



## Core Groups: The Way to Real European Defence

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European countries continue to have different political views on the use of military force. Their armed forces also show a wide variety in terms of capabilities for operations low to high in the spectrum. Thus, European strategic autonomy in deploying armed forces for military operations requires a new approach. Rather than pursuing the impossible – acting at 28 – European countries should form core groups of partners with comparable intent, willingness and capabilities. France and the UK can provide the core for a European intervention force while Germany and Poland could constitute the core of a heavy land force formation. All core groups should support each other in a network, to be developed under the overarching umbrella's of the EU and NATO.

The European Union Global Strategy argues for strategic autonomy for Europe to secure peace and safeguard security within and beyond its borders. The EU has a wide range of instruments at its disposal, from military and civilian crisis management tools under the Common Security and Defence Policy to humanitarian relief, development aid and state-building programmes. Although the joined-up approach of deploying these instruments in a

synchronised manner remains a challenge, practice has shown that the EU is able to improve security and stabilise former conflict areas. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and the Horn of Africa have not reached the phase of self-sustainable peace and security. Yet, without the EU efforts they would most probably be worse off today. The EU's added value vis-à-vis NATO or military coalitions of the willing is the joined-up approach of the coordinated use of all available means – as practice is proving.

The same logic could be applied to hybrid threats. They require hybrid responses. Tanks and fighter aircraft are of little or no value when energy flows to Europe are interrupted. A European policy to decrease energy dependencies from potential adversaries should be the answer. Cyber threats have to be countered on a government-wide basis – and even involving the private sector – not just by defence forces. But make no mistake: hybrid responses are not just about better strategic communications, decreasing energy dependencies and cyber defence. It is also about military power. Europe is particularly weak in this area. So, the question arises: can the EU deliver what it is promising in the Global Strategy and the Implementation Plan for Security and Defence, including at the high

end of the spectrum? This question becomes all the more relevant after Donald Trump has entered the White House. American pressure on Europe to take care of its own security will further increase. What can be done in case the shots are called?

### **DIVERSITY IN CAPABILITIES**

All European countries are strong in what could be called ‘soft military power’: capabilities required for stabilisation operations, working together with civilian actors and local authorities to restore failed states and help them to transition into functioning societies. But the higher in the spectrum, the bigger European shortfalls become. Partly, this is caused by a lack of enablers, such as strategic reconnaissance and intelligence, air-to-air refuelling and interoperable command and control capabilities. Equally, European countries have limited amounts of expensive precision munitions. There is a lack of adequate numbers of platforms able to deliver heavy fire power – in particular land-based, both for combat units and combat support units.

For more than two decades European countries have reduced their heavy units and restructured to rapidly deployable and lightly armed, infantry-based forces. It was the right thing to do in order to be able to carry out crisis management operations in the Balkans during the 1990s and, later on, even further away in the Middle East and Africa. The new security environment asks for more mixed forces, still with rapidly deployable components in order to reinforce NATO’s borders quickly or to intervene outside Europe when needed – but also with more stronger components able to deter or, when required, to engage with opponents equipped with heavier weaponry.

The need to strengthen the robustness of armed forces is clearly stated by NATO in

order to reinforce deterrence and defence in view of Russia’s behaviour and military activities. The EU Global Strategy and the Implementation Plan for Security and Defence have also underlined the need for strengthening high-spectrum forces. So, there is clarity and consistency in NATO and in the EU.

What about those who have to deliver these stronger forces, the member states? The military capability landscape in Europe continues to reflect history, geography and national interests. At the one end, France and the United Kingdom have interventionist capabilities, rapidly deployable, supported by their own strategic reconnaissance assets and capable of delivering heavy fire power. However, the scale is limited and sustainability is poor due to force reductions as a result of defence budget cuts and increasing commitments at home due to the persistent threat of terrorism, in particular in France.

At the other extreme end countries like Austria and Ireland have national defence forces able to contribute to low-spectrum operations but with very limited high-end capabilities. All the other European countries are somewhere in between. Some of them invest primarily in modernising their land forces (the Baltic States, Poland) for obvious reasons while others aim to keep at full spectrum air, naval and land forces – either on their own (Germany) or through deepening defence cooperation with close neighbours (e.g. the Benelux countries).

This diverse capabilities landscape is unlikely to change soon because member states still plan their future forces nationally – at best in close harmony with reliable cluster partners. European countries are certainly not doing this at the NATO or EU level – despite all declarations on long-term planning coordination, promises of increasing collaborative defence spending and what have you.

The implication of this state of affairs is that closing the main gaps in European capability shortfalls – in particular at the high-end of the spectrum – will rest on the shoulders of fewer than 28 member states collectively. These are the shoulders of the larger countries and of those smaller member states willing and able to join them. Thus, it would be wrong to treat the issue of improving European military forces solely in the context of the two international organisations concerned, the EU and NATO. The reasons are practical and factual – the different capability profiles – but there are also important political arguments. It is unlikely that 28 member states will unanimously agree or agree in time on high-spectrum intervention-type military operations. In the EU consensus is only possible for military CSDP operations in a relatively benign environment. The recent past is proving that high-spectrum operations are carried out by a single nation (the French interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic) or by a coalition of the willing (the anti-ISIS coalition under the leadership of the United States).

## CONSEQUENCES

In the EU of 28 member states political consensus to deploy forces for high-spectrum interventions is out of reach, also in the foreseeable future. Equally, the lack of cohesion in military capabilities among European states will continue to exist. This leads to a different path to find the solution for Europe's most serious problem in defence: the persistent shortfalls in military capabilities for acting on its own.

**1. CSDP.** As, politically, EU unanimity on launching military operations at the highest end of the spectrum is unlikely, there seems to be little room for using CSDP as the framework. Even if unanimity were to be attainable, decision-making would take too much time. Of course, if the willing and able

member states would nevertheless opt for using the EU framework, then unused Treaty potential (such as enhanced cooperation or permanent structured cooperation) would be an option. But it should be noted that such potential has existed for some time. It seems that countries like France for the foreseeable future will prefer to operate outside the multilateral framework – at least at the start of an intervention, the 'initial entry phase'.

This sober statement on the EU context does not at all mean that the CSDP's motto is 'business as usual'. Collective capability requirements have to be reviewed – based on the new tasks stemming from the Global Strategy and the Implementation Plan. As eloquently described in Sven Biscop's recent publication, capability planning and review should encompass all theoretically possible CSDP operations, from support to border security and stabilisation, training and capacity-building, and from low to high in the spectrum.<sup>1</sup> This recalculation of collective CSDP requirements, taking into account new tasks, will be carried out this year in the context of reviewing the EU's Capability Development Plan.

**2. High-end, smaller groups.** The development and deployment of high-end spectrum capabilities outside Europe rests on the shoulders of a smaller group, preferably with the participation of the maximum amount of larger European countries. The need to involve the United Kingdom also argues for a format outside the EU – in addition to the argument that EU consensus on time-urgent, high-end operations is unlikely to be obtained. In fact, a European intervention force has already been created, the Franco-British Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF), the main operational product of the 2010 bilateral Lancaster House Treaty. The British Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) constitutes the

national module. Several European countries – the three Baltic States, Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands – signed a Letter of Intent in September 2014 to join the JEF. Clearly, these two multinational operational formations now also serve the purpose of keeping the UK connected to its European partners in capability development, including for high-end operations.

**3. EU & NATO.** Although such European military intervention capabilities are developed outside the EU and NATO, they perfectly fit in the collective requirements of these two organisations. They should somehow be taken into account when assessing European efforts to solve the well-known shortfalls. The often heard argument of ‘a single set of forces’ also means that new formations like the CJEF and the JEF cannot be treated solely as serving bilateral or regional interests. They can fulfil European mission needs without necessarily operating as an EU or NATO force. However, nothing precludes them from also serving NATO, either for urgent deployment to reinforce the defence of the Alliance’s territory under Article 5 or for high-end non-Article 5 operations.

The renaissance of NATO’s original core task will have huge consequences for European capabilities. No matter if the United States’ reassurance measures remain fully in place or in case President Trump decides to reduce the enhanced American presence in Europe, the countries on the Eastern side of the Atlantic will have to deliver more capabilities. In particular, this applies to land forces.

**4. Core groups.** Despite the new upward trend in European defence expenditure, financial ceilings will limit the options for strengthening armed forces across the board. Countries are already setting new priorities, mainly based on their own national or regional interests. The Baltic States have opted for spending most of

their defence budgets on modernising land forces, taking into account the growing threat from Russia. Poland is doing the same; it is also investing in new helicopters and fighter aircraft. Germany has reactivated two tank battalions and is expanding its armoured vehicles fleet. On the other hand, the UK is further reducing its tank arsenal and continues to focus on quickly deployable, expeditionary forces. Mediterranean countries are paying more attention to naval forces, taking into account the migration pressure on their southern borders.

So, why not incorporate these different capability priorities when addressing the question of how best to realise better European military capabilities? The solution to the problem is more likely to be found in groups of the willing and able rather than in the formula of ‘all contributing to everything’. This continues to be a non-starter in the EU and NATO with such a different landscape of capability profiles and preferences of their member states.

The answer has to be: a network of core groups, which are constituted on the basis of a comparable will to act and backed up by their military capabilities. A group with France and the UK as the core for high-intensity interventions outside Europe would be a logical formation. Other countries can hook on to, e.g., the British JEF or to French rapidly deployable capabilities. One could imagine another group with Germany and Poland providing the core for heavy land forces, needed for NATO’s territorial defence as a follow-on force to the Alliance’s rapidly deployable capabilities (the NATO Response Force). A third core group (led by Italy?) could concentrate on support to border security and stabilisation operations – for which countries not willing to engage in high-intensity operations should make extra efforts.

**MAINTAINING COHESION**

Such a system of core capability groups could result in a set of uncoordinated military multinational formations, splitting up Europe. This can be prevented by creating a network of core groups, which are linked to each other. The basic principle remains that the core capacity comes from the dedicated group, but countries participating in other core groups could still support other formations. For example, rapid intervention capabilities around a British-French core could be supported by enabling capabilities of countries not part of this core formation. Parts of the heavy land forces of the German-Polish core group could be deployed as replacement forces for the initial entry capability. All member states could add capabilities to a border security and stabilisation operations core group. Certainly, interoperability and standardisation, in particular in areas like communications and command & control, are key for connecting member states' armed forces to all core groups.

The EU and NATO would have to orchestrate and monitor the overarching consistency of the network in terms of fulfilling all collective requirements and solving European capability shortfalls. Partly, the work of both organisations will not overlap as NATO's Article 5 requirements are non-existent in the EU.<sup>2</sup> Equally, the EU's own needs for civil-military interaction have no counterpart in the Alliance. The harmonisation of EU and NATO activities in capability development should logically focus on the areas of overlap – the medium to high-end spectrum capabilities.

**CONCLUSION**

It is time to stop pursuing the impossible – acting at 28 while interests, intent and capabilities are different. Enough time, energy and effort have been wasted. Continuing existing methods – also in a new jacket – will only result in a repetition of the past experience. Reality rather than theory has to be reflected in military capability improvement: the continuing diversity of defence interests and armed forces profiles across Europe.

In order to make real progress, capability development should build on the strengths of the European countries, not on the principle of all EU or NATO member states moving forward together. The latter means that the current slow speed will continue to dominate as it reflects the lowest common denominator. The solution for speeding up lies in a system that builds on core groups of countries with comparable intent, willingness and capabilities. They should be developed under the overarching umbrellas – both of the EU and NATO – in order to ensure that all core groups are together in a network fulfilling all requirements. By providing support to each other the network of core groups would ensure European cohesion and solidarity in developing and deploying military capabilities. Most importantly, Europe can finally turn words into deeds with regard to taking more responsibility for its own security.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Biscop, S. (2017) Oratio pro PESCO, Egmont Paper 91.

<sup>2</sup>Article 42-7 of the EU Treaty foresees mutual assistance for a member state under attack. However, in terms of territorial defence 22 EU countries, also members of the Alliance, rely on NATO.