



Pooling & Sharing: From Slow March to Quick March?

Sven Biscop & Jo Coelmont

On 23 May, the Ministers of Defence of the EU27 will assess the first outcome of the “Ghent Framework” for pooling & sharing of military capabilities. While some defence establishments may be hesitant, now is no time for timidity. Ministers must take the lead for the process to yield substantial results. If “Ghent” was the expression of the will, now the first concrete actions must be taken.

2010 saw an arduous debate about whether, and if so, how to implement Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a new mechanism introduced by the Lisbon Treaty that could notably make capability development more efficient and coherent. In spite of the lack of common understanding of PESCO, the Ministers of Defence of the EU Member States, urged on by the financial crisis, on 9 December 2010 agreed on potentially far-reaching conclusions: the so-called Ghent Framework.

Avoiding any explicit reference to PESCO, Ministers focused on the immediate need for coordination in view of the budgetary cuts and proposed a concrete method. Member States were encouraged to “systematically analyze their national military capabilities”, aiming at

“measures to increase interoperability for capabilities to be maintained on a national level; exploring which capabilities offer potential for pooling; intensifying cooperation regarding capabilities, support structures and tasks which could be addressed on the basis of role- and task-sharing”. This pragmatic approach created a positive atmosphere. Subsequently, “pooling & sharing” became the new buzzword in CSDP town.

Keeping up the Pace

Pooling & sharing is of course not new. For decades already many Member States have pooled important capabilities with others, through various bilateral and multilateral arrangements, and some have even engaged in role and task sharing or specialization. But they have never surpassed the tactical level of project-by-project cooperation, and have not solved the strategic shortfalls. There certainly is scope therefore to create many more synergies and effects of scale, as well as an increasing necessity, in view of the budgetary pressure and the ever reduced size of most Member States’ defence budgets and armed forces.

The current window of opportunity is not to be wasted. However, after the initial enthusiasm, conservatism might yet gain the

upper hand. Defence establishments focusing on maintaining national structures and stepping on the brakes to protect what they have, risk to lose the chance of getting more, and will probably end up with less. Of course, as several Member States have indicated, the Ghent Framework has to be a long-term process, that continues beyond the Hungarian Presidency. But that requires a sufficiently strong impulse at the start of the process.

Two important conclusions therefore must be kept in mind when the Ministers of Defence of the EU27 meet on 23 May:

- (1) *If the first round of the Ghent Framework is inconclusive, there will be no second round.* If the conclusion of the May Defence Ministers Council is that all 27 go for pooling & sharing – but in some peripheral areas only, that will not change the face of European defence. Vice versa, if the conclusion is to go for pooling & sharing in all capability areas – but only between Belgium and Luxembourg, that will not change the face of European defence either. A critical mass of Member States must take ambitious initiatives, including in some significant capability areas, to set things in motion.
- (2) *Pooling & sharing what you have, does not get you more.* Pooling & sharing will allow us to make existing capabilities more cost-effective, and hopefully also more operationally effective. But it does not automatically lead to solutions for the capability shortfalls, i.e. the capabilities that collectively we don't have. The Ghent Framework not only has to be long-term, it also has to create a platform to launch new capability initiatives.

For the Ghent Framework to yield results, it must be top-down. Not in the sense that Brussels dictates to the Member States, but in

the sense that the Ministers of Defence, who are the capability providers, personally take the lead and steer their armed forces towards greater convergence in order to meet the common capability objectives.

A Permanent Platform

Useful inspiration for dealing with commonly identified objectives can be found in the method used to launch CSDP operations: a Force Generation Conference. Once the capabilities required for a specific upcoming CSDP operation are identified and listed in the Statement of Requirements, a Force Generation Conference is organized among the potential Troop Contributing Nations. This process goes on until the entire list of requirements has been met by *voluntary* contributions by the Member States. Although such conferences can be difficult, in the end they have always yielded result.

“The Ghent Framework could be the first step towards a capability generation conference”

In a similar vein, the Ghent Framework could be the first step towards a “capability generation conference” of the Ministers of Defence of the willing Member States. The aim of such a conference would be to create a durable *strategic-level* framework for systematic exchange of information on national defence planning, as a basis for consultation and top-down coordination, on a voluntary basis. Today, Member States do their national defence planning in splendid isolation, without really taking into account either EU or NATO guidelines. In the future, a national defence white book ought no longer to be the end of the process, but the starting point for an open dialogue among partners. As defence planning concerns the long term, such a dialogue will be permanent, hence a *Permanent Capability*

Conference. Such a forum will create the certainty and confidence that capitals need in order to really align their national defence planning with fellow Member States and to focus it on the commonly identified shortfalls.

The aim is not in any way to transfer sovereignty over defence planning to the EU level. National governments and Chiefs of Defence will still decide in which capabilities to invest or disinvest. The aim is to restore the sovereignty that each individually we have all lost, being unable to sustain significant crisis management operations on our own, which pooling and sharing alone has not been able to remedy.

Towards Military Convergence

Only in the framework of a Permanent Capability Conference that provides them with a bird's eye view of all participants' plans and intentions can Member State reliably assess the relevance of their national capabilities. It functions in effect as a peer review mechanism of national defence planning. The advantages for national capability decisions are four-fold:

- (1) Member States can confidently choose to strengthen their relevance by *focusing* their defence effort on those capabilities required for crisis management operations that are in short supply and therefore critical at the EU level.
- (2) Member States can safely decide not to expand or even to disinvest in national capabilities of which at the EU-level there already is overcapacity. Actually, Member States spent far more money on maintaining redundant capabilities than would be needed to solve the priority shortfalls. Doing away with those redundancies in a concerted way is the most effective cost-saver imaginable. Furthermore Member States can without risk decide to disinvest in a capability area either because existing

national capabilities are obsolete and non-deployable or because, always on a voluntary basis, participating Member States have agreed on specialization among them.

- (3) In those capability areas in which they do remain active, Member States will be easily able to identify opportunities for increased pooling and sharing of capabilities, allowing them to organize them in a more cost-effective manner and increase operational effectiveness.
- (4) Pooling & sharing, specialization, and doing away with redundancies, will create budgetary margin allowing Member States to find partners to launch multinational programmes to address the strategic shortfalls and generate *new* capabilities, including in those areas which go beyond the means of any individual nation and thus demand a combined initiative at the EU-level.

The European Defence Agency can and should act as the organizer and the secretariat of such a process. A permanent capability generation conference would thus also result in a permanently relevant EDA.

Permanent Structured Cooperation?

The question can be asked: does this constitute PESCO? What is relevant here is not the label, but whether for the Ghent Framework to be successful, a mechanism similar to PESCO is necessary. In all likelihood, not all Member States will be willing from the start to subscribe to a permanent and structured process along the lines of the Ghent Framework. It is crucial that those who are willing can do so *within* the EU and can make use of the EU institutions, notably the EDA. That will ensure that something like a Permanent Capability Conference remains fully in line with the overall development of CSDP, and will easily allow other Member States to join at a later

stage, whenever they are able and willing.

To allow that, the Protocol on PESCO annexed to the Lisbon Treaty could be activated, or Member States could agree to consider this as one of the subgroups established in the EDA. As long as the experience and expertise of the EDA can be put to use.

Conclusion

Our armed forces are simultaneously facing budgetary austerity and increasing deployment for crisis management operations. In spite of this, the political circumstances at first sight are not propitious to a new step in European defence cooperation. With Member States divided over the military dimension of Libyan crisis management, the enthusiasm for pooling & sharing of capabilities may have slackened. Yet, operations in Libya have also highlighted once again the already well-known capability shortfalls. The solution requires thinking-out-of-the-box, of which “Ghent” was the starting point. Only by aligning their defence efforts and *collectively* focussing it on those shortfalls can Europeans remain militarily relevant. And that is the first step to develop a truly common CSDP strategy, on which debate should start simultaneously.

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