



## The EU Global Strategy and Defence: The Challenge of Thinking Strategically about Means

*Sven Biscop & Jo Coelmont*

Since strategy is about connecting ends, ways and means, the means constrain the ends. It would be unrealistic to set objectives for which the means are unavailable or cannot be acquired in time. But it would be equally unrealistic to underestimate the available means. To wilfully ignore one's potential is to handicap one's strategy from the outset.

Yet this is exactly what is threatening to happen in the debate about the defence implications of the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy (EUGS). The High Representative, Federica Mogherini, aims to detail these in an Implementation Plan to be submitted to Member States by the end of November 2016.

### **DON'T MENTION THE BATTLEGROUPS**

Once again, the Battlegroups, the EU scheme to have two battalion-size forces on stand-by, are absorbing a lot of attention. That is comfortable for everybody, for as the Battlegroups have been discussed time and again, the arguments are well rehearsed and no profound reflection is required. This debate by now can be run on autopilot. The problem is that even if the absence of any automatic availability of the Battlegroups could be solved (and it cannot, unless troops were hired on the

EU payroll and put under EU command), two Battlegroups could implement but the slightest part of the extensive tasks that the EUGS sets to the military.

In what seems at first sight to be a positive development though, the brigade has made its entry into the EU debate. Proposals are on the table to increase the EU's military level of ambition from the ability to deploy two Battlegroups to one brigade. Four battalions instead of two, in other words: a doubling, yes, but still woefully inadequate to implement the EUGS.

In actual fact, a brigade does not constitute an increased level of ambition at all. For the point of comparison, the current level of ambition, is not the two Battlegroups. It is the Headline Goal that the EU set in 1999: the ability to deploy, and to sustain for at least one year, up to an army corps (i.e. 60,000 troops) and concomitant air and naval forces. The corps level is the indeed the only appropriate scale when discussing the implementation of the ambitious EUGS.

Many are in the habit of ridiculing what they consider an unachievable level of ambition. But they ignore the fact that for more than a decade now, EU Member States have continuously fielded troop numbers, for

CSDP, NATO, UN and coalition operations, which when taken together easily add up to the Headline Goal and more. Furthermore, even a quick look at all ongoing operations in which forces from EU Member States are engaged and at the theatres in which the need for additional deployments is very likely, immediately reveals that the equivalent of – at least – a corps is definitely required if we want to deal with all of today’s challenges.

### **DON’T PREPARE FOR THE PAST WAR**

To this day, however, EU Member States cannot deploy such numbers alone for any longer period of time. They can only do so if the US provides the bulk of the strategic enablers. And in practice they count on the availability of US forces and US political will to act as a strategic reserve as well. For contrary to good military practice, EU Member States have insufficient capabilities to simultaneously deploy troops up to the equivalent of a corps and have as many again in reserve in case an operation goes awry. In the military field therefore, EU Member States do not possess strategic autonomy.

Yet that is the objective that the EUGS has set: not only does the Strategy increase the tasks for the military, it also commits Member States to undertake these tasks alone if and when necessary. The need for strategic autonomy is obvious: regardless of who wins the presidential elections in the US, if one candidate considers statements about dissolving NATO to be a vote-winner, it means that for more than just a marginal segment of US opinion commitment to European security is less evident than it once was. If Europeans do not demonstrate the will and ability to do more, they are at great risk of losing their allies across the Atlantic.

But, the argument will be raised, once Brexit happens and the British contribution is deducted from the EU force catalogue, the

corps level will definitely be out of sight, let alone strategic autonomy. For sure, British capabilities cannot be easily compensated for by the remaining Member States’ existing capabilities. For one, however, British forces will not disappear, and Britain will still be in Europe, so when a crisis threatens the security of Europe, it threatens the security of the UK as well. If military action is called for, Britain is more likely to participate than not, even though after Brexit it will most probably no longer be formally engaged in the Headline Goal process.

Furthermore, together the EU27 still spend more than €175 billion per year on defence, for a total of more than 1.35 million troops. Even without the UK therefore, achieving the current corps-level Headline Goal – which, lest we forget, in 1999 was set for a Union of just fifteen – should be eminently feasible. As should be the new objective of achieving strategic autonomy at this level, over time.

Over time, for it would be a major mistake indeed to limit the EU level of ambition to existing capabilities today. An ambition is a project to be realised in the future. It is to guide the acquisition of new capabilities, in the long term. Now is the time to decide which capabilities Europe needs in twenty years’ time and beyond. That similarly implies looking at the potential threats and challenges in 2035 and beyond as well, and not just at today’s security environment.

### **CONCLUSION: AIM HIGH**

The Implementation Plan stands or falls with defining the level of ambition: which military means are the EU Member States willing to devote to the implementation of the EUGS? Regardless of whether in an actual future contingency EU Member States choose to deploy through CSDP, NATO the UN or an ad hoc coalition, autonomously or with the US: if capability development is not set on track now, there will be no European contribution in

any scenario. The first step is to think through the implications of the three military tasks in the EUGS – protecting Europe, building capacity in our partners, and responding to crisis – and to indicate the type and the scale of forces that they might require, now and in the future.

Protecting Europe, for example, can imply operations on Europe's borders, but as well a naval task force or even a carrier group to safeguard the sea lines of communication. Capacity-building can entail long-term efforts in several neighbouring countries, but also military cooperation activities with partners such as ASEAN, especially in the maritime area. Responding to (or preventing) crisis may require more than one long-term stabilization operation, of at least brigade-size, in the neighbourhood, without forgetting that the EUGS also mentions contributing to worldwide UN peacekeeping. But it can also mean a high-intensity crisis management operation of several brigades and/or squadrons in the neighbourhood. These scenarios may occur simultaneously, so a high degree of concurrency is inevitable.

On this basis, the Implementation Plan cannot but conclude that the current Headline Goal, i.e. the corps level and equivalent air and naval forces, is the point of departure. Besides, how would Member States explain to their publics that 17 years after setting the corps-level Headline Goal, and in response to an ambitious EUGS, their proposal would be to lower the military level of ambition? Not the Battlegroups therefore, not a brigade, not even a division – but the corps.

This in turn allows to quantify the requirement for strategic enablers, which the EUGS itself strongly emphasizes, in line with the objective of strategic autonomy. That objective also implies that EU Member States gradually provide their own strategic reserves. In combination with a gradual increase in the degree of concurrency that EU Member States have to be able to deal with, this can allow the Implementation Plan to give an indication of how the Headline Goal can develop over time.

Then comes the implementation of the Implementation Plan: Commission-funded defence research into future platforms, actual EDA-run projects to develop enablers, and ever closer cooperation between Member States' forces, which in time could be solidified by activating a proper mechanism of Permanent Structured Cooperation.

First things first though: an unequivocal translation of the political level of ambition expressed in the EUGS into a realistic but real military level of ambition.

*Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College, is the Director of the Europe in the World Programme at Egmont and a Professor at Ghent University. Brigadier-General (Ret.) Jo Coelmont, former Belgian Military Representative to the EU Military Committee, is a Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont.*

*This article also appears in IMPETUS, the magazine of the EU Military Staff. Written at the invitation of the EUMS, it engages the authors only.*