

PESCO: The Last Chance

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To the outside observer, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) equals the long list of projects rather than the 20 binding commitments that were hailed as a game-changer when PESCO was launched in 2017. At first sight, these 68 projects do not seem to work towards a single objective. Is the end of PESCO clear even to the initiated? It is not, in fact, and that remains the greatest obstacle to success. A (second) strategic review of PESCO is underway, but putting PESCO on the right track requires a fundamental overhaul.

THE END?

The 2017 Council Decision establishing PESCO stated that “A long term vision of PESCO could be to arrive at a coherent full spectrum force package – in complementarity with NATO, which will continue to be the cornerstone of collective defence for its members”. “Could”, not “should”, so this was an option rather than a decision. Nevertheless, the binding criteria do point to the establishment of a *force package*. Member States committed to bring their defence apparatus into line with each other, notably by harmonising the identification of military needs, addressing the commonly prioritised shortfalls, and making available strategically deployable formations.

When PESCO was launched, Member States understandably relabelled several existing or planned initiatives as PESCO projects, to demonstrate progress. But this created a path dependency that PESCO has not

been able to escape. Member States forgot about the commitments and continued to focus exclusively on a plethora of projects, often without a link to the capability priorities of the Headline Goal (HG) or the Capability Development Plan (CDP). Many are not really projects, because they come without timeline or budget, or they are but exploratory studies, that might or might not lead to an actual project. Most concern equipment; very few concern capabilities, i.e. people, doctrine, and equipment. Designing, building, and procuring equipment: that is what the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the other Commission initiatives are for. The aim of PESCO ought to be to develop capabilities, i.e. national or multinational units that use that equipment. Ultimately, most current projects would also have happened had PESCO not existed. What is PESCO for, then?

PESCO is labour-intensive yet underused: many people spend many hours on just a fraction of what it was supposed to be. It is a catch-all yet a side-show: just about everything can become a PESCO project (because anything fits under the broad “priorities” of the CDP), but PESCO’s impact on national defence planning is negligible. It will not disappear, because it is in the Treaty, but it will become ever more irrelevant. Unless the strategic review really addresses strategy and re-emphasises the original ambitious objective.

AN UNPRECEDENTED STRATEGIC SITUATION

The starting point must be a shared understanding of the strategic environment and its concrete military implications. Has it really sunk in that the EU is facing an unprecedented situation?

For the first time ever, EU enlargement is being actively contested by a hostile power. One candidate country, Ukraine, is at war with Russia, and the EU and its Member States are massively supporting it as non-belligerents. But Georgia and Moldova, candidates too, are very vulnerable to Russian aggression as well. If necessary, the EU must do for them what it is doing for Ukraine. There is a direct link with collective defence: the EU and the Member States can confidently support candidate countries without undue fear of direct Russian retaliation because NATO provides deterrence and defence. However, the change in American grand strategy (since the Obama administration) has a significant impact on the Alliance: in case of simultaneous great power wars in Europe and Asia, the US will likely prioritise the latter. Therefore, within NATO, Europe is increasingly having to ensure its own conventional deterrence and defence, under the American nuclear umbrella.

Meanwhile, Europe's southern flank is as instable as ever, and Russia is acting as a spoiler and a multiplier of security threats. The EU is facing multiple crises in the Sahel, the Middle East, and the Red Sea. Additional crises could easily erupt in those three regions, in North Africa, the Gulf, and the Indian Ocean, but also in the Caucasus and the Black Sea (where the Eastern and Southern flanks directly interconnect). If and when European interests necessitate intervention, Europeans will have to act, for American intervention in Europe's periphery is increasingly unlikely. A credible expeditionary capacity will have a deterrent effect on Europe's neighbours and strengthen European diplomacy.

Finally, there is the threat of hybrid actions against the EU itself that stay below the threshold that would trigger Art. 5 / Art. 42.7. The EU lacks an integrated doctrine on how to respond to and, in particular, on how to deter such actions.

A NEW FORCE PACKAGE

The new strategic situation calls for a new European force posture. All the troops of all European Allies / EU Member States added together do not make for a complete set

of forces. In many essential areas they have little or no capability. Europe's forces are fully operational only if the US makes up the difference. In view of current American strategy, that poses an unacceptable strategic risk. The solution is, within NATO, to align the European contributions (including the UK) in such a way that collectively, they form a coherent force package that is fully employable without any US plug-in. The NATO New Force Model goes in this direction already, aiming at 300.000 European troops in a high state of readiness. The European Allies should take this one step further and commit to create their own strategic enablers for this force. They would thus have to agree on additional capability targets. Eventually, the 300.000 should need but a single American: SACEUR. The result would be a tangible European pillar in NATO, in military terms.

Europeans will have to rebuild the logistical depth and military mobility needed to sustain this force package by themselves. As the Russo-Ukrainian War proves, great additional depth is required to support candidate countries that are being threatened or aggressed. That support will likely be channelled through the EU rather than NATO.

In addition, Europeans must take their expeditionary needs seriously. The EU's planned Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of up to 5000 troops is clearly insufficient to address multiple crises. Europeans need a much larger pool of robust expeditionary forces (army, navy, and air force), also with their own enablers, to deal themselves with all scenarios in their broad neighbourhood. This has been clear since the very beginning of the ESDP/CSDP, hence the 1999 HG of an army corps plus concomitant naval and air assets. But from 2004, the focus on two battalion-strength battlegroups, meant as a rapid response element within the HG, began in the minds of Member States to replace the HG. The RDC is an interesting modular concept, but it is a paper concept, for the force that these modules would enable still is a mere battlegroup. One of the conceptually most promising PESCO projects, the [Crisis Response Operation Core \(CROC\)](#), went in the same direction, but it is expected to reach its objectives and the Project Completion Year (PCY) soon, even though it has

not generated an actual capability. Just like in PESCO, a path dependency has emerged that keeps the EU thinking small.

A credible European expeditionary force requires nations to declare entire brigades (and air squadrons, and ships) and forge these into a force package (within the overall European force package) through systematic multinational manoeuvres. No standby scheme is necessary, but, again, European enablers. From such a force package, a tailor-made force can be generated for specific operations. The EU could rethink the RDC along these lines, but NATO also envisages an expeditionary Allied Response Force. The important thing is that the European nations that are able and willing organise themselves, so that in a crisis they can flexibly deploy under any flag without needing non-European assets.

As to deterring and defending against hybrid actions: as long as the threshold of collective defence is not crossed, the first responder will be the EU, because primarily civilian instruments will be used. Nevertheless, the military implications must be ascertained, such as cyber capabilities, and integrated into the overall capability targets. But this urgently requires a comprehensive EU doctrine.

The resulting European force package will be neither EU-owned nor NATO-owned; it will consist of national capabilities. But nations can choose to cooperate to build the package, and to use EU instruments to that end. This is where PESCO comes in.

A NEW BEGINNING?

PESCO can be the central hub where the EU Member States that want to cooperate to achieve capability targets translate these into concrete initiatives, and steer all defence cooperation within the EU-framework, under the CSDP as well as the Commission.

These targets include those apportioned to each NATO Ally through the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP). And in particular the additional targets that the European

NATO Allies collectively set themselves in order to build a coherent force package within NATO; the targets implied by the need to militarily support EU candidate countries; and by the need for an autonomous European expeditionary capacity. The role of the CDP would be to specify the latter three, complementing the NDPP without duplicating it. Together, these targets constitute the framework for PESCO: nothing that falls outside it, should be allowed to carry the PESCO label.

Within this framework of targets, Member States can then choose to collectively: initiate research to develop new technologies; design and build new equipment; procure new equipment. And they can opt to form multinational capabilities, by permanently anchoring national units (brigades, squadrons, ships) into multinational formations (divisions, wings, fleets), or by operating as a single unit a capability made up of nationally-owned platforms (drones, air transport, air defence, cyber, space, etc.).

There would no longer be any distinction between PESCO projects, EDF projects, and double-labelled projects. Instead, all of the collective initiatives that are relevant to the framework of targets would receive the PESCO label. Some would be implemented through the EDF and other Commission instruments or through the EDA (e.g. CAT B projects); others by clusters of Member States. There would be no need for any other EDF projects, outside PESCO. EU instruments and resources should be focused on the single goal of building a coherent European force package.

This implies, though, that in addition to the Member States, all relevant institutions be included in the PESCO Secretariat and obtain the right to propose projects: the EU Military Staff, the European Defence Agency, and the European External Action Service. The Commission must be associated as well. This to ensure that Member States are forced to at least discuss all necessary projects, even if in the end capitals still decide whether or not to join any initiative. For experience has shown that a fully bottom-up process, relying on Member State initiative only, does not spontaneously generate initiatives to address all priority shortfalls. Moreover, the advice of

the PESCO Secretariat on whether or not a Member State-proposed project fits into PESCO, should be binding. Member States could still undertake a rejected project, of course, but it could not benefit from EU funding nor could it use the PESCO label.

PESCO would greatly benefit from a permanent chair. A “Mr or Mrs PESCO”, a former minister, who drives the comprehensive effort to forge a coherent force package would have more impact than a “Defence Commissioner” dealing only with the defence industrial dimension.

CONCLUSION

“Give PESCO a chance” was the motto in 2017, in the face of scepticism towards the umpteenth EU defence initiative. That scepticism proved justified, alas. Now is the last chance for PESCO, therefore. If Member States do not manage to refocus PESCO on what they themselves consider to be the most relevant for their defence, it will be marginalised. Most relevant today obviously is not the CSDP, but deterrence and defence through NATO. If EU instruments can help nations achieve their NATO targets, why would one hesitate? Do it, and build on it to add the targets that would lead to a complete and coherent European force package. Twenty-five years after the start of the CSDP, it would be none too early.

Prof. Dr Sven Biscop was closely involved in the abortive initial attempt to activate PESCO in 2009-10, and afterwards despaired of it ever happening. His optimism when in 2017 it did, has been severely challenged since. None of this is preventing Beatriz Cózar Murillo from completing a doctoral dissertation on PESCO under his supervision together with Prof. Dr Guillem Colom Piella.





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