a German contribution to NATO got under way at Petersberg near Bonn at the same time as negotiations on the EDC were held in Paris at the invitation of the French government. Adenauer was left guessing as to the Allies' main concerns. Although the German Chancellor felt strongly about reconciliation with France and considered rearmament most feasible within the context of European integration, he nonetheless realised that only the United States had the power to guarantee the Federal Republic's security. As a result, Bonn

gave priority to the discussions with the Allied High Commissioners and sent only a small delegation to Paris. In both venues the discussion focused on how to create German units that were militarily meaningful and yet still acceptable to France. However, it soon became evident that the only option acceptable to everybody at this stage was the European one. This was also satisfactory to the German Chancellor who, above all, wanted to prevent the Western Powers from postponing rearmament indefinitely and avoid the prospect of having them seek a solution to the German question and European security via negotiations with the Soviet Union that had proposed Four-Power talks.

The major problems of rearmament were the status of German troops, the size of nationally homogeneous units and the link between the EDC and NATO. The question of unit size was resolved by creating small divisions and the linkage was to occur through the declaration of reciprocal guarantees. However, the question of the regulation of German arms production remained unresolved until the very end of the negotiations. Bonn was not ready to accept France's insistence that it renounce the possibility of rebuilding an armaments industry.

When the EDC Treaty with its supplementary protocols and letters was signed in Paris on 27 May 1952, it was clear to everybody involved that this was only the second-best solution. For the United States, it was important that Western defence was strengthened as quickly as possible through a substantial German military contribution. If that was not achievable in the framework of NATO, then it should be accomplished through a European army. But it was important that France participated. At the same time, Paris had neither succeeded in preventing German rearmament nor in completely subordinating Bonn's military contribution to French control. And the Federal Republic had failed to realise its prime objective of membership in NATO. In the end, it accepted a solution that included a number of discriminatory elements but at least opened up the possibility of closer future integration into Europe. With the simultaneous signing of the General Treaty, that is the Convention on Relations between the Three Powers and the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn had, nevertheless, achieved the prospect of terminating the occupation regime and reinstating national sovereignty. Despite all the criticism it faced domestically, the government

Thinking aloud about German membership of NATO in 1949 risked generating so negative a reaction as to be self-defeating



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Means to an end: Adenauer saw the creation of a German army as a means to improve his country's security, an opportunity to hasten the end of Germany's occupation and a step on the path to European integration

had reason to be satisfied with its achievements, provided that both treaties were quickly ratified and then implemented.

Rearmament, in whatever form, faced strong domestic opposition in Germany and triggered heated debate on the constitutionality of a German military contribution and the creation of a vociferous popular movement called *Without Me*. Nevertheless, the EDC and the General Treaty were duly ratified. But ratification was problematic in France where opposition to the treaties grew. Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France tried to allay widespread fears in his country by seeking further German concessions, including postponing the introduction of any supranational regulations for between five and eight years, during which German military units would be subordinated to French command. He also

demanded concessions from Germany on the future of the then French-administered Saar region. When Bonn declined, ratification was brought into question. The alternative option of NATO membership was also closed as long as US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles remained committed to the EDC solution.

On 30 August 1954, the French *Assemblée Nationale* voted to drop the EDC treaty from the agenda. Fear of a resurgent Germany had prevailed, even though the Federal Republic was to be firmly integrated in a European community. The previous month in Geneva, France had been able – with Soviet support – to reach a resolution of its Indochina entanglement. Paris had therefore reason to accommodate Soviet concerns. Meanwhile German and US policies lay in ruins. Four years of arduous negotiations appeared to have been in vain.

The road to NATO

At this juncture, London took the initiative. The Three Powers had already stated in 1952 that if the EDC failed to materialise, the issue of German rearmament had to be settled as part of a package including the termination of the occupation regime. They had also promised to work for a new solution immediately. UK Foreign Minister Anthony Eden and his US counterpart, John Foster Dulles, set out to search for a way out of the impasse. The result was a UK invitation to all six EDC states, Canada and the United States to a Nine-Power conference in London. Three topics were on the agenda: terminating the state of occupation in the Federal Republic; revising the Brussels Treaty of 1948 and inviting the Federal Republic and Italy to accede to it; and admitting the Federal Republic to NATO.

Understandably, France insisted on safeguards against unwelcome developments in Germany, while the Federal Republic wished to be treated equally and not to be discriminated against. The Brussels Treaty offered a solution. By using its automatic assistance clause, the treaty was developed into a system of collective security in Europe, the Western European Union (WEU), into which German rearmament could be embedded. The WEU also provided a framework for establishing limits on German rearmament as had the EDC Treaty. But when Adenauer was asked at a press conference whether Hitler's generals would also be Adenauer's generals, the Chancellor replied that NATO would probably not accept 18-year-old boys. As a gesture to France, the United Kingdom committed itself to stationing four divisions and a tactical air fleet on the European mainland and not to withdraw them against the wishes of the other members. The United States had already in 1951 committed additional divisions to the European continent.

UK assurances together with similar US guarantees were of great importance to Paris, which saw in the Anglo-American forces a counterweight to a German army. The German government was not only granted admission to NATO as an equal member, but a revision of the General Treaty was also agreed and a number of controversial clauses eliminated. The presence of foreign troops in West Germany was also contractually regulated in a Convention on the Rights and Obligations of Foreign Forces (Force Convention). The Federal Republic further complied with the request publicly to renounce any production of atomic, biological

and chemical weapons. In return, the Three Powers stated that they supported the restoration of a united, free Germany. Bonn committed itself to search for reunification only by peaceful means and to pursue its foreign policy in accordance with Article 2 of the UN Charter.

But before negotiations on German membership in NATO could be finalised, the issue of the Saar's status had to be resolved. France had made its approval contingent on the resolution of this question. In a marathon, all-night meeting Adenauer and Mendès-France agreed to create a European Statute for the Saar. The region was to attain political autonomy, but should remain economically linked to France. At the request of France, the population was to vote on the Statute in a referendum. Paris was so sure of a positive vote that no provision was made for its rejection. In the event, however, the people of the Saar voted against the Statute, thereby effectively obliging France to accept the Saar's accession to the Federal Republic. In this way, following a transition period, the Saar became a *land*, or province, of



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German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer



Defending the West: The *Bundeswehr* never reached its full anticipated strength of 12 divisions and 560,000 troops, yet eventually became the largest continental European army

the Federal Republic on 1 January 1957, after Germany had joined NATO.

On 23 October 1954 the North Atlantic Council decided to invite the Federal Republic to become a member. One day later, 12 major treaties were signed. On 6 May 1955, after the ratification process had been concluded in all states, the Federal Republic of Germany took its seat at the NATO table. The day before, the General Treaty, the Force Convention and the European Statute on the Saar had taken effect. When the Allied High Commissioners declared the occupation regime to be terminated the occupation had come to an end. The Federal Republic of Germany had rejoined the family of nations.

Germany in NATO

The build-up of the *Bundeswehr* was slow and cumbersome. Though the legislative foundation of the new army was laid quickly thanks to a bipartisan consensus, the development of troops was handicapped by the lack of both commissioned and non-commissioned officers, a shortage of barracks and a reluctance of volunteers to sign up for service. In 1957, the first German division could be assigned to NATO. But the *Bundeswehr* never reached its full strength of 12 divisions and 560,000 men as planned in 1954. That said, NATO itself failed to reach its 1952 Lisbon Force Goals of 90 divisions, half of which were to be deployed in Central Europe.

For 50 years Germany has participated in the Atlantic Alliance. In 1955, few people would have imagined that the Federal Republic would build the largest army on the European continent. And no French official intent on circumscribing German potential power would in his wildest dreams have imagined that 40 years later German units would be marching in a 14 July parade on the *Champs Elysées* as part of the Eurocorps.

Over the years, German membership in NATO was, nevertheless, troubled by three major crises. When the Federal Republic joined the Alliance, its principal asset was its promise to build a strong conventional army. Soon thereafter, however, NATO's strategy began changing towards greater reliance on nuclear weapons. The new strategy of massive retaliation relied on a "nuclear sword" and relegated all other forces to a "conventional shield". Germany was faced with the difficult decision as to whether it should introduce nuclear weapons' systems while the warheads remained under US custody. For about ten years, the issue of nuclear sharing – of weapons, information and decision-making – remained a hotly contested issue. Moreover, it was exacerbated when US military strategy changed again in the 1960s under the label of flexible response, requiring greater reliance on conventional weapons. It was a step that Germany very much resented, fearing that it would weaken deterrence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.

The next crisis arose when France withdrew its forces from NATO's integrated military command. Ostensibly, President Charles de Gaulle was offended that his request for a three-power *directoire* and for nuclear cooperation with the United States had been rejected. But he had also hoped to give France a greater role as spokesman for Europe, not least vis-à-vis Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union at the beginning of the era of *détente*. De Gaulle's move confronted the Federal Republic with a difficult conflict of priorities: it would only be able to further the project of European integration together with France, yet a close relationship with the United States was essential for its security and protection. The growing rift between the two partners forced Bonn to walk a tightrope in its foreign relations.

Still another crisis came with the 1979 NATO double-track decision. This stemmed from



French Prime Minister Pierre Mendès-France (left) and UK Foreign Minister Anthony Eden

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ruminations by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt about a "grey zone" that was developing as a result of the bilateral Soviet-US agreement negotiated within the framework of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. Schmidt called primarily for greater European input into these negotiations, but Washington responded with a proposal for the deployment of additional nuclear weapons. As a concession to the Europeans this offer was linked to an arms-control proposal. But it was only after many years that arms-control talks generated results and a "double-zero" agreement, envisaging the eventual elimination of intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe, was negotiated with the Soviet Union. Before that, the deployment of intermediate-range nuclear systems in West Germany generated massive public protests and contributed to the downfall of the Schmidt government.

On balance, Alliance membership has served German interests extremely well. NATO has provided a vital security umbrella against military aggression, under which the Federal Republic was able to evolve into a responsible and important European nation. In



Sign of changing times: No French official in 1955 could have imagined German units marching in a 14 July parade on the *Champs Élysées* just 40 years on

In addition to providing security to Germany, NATO has served as a non-discriminatory framework within which other Allies have also been able to feel secure from Germany, offering both collective defence and collective security, and firmly anchoring Germany in the West. The Alliance has also provided an essential link – an umbilical cord – to the United States that made deterrence credible during the Cold War, provided critical assistance during the process of German reunification and has consistently served as a mediator and crisis manager in post-war Europe.

In the wake of both the 11/9 fall of the Berlin Wall and the 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States, some of the factors that made NATO membership so central to German foreign policy have become less significant. As a result, some analysts have begun to argue that the European Union's European Security and Defence Policy provides an alternative. But is this really the case? Chancellor Gerhard Schröder went on record at this

year's Munich Security Conference in February to lament the fact that NATO was "no longer the primary venue where transatlantic partners discuss and coordinate strategies", urging NATO's reinvigoration and the re-establishment of a culture of strategic dialogue within the Alliance. A start has been made on this at the informal NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting in Vilnius, Lithuania, in April. Indeed, as long as NATO manages to transform itself again and retains its internal cohesion, there is surely no alternative to the strong link to North America that NATO embodies, the community of democracies it constitutes and the instruments for global conflict management and power projection it offers. ■

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