



The Strategic Compass: Entering the Fray

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The Strategic Compass for the EU's security and defence policy, to be adopted in 2022, must generate immediate action. The best way of ensuring that is to prepare new capability initiatives and, potentially, new operational engagements now, so that they can be launched simultaneously with the Strategic Compass. In that light, "the development of an initial-entry force as a pool of Member State forces that train and exercise together and are made available to the EU" (as summarised in an EEAS working paper), is one of the most promising ideas on the table. How to make it work?

The best way not to make an initial-entry force work, is to build it on the basis of the existing EU Battlegroup scheme. A battlegroup is what is left of a division that has twice been run over by the Red Army: thus General von Mellenthin's definition in his World War Two memoir.¹ A battlegroup, in other words, is an ad hoc force, thrown together from what forces are left after defeat or, in a positive scenario, purposely put together for a specific operation.

The force that executed EU Operation Artemis in the Congo in 2003 was fit for purpose, but turning its scale (a reinforced battalion) and composition into a fixed format for all EU Battlegroups did not make operational sense. A Battlegroup is not always the right battlegroup: different contingencies demand different force packages, of different sizes, but those cannot be generated from a pool of a mere two "battalions-plus" on standby. Linking the idea of an initial-entry force to the Battlegroups, locks the EU into thinking small. For most Member States, the Battlegroup scheme entails no more than contributing a few companies, or even just a single company, every couple of years. If they are serious about the initial-entry force, they will have to think a lot bigger than that.

BRIGADES AS BUILDINGS-BLOCKS

In a non-paper earlier this year, 14 Member States (including France, Germany, Italy, and Spain) did see things bigger. They advocated a 5000-strong "first entry force", "articulated around a brigade-size land component and a maritime component", to "be enhanced with an air component and all necessary enablers" at a later stage. For ground operations, the ability to put together a brigade-size force and deploy it at short notice would indeed provide the EU with a much broader range of options. The big risk, however, is that Member States, as usual, will interpret even this proposal in a minimalist way: as a call

for the EU27 collectively to create a single multinational brigade for EU operations. That, frankly, would be useless.

To start with, most EU Member States have a least one brigade in their armies (my own country, Belgium, included) – they do not need the EU to create one. Second, a single brigade can obviously deal with a single crisis, but it is not unduly pessimistic to assume that the EU will face simultaneous contingencies in its periphery. Third, a single brigade will never be fit to be deployed in all theatres, against all potential adversaries – that requires a variety of brigades, of different composition. Finally, more than an initial-entry force is needed, for the simple reason that in many scenarios in the European periphery any follow-on forces will also have to be provided by EU Member States, as US attention has shifted to Asia. As one brigade can only be deployed for 4 months at a time, sustaining a year-round deployment requires at least three.

What is necessary, therefore, is a pool of brigades, a modular force package from which a force can be tailored for any specific operation, from training and mentoring to combat. In other words, a multinational corps, with national brigades as building-blocks.² The difference with the Battlegroup scheme, apart from the scale, is double. On the one hand, this need not be a stand-by force that, during a stand-by phase, is available exclusively to the EU – there simply are not enough deployable forces in Europe to allow for this. Overall readiness of the constituent brigades must be such, however, that rapid deployment is possible. On the other hand, national brigades ought to be anchored permanently in the multinational corps, and participate in annual multinational manoeuvres. A Battlegroup, in contrast, is simply dissolved after its stand-by phase.

The advantage of a permanent multinational corps are threefold. First, many national brigades are incomplete: they lack specific combat support and combat service support capabilities, which render them unemployable in many scenarios (think of a brigade without air defence, for example). A combination of pooling and specialisation at

corps level can remedy this. Second, arms and equipment as well as doctrine can gradually be harmonised between brigades, increasing interoperability and rendering pooling and specialisation easier. Third, the corps can serve as the benchmark to quantify the need for strategic enablers. The states that contribute to the corps should acquire the necessary strategic enablers to deploy its brigades without having recourse to the assets of others.

The CROC and the Headline Goal, and the 28th ~~army~~ brigade

The template for such a scheme already exists, as a PESCO project: the EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC). More Member States could join; for the moment Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain have committed. More importantly, Member States must develop the CROC into an actual force, with identified brigades assigned to it, rather than regarding it merely as a tool for drawing up scenarios and catalogues of theoretically available forces.

Conceived as a multinational corps composed of pre-identified national brigades, the CROC would in effect be a new and realistic way of achieving the EU's Headline Goal: a pool of 50 to 60,000 troops for expeditionary operations. Although overshadowed by the Battlegroups, the 1999 Headline Goal remains the official level of ambition. It also is the required level of ambition: in a strategic environment that sees near permanent instability in the periphery of Europe, while the US is increasingly focusing on Asia, Europeans will need the forces to underpin their diplomacy and to undertake crisis management and stabilisation outside Europe's borders in any non-Article 5 scenario. An expeditionary corps, available regardless of the forces assigned to deterrence and collective defence, is a minimum.

In fact, this corps could double as one of the three corps that NATO defence planning envisages. So the EU's CROC would be a way (perhaps the only way) of reaching NATO targets, rather than an obstacle as NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg pretends.

The CROC could also be the framework to operationalise the “28th army” that the German social-democratic party proposed in 2020.³ What the SPD put forward, in fact, is not an army, but a brigade: a multinational unit recruiting from all EU Member States (similar to the French *Légion Étrangère*). For the reasons explained above, there would be little point in creating a single, free-standing brigade. As one brigade within a corps, however, what one might call “1st European Brigade” could be a worthwhile military and political experiment, and the potential nucleus of more truly European units.

If a set of Member States now operationalises the CROC along these lines, then the time has perhaps come to close down the Battlegroups. The EU has never deployed a Battlegroup, and likely never will. Nevertheless, the scheme has been very useful in pushing capability development and multinational cooperation. Today, however, it has become an obstacle rather than a stimulus to further defence integration. Let us focus efforts on the CROC.

COMMAND & CONTROL, PLANNING, AND STRATEGY

For the CROC to be effective requires standing arrangements for command & control. As regards the Operational Headquarters, strengthening the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) within the EU’s own structures is already under discussion in the context of the Strategic Compass. In order to align the level of ambition with the proposed initial entry force, the MPCC ought to be able to conduct at least one, but ideally two, brigade-size operations simultaneously. Could Eurocorps be the standing Force Headquarters of the CROC and be developed into an “EU Land Headquarters”? For Eurocorps, this would be a return to the roots, when the participating states had assigned divisions and brigades to it, unlike today, when only the corps headquarters is permanent.

A necessary complement, also already under discussion, is advanced planning. If Member States operationalise the CROC, the EU can further enhance its overall

reactiveness by giving the EU Military Staff or the MPCC a standing mandate to undertake contingency planning, at its own initiative. Not just for fictional countries and generic scenarios, though, but for real military options in actual places where a crisis is developing that threatens EU interests.

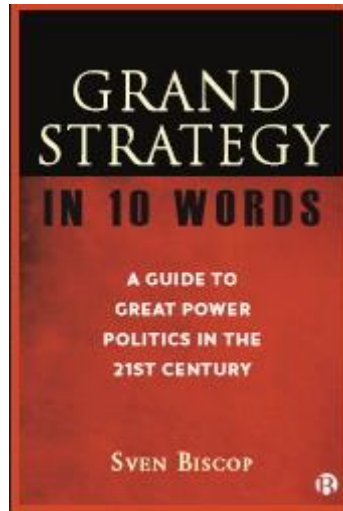
Finally, as the EEAS has rightly pointed out, the EU needs a strategic, interest-based narrative that clearly sets out when and where Europe must engage in military operations outside its borders in the first place. The EU and its Member States must above all be honest with themselves and stop pretending that the point of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is to protect people in other countries. That can be a positive side effect of an intervention – but military action should only be considered when the European interest is directly at stake.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the EU has been able to count on an effective rapid reaction capacity. It is called France. That is not a tenable situation, neither for France nor for the EU. Something must obviously be done. Not by warming up the debate about the Battlegroups once again. If Member States try to base it on the Battlegroups, the initial entry force will be dead on arrival.

Going far beyond the debate on an initial-entry force, EU High Representative Josep Borrell recently emphasised the need for a 50,000-strong EU reaction corps.⁴ In other words, the original Headline Goal. The Strategic Compass provides the opportunity to – finally – reach this goal. To grasp it, Member States must think big, and combine existing objectives, ideas, and half-started projects (the Headline Goal, the initial entry force, the CROC) into a single, concrete plan of *action*.

Sven Biscop painted his last tin soldiers in 1998 and published his first journal article on European defence in 1999. Twenty-two years later, in 2021 (the bicentenary of Napoleon’s death), Europe actually has fewer capabilities than when it started out.



Grand Strategy in 10 Words - A Guide to Great Power Politics in the 21st Century (Bristol University Press, 2021).

ENDNOTES

¹ Friedrich von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles. A Study of the Employment of Armour in the Second World War*. London, Cassel, 1955.

² Sven Biscop, [Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence](#). In: *Survival*, Vol. 62, 2020, No. 5, pp. 105-118.

³ SPB Bundestagsfraktion, [Diskussionspapier 28. Armee](#). Berlin, 6 October 2020.

⁴ [Afghan Tragedy Shows EU Needs Geopolitical Muscle: Borrell](#). France24, 22 August 2021. At an informal meeting of Defence Ministers on 2 September 2021, however, the High Representative emphasised the 5000-strong initial-entry force instead. See: [Informal meeting of Defence Ministers: Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the Press Conference](#).



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