

EGMONT POLICY BRIEF 285

– SEPTEMBER 2022 –

The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?

Sven Biscop

At the June 2022 Madrid Summit, NATO leaders gave the green light to transition to a [New Force Model \(NFM\)](#) in the course of 2023. The avowed aim is to create a pool of 300,000 troops in a high state of readiness (as opposed to some 40,000 today), and to pre-assign these to specific defence plans. This is very ambitious (as well it should be), all the more so because these will mostly be European troops. Is NATO building a European army?

The rationale behind the NFM is that to be able to respond to all eventualities, the NATO military commander, SACEUR, requires a better view of the available forces, and their state of readiness, beyond the 40,000 currently on rotation at any one time in the NATO Response Force (NRF). Hence the NFM provides for the organisation of forces in three tiers: 100,000 troops in tier 1 should be available within 10 days; 200,000 more in tier 2 within 10 to 30 days. Adding to the existing scheme of pre-deployed battlegroups in the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, some additional tier 1 and 2 forces will be pre-deployed on NATO's eastern flank, on a rotational basis, but probably not substantially so. More importantly, NATO aims for all tier 1 and 2 troops to be assigned to specific geographic defence plans for which they can then train. Tier 3, finally, provides for at least 500,000 troops more within one to six months.

EUROPEANISING DETERRENCE AND DEFENCE

The rationale goes further, however. To prevent any incursion from establishing a foothold on the territory of a NATO ally which would be difficult to reduce, thus

creating a *fait accompli*, the response must be immediate and in force. In other words, a counter-attack cannot wait for reinforcements to arrive from across the Atlantic, but must be undertaken with forces present in Europe. That, in turn, means: with mostly European forces. If there are signs of an aggressive military build-up, North American Allies could of course pre-deploy forces preventively. But even since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although the US has brought its forward [presence](#) in Europe to 100,000 troops, the bulk of these are headquarters and depots, not combat forces. The core of the NFM will be 300,000 European high-readiness troops, therefore.

The first line of *conventional* deterrence and defence will thus increasingly be European. This *de facto* Europeanisation of the European theatre is in line with the evolution of the global strategic environment, and of US grand strategy. Concretely, if war were to break out in Europe and Asia simultaneously, the US would likely prioritise the latter (contrary to World War Two, when the strategy was "Germany first"). The European allies would thus have to hold the line in Europe; reinforcements from North America would arrive later and in smaller numbers than envisaged during the Cold War. That is the real (though unspoken) strategic significance of the rise of China: not that it poses a military threat to Europe (it does not), but that the US identifies it as the main military threat, and allocates resources accordingly.

The European allies ought not to deplore this evolution, but must embrace it, and assume the enhanced responsibility that comes with it. In the end, it will turn NATO into a "normal" alliance. Over the years, many Europeans have come to misunderstand what an alliance means: as if in

every scenario their main ally, the US, takes the lead, sets the strategy, and provides the tip of the spear. That is a protectorate, not an alliance. One can hardly blame the US for at times behaving high-handedly towards those who take its protection for granted. In a normal alliance, one organises to defend oneself, and calls upon one's allies when necessary – not by default.

MULTINATIONAL UNITS FOR COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Less conspicuous in NATO's communication about the NFM so far, though potentially very important, is that it encourages Allies to cooperate and organise the tier 1 and 2 forces in large *multinational* formations. In this regard the EU experience teaches an important lesson: temporary multinational formations, such as the EU Battlegroups, do not work. Working up a multinational unit during several months; putting it on stand-by and/or pre-deploying it for a fixed term; and then dissolving it: even if the will to deploy were there, this means that the accumulation of experience is almost zero. Also, there are no opportunities to create synergies and effects of scale between the constituent national units.

Permanent multinational formations are required, with [national brigades as building-blocks](#), which systematically train and exercise together. The advantages are numerous. Doctrine and equipment can gradually be harmonised between the national brigades. At the level of the larger formation (such as a division or a corps), a combination of a division of labour and pooling of assets can ensure the availability of the full complement of combat support and combat service support, which not each individual brigade (certainly not those of smaller Allies) can still put into the field. From such integrated formations, tailored force packages can be generated for rotational deployments or for actual operations.

Such a model actually is on the EU's drawing board: the Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC), one of the projects under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). But even as this remains a mostly conceptual exercise, it has been watered down already. Several multinational initiatives do exist, with different degrees of integration: the three

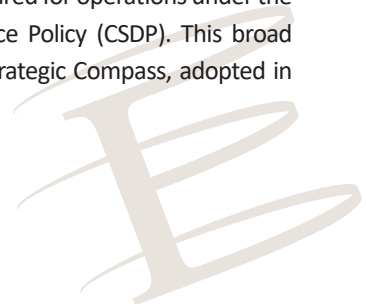
groups led by Germany, Italy, and the UK in the context of NATO's [Framework Nation Concept](#); the Eurocorps; and bilateral cooperation such as the German-Netherlands Corps and the Franco-Belgian Motorised Capacity. Rarely are they used, however, to generate deployments, although, arguably, that is exactly what it would take to instil a real sense of purpose into these schemes.

The fastest way to an effective NFM would be to deepen some of these existing frameworks, turning them into standing formations with units permanently assigned to them, and linking each to one of the regional defence plans. In a later stage, new formations can be created. Nor should this be limited to land forces: multinational air wings, with national squadrons as building-blocks, are an indispensable complement. Naturally, the larger European Allies could continue to field purely national formations as well.

Eventually every sector of the eastern flank could be covered by a large European (national or multinational) formation, in tiers 1 and 2, from which rotational pre-deployments would be generated, in coordination with the rotational presence of non-European Allies. This would not be a single European army, of course, but it would begin to constitute what in principle is the aim of PESCO (though in reality it is not moving in this direction): a comprehensive, full-spectrum force *package*. That would be a tangible European pillar within NATO, on which conventional deterrence and defence in the European theatre would come to rest, together with the Alliance's military command structure.

THE EU CONTRIBUTION TO THE EUROPEAN PILLAR

Such a European pillar within NATO would greatly benefit from an effective EU contribution, notably through its European Defence Fund (EDF). As a form of common funding, the EDF is the best way to ensure that the EU Member States invest in the collective interest, by concentrating funds on the priority capability gaps for the full range of tasks, including collective defence – the EDF is in no way limited to the capabilities required for operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This broad focus is evident in the EU's Strategic Compass, adopted in



March 2022, which listed these priorities once again. They include both enablers, in particular in the space and cyber domains, and the next generation European platforms, such as main battle tanks and fighter aircraft – obviously capabilities for collective defence. The EU has drawn up many such lists over the years (as has NATO). The time has come for Member States to commit: who will invest which sums in which projects, and how many of the finished product will they buy?

The Commission has also proposed a new instrument for joint procurement: the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), to be adopted by the end of 2022. In the short term, Member States have to urgently replenish stocks of all kinds, but they are also strengthening capabilities such as missile defence and UAVs by acquiring systems off the shelf. In the long term, EDIRPA can be used to procure together what has been developed together through the EDF.

The EDF and EDIRPA are indispensable, for they alone can ensure that additional defence budgets are spent in the most cost-effective way, and push for the harmonisation of future equipment without which no really coherent force package is possible. Moreover, they will guarantee that new funds and projects will strengthen the European technological and industrial base, within the framework of the EU's overall economic strategy, which is not an objective as such of NATO or its new initiative, the Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic (DIANA). Finally, only collectively, through the EDF, can the Europeans field their own enablers, without which the European pillar would not be complete. For as deterrence and defence are being Europeanised, the European role cannot be that of a mere troop provider whose forces can only be put to use when the US deploys its enablers.

The EU's role goes beyond the financial and industrial dimensions, though. It should encourage Member States that acquire the same equipment, be it in the short term and off the shelf or when the long-term investment projects bear fruit, to not simply equip their national forces with it, but to build multinational formations. Especially in areas that many Member States have only just entered or

are about to, it would be absolutely silly to once again set up a plethora of separate national capabilities. For after a few years, inevitably one would come to the realisation that they are too small to be significant; yet by then the obstacles to cooperation will already have become too big to be easily overcome. Instead, Member States ought to configure capabilities as national building-blocks of a multinational formation from the start. A European drone command, missile command, cyber command etc. would greatly strengthen the European pillar (and could be as many PESCO projects; on cyber, one project goes in this direction already).

EUROPEAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The EU's Strategic Compass also announced the creation of a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), which "will consist of substantially modified EU Battlegroups and of pre-identified Member States' military forces and capabilities". It really ought to be clear by now that the Battlegroups have not worked and will never work. Given that the RDC is to intervene at brigade level (5,000 troops), what is needed, therefore, is for a set of EU Member States to each identify a national brigade capable of expeditionary operations, and to permanently assign them to a headquarters – the existing Eurocorps HQ would be eminently suited. As per the model for multinational formations described above, these brigades should do systematic manoeuvres together, as a corps. Thus a pool of interoperable, high-readiness expeditionary brigades will emerge, from which a tailored force can be generated for a specific operation. The more States commit a brigade, the more likely a coalition of the willing will be ready to act in a given crisis. Air and naval elements ought to be included as well.

The NFM, however, also provides for a multinational Allied Reaction Force (ARF), a lighter (i.e. expeditionary) successor to the NRF, as part of Tier 1. There is obviously no point in creating two (mostly) European rapid reaction formations, nor would it be possible, for there are not enough high-readiness expeditionary forces to go around. It is quite possible that the problem of duplication will not pose itself, for the simple (and sad) reason that EU Member States will not take the RDC

seriously and satisfy themselves with a rebranding of the Battlegroups – which would be perfectly useless.

Even then, however, the ARF would remain problematic, especially if (as seems to be the intention) is it assigned exclusively to SACEUR. For the reality is that over the last two decades nearly every crisis management operation that entailed combat has been conducted outside the EU and NATO frameworks, by ad hoc coalitions. At the same time, even an ad hoc coalition intervening in Europe's neighbourhood de facto always interacts with EU strategy and its political and economic presence in the countries concerned. Meanwhile, the US appears less and less willing to play a leading role on Europe's southern flank.

In this strategic context, it is pointless to "lock up" the bulk of European expeditionary forces in a NATO-only scheme. Instead, the RDC and ARF could be regarded as a single force – a European Reaction Force (ERF), perhaps – that is available to both NATO and the EU, would be certified by both, and exercise command and control arrangements with both. Crucially, a coalition of the willing from among the contributing States could also deploy a force generated from the "ERF" outside the formal EU and NATO framework. And let us just forget about the Battlegroups.

DEFENCE PLANNING AND COMMAND

In terms of defence planning, experience has shown that when the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and the EU's Headline Goal Process and Capability Development Plan (CDP) run in parallel, only one (the former) has actual impact on national defence planning. The NDPP has defects, however, because until now it does not really take into account the need for the European Allies to pool their efforts and create multinational capabilities in many areas, as individually they no longer have the scale to generate significant additional capabilities. Nor does the NDPP integrate the requirements, notably in terms of enablers, of European-only crisis management operations on the southern flank.

Only the EU can set the level of ambition for autonomous

crisis management operations, because it can only be derived from overall EU foreign policy. But ideally, it would be incorporated into the NDPP instead of being fed into a separate process, so that NATO and the EU effectively co-decide on a balanced mix of forces for the European Allies that are Members of the EU. Similarly, the opportunities for cooperation identified through the CDP have to be pushed by the NDPP as well, which must abandon its focus on national capabilities in favour of an approach favouring multinational cooperation.

In terms of command, if under the NFM the bulk of the forces in tiers 1 and 2 will be European, the question could eventually be asked whether it still makes sense that SACEUR always is an American officer. How can NATO seriously consider Europeanising conventional deterrence and defence in the European theatre if the Europeans don't trust each other, and don't trust their own deterrent value unless an American is in charge? The European armed forces are not colonial troops, that are effective only when led by officers from and provided with enablers by the "metropolis". Unless Europeans get rid of this *mindset*, their deterrence and defence will never be credible in the eyes of the adversary. Appointing a European SACEUR could be exactly the shock that is needed to finally make European leaders understand that the shift in US grand strategy is for real, and that they had better adapt.

BUT WHO SETS THE STRATEGY?

Technically, the military solutions outlined above are all eminently feasible, though some are politically controversial. Where States view the least clear is on the question of who makes the strategy that guides the military instrument.

For sure, the US sets strategy, as do the individual European States *and* the EU. Indeed, on many issues of grand strategy, the EU Member States can only have an impact collectively, as a Union. Even the biggest Member States, such as France and Germany, may have a strategy on Ukraine, for example, but lack the political, economic, and military weight to carry it out by themselves, not to mention the fact that in many relevant areas competences are shared with the EU. The reality is, therefore, that on

this side of the Atlantic only the EU can now do grand strategy (which is not saying, obviously, that it always does so successfully).

Ukraine illustrates this well. The initial Russian invasion, in 2014, was partly triggered by the EU's offer of a far-reaching trade agreement. The EU then made the core strategic decision: to stand by Ukraine (rather than accepting Russia's claim to a sphere of influence, as the West had done with regard to Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968). In concrete terms, this meant linking up Ukraine with the single market. From that decision, all the rest followed: EU sanctions against Russia; strengthening deterrence and defence through NATO; and diplomatic initiatives by various States. No individual EU Member State, and certainly not NATO, could have taken that decision. Nor could the US have decided this for Europe; indeed, a US offer of support to Ukraine would have been near meaningless without the simultaneous promise of association with the EU.

And yet, many leaders on both sides of the Atlantic and in the NATO apparatus continue to behave as if things work the other way around, as if the EU operates within a framework predefined at NATO. Moreover, many European States behave totally schizophrenically: their permanent representative to the EU says one thing and that to NATO another. The result is a blurred line of command. Decisions are taken by NATO, by the EU, by the US (often after EU-US consultation), and by other individual States (notably the UK). But there is no one clear locus where the overall strategy is set. And so there isn't one: the transatlantic community lacks a comprehensive articulation of its "war aims" towards Ukraine and Russia, of the extent to which it is willing to use which instruments, and of the conditions that have to be fulfilled before it can consider lifting sanctions against Moscow. That makes it difficult both to manage Ukrainian expectations and to send unequivocal messages to Russia.

At the very least, more systematic EU-US consultation on issues of grand strategy is needed, including prior to every NATO Summit; non-EU European Allies could be associated as required. Logic also dictates that the EU as such have a

permanent representative in the North Atlantic Council, to speak for its Member States on issues that fall within the EU's remit. None of this is a precondition for improving military deterrence and defence today. However, the authority and the instruments to deter all non-military ("hybrid") threats mostly lie with the EU and its Member States. So does the core of economic and monetary policy that, as the ongoing war demonstrates, must underpin military power. Ultimately, therefore, the way the Atlantic community makes strategy will have to adapt.

CONCLUSION

It would be more than a bit ironic if the Europeans did in NATO what they always pretended they would in the EU: to forge their separate national armed forces into a single comprehensive force package. The label does not matter, though, as long as Europeans do it this time. The highly ambitious NFM is necessary. But it will not work unless Europeans think in terms of a force package. A hotchpotch of incomplete national forces will never be able to ensure effective deterrence and defence, no matter how much extra defence spending is mobilised.

What would definitely be counterproductive is to once again see the NFM as competing with the EU's defence initiatives. Instead, they must be fully aligned with each other. NATO must realise that it takes EU instruments to get the most out of the European defence effort. And the EU must realise that it takes NATO for its instruments to have maximum effect.

The Europeanisation of conventional deterrence and defence is a logical step in the evolving strategic context. If the US is serious about it, it will have to allow the Europeans some leeway. But as always, the most important question is: are the Europeans serious?

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop (Egmont Institute & Ghent University) warmly thanks his academic colleagues and the various military, diplomatic and other official interlocutors, working at NATO and elsewhere, who informed this policy brief. In particular those who will not like the title – though they might have seen it coming.



The opinions expressed in this Publication are those of the author(s) alone, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egmont Institute. Founded in 1947, EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations is an independent and non-profit Brussels-based think tank dedicated to interdisciplinary research.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the permission of the publishers.

www.egmontinstitute.be

© Egmont Institute, September 2022

© Author(s), September 2022