



SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

An EU Security Council and a European Commissioner for Security and Defence: The Final Pieces of the Union's Common Security *and* Defence Policy Puzzle?

Jo Coelmont

These last few years the EU has taken considerable steps to give more substance to its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Nearly all the pieces of the puzzle are on the table now. There is consensus on the urgency to improve Europe's security. But how to assemble the various pieces of the puzzle in a structured manner? In this regard, the start of a new Commission is an opportunity not to be missed.

The central piece of the puzzle is the Global Strategy (EUGS), which defines the EU's political level of ambition. The Union has the duty to protect its citizens, which requires it to be a global actor in security and defence. That in turn requires strategic autonomy, at least to conduct military crisis management operations. The EUGS remains silent about the corresponding military level of ambition, however, although it does contain a call to acquire "high-end military capabilities", and concludes that "We must now swiftly translate this into action".

THE MILITARY LEVEL OF AMBITION: LOOK TO THE FUTURE, NOT THE PAST

Three years after the publication of the EUGS, the definition of the military level of ambition has still not progressed beyond where the EU already was in 1999: the Helsinki Headline Goal (HLG) still guides, or rather limits, planning. The HLG is but a catalogue, the scope of which is the military capabilities which back then would have been required for operations in former Yugoslavia. That was a crisis in a limited theatre close to the Union, in which the adversaries had but limited capabilities. In 2010 this catalogue underwent some minimal revision. The HLG thus still limits the EU military level of ambition to one army corps plus equivalent air and naval units. Anybody who questions this invariably receives the reply that more is not politically feasible.

Imposing such a straightjacket on the military planners in the EU – the EU Military Committee and EU Military Staff – cannot be reconciled with the lessons that have meanwhile been drawn from recent, often long-term operations. In reality, operational reserves included, operations would require not one but

three army corps. Is that unfeasible for the EU? Until the fall of the Berlin Wall, Belgium alone permanently stationed an army corps along the Iron Curtain. What was achievable then for just one Member State can hardly be the level of ambition of the entire EU today.

If the EU makes maximum use of new instruments such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), a military level of ambition that corresponds with the EUGS is feasible and affordable. Possessing adequate military force is vitally important. Forsaking it will endanger both the EU and NATO.

CAPABILITY PLANNING: FIRST THINGS FIRST

PESCO is the instrument to streamline national investment plans while respecting national sovereignty, thus to optimise multinational cooperation. The European Defence Agency is ideally placed to facilitate multinational projects, while the EDF is a budgetary facilitator. Yet it is not up to these EU-level facilitators to determine capability priorities, nor is it up to industry.

In terms of military capability planning, NATO procedures and in particular the way they are applied by the US ought to inspire the EU Member States. A two-step approach is indicated. At first the EU Member States need to determine what is required to achieve autonomy in crisis management. The EU must be able to act whenever the European interest is primarily at stake, for systematically appealing to NATO and the US no longer is Washington's preferred option – to put it mildly. Once the required capabilities and the order of priority have been identified, it must be determined which Member State can contribute what. Subsequently, those EU Member States that are also NATO Allies must assess which additional

capabilities they need to meet their commitments in NATO.

EU MILITARY CRISIS MANAGEMENT OPERATIONS: WHAT IS SUCCESS?

The military operations that the EU has conducted so far, have seldom led to durable peace. Often the force deployed was undersized relative to the task. On the civilian side, humanitarian aid and development aid were often and economic support nearly always insufficient, although they are a prerequisite for a durable solution. Political attention often evaporated quite soon after the first military deployment. All of this points to the same conclusion: existing EU structures must be adapted. Both a fully-fledged strategic-military headquarters and - to insure a true comprehensive approach - an overarching civilian-military crisis management headquarters are indispensable. The Commission as well as the Member States are due for some serious introspection in this regard.

CARD: AN X-RAY OF CSDP. ET ALORS?

The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) is the instrument to regularly apply a SWOT analysis to CSDP; what are the strengths and weaknesses, the opportunities and threats. But who will draw conclusions from this, prepare decisions to translate them into practice, and supervise their implementation? Who will henceforth ascertain that EU operations effectively reach the desired political end-state? How can the EU become an effective preventive actor?

THE FINAL STEP: PERMANENT AND STRUCTURED POLITICAL GUIDANCE

Two decades after Saint-Malo all the pieces of the puzzle are on the table. What is still lacking, is coordinated political guidance at the highest level. In the informal Council of Defence

Ministers (and even if it were to become a formal format), ministers are always confronted with a contradiction. On the one hand, they are pushed to show solidarity and spend more on defence, but on the other hand their colleagues, the finance ministers, impose budgetary restrictions. Who can arbitrate between these conflicting priorities? Today there is no format in the Council or the Commission that can align and set overall priorities for military planning, PESCO, the EDA, the EDF as well as industrial policy (for defence and other strategic sectors). For the moment, CARD therefore only serves to lay bare the problems, but the current piecemeal approach is not sufficient to address them. Turf battles between EU entities certainly don't help.

The High Representative and the Foreign Affairs Council must of course maintain their authority, obviously also in matters of security and defence. Yet at the same time vital issues of war and peace are *Chefsache* : such decisions are made at the highest political level, and require a specific preparation. That demands a specific structure, both in the Council and the Commission.

NO NEW STRUCTURES ARE REQUIRED, BUT THE EXISTING ONES MUST BE RECONFIGURED

First, the time is ripe to appoint a Commissioner for Security and Defence, with competences in the areas of space, cyber and defence, and in particular for the industrial dimension of the production of all required civilian and military capabilities. He/she would contribute to the decision-making on the definition of capability priorities. This Commissioner, besides having his/her own portfolio, would serve as the High

Representative's right hand, and could chair certain meetings when the latter cannot be present.

Second, a European Security Council could be created at the level of Heads of State and Government, to take decisions on the launching of civilian and military operations, but also to ensure more permanent political guidance once they are deployed. Such a Council would also guide a more effective policy of prevention, as well as the budgetary dimension of CSDP: what will be done on the basis of common funding and what will Member States contribute? The European Security Council would have the same composition as the European Council. The difference would be the dedicated focus on security and defence, but also the nature of the decision-making: leaving space to those that are able and willing to act (in accordance with Article 44 TEU that creates the possibility of entrusting implementation of a task to a group of Member States). "Events" will determine how often the European Security Council should meet.

Every global actor except the EU has analogous structures to allow for agile decision-making. Introducing the same in the EU ought therefore to be but a small organisational step for the Union, but it would be a giant leap for the protection of the Union's citizens.

Brigadier-General (Ret.) Jo Coelmont, former Military Representative of Belgium to the EU Military Committee, is a Senior Research Fellow at Egmont and a Senior Fellow of the Royal Higher Institute for Defence in Brussels.



The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief 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.

www.egmontinstitute.be

© Egmont Institute 2019. All rights reserved.