



# Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence

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# Battalions to Brigades: The Future of European Defence

**Sven Biscop**

There is no lack of initiatives to further defence cooperation between European states, but there might be a lack of ambition. Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the new European Union mechanism launched in December 2017, could probably be described as the most promising scheme, but the participating states have so far explored only a fraction of its potential. The risk is that it will yield but a small step forward, when much more is needed. Achieving inter-operability between Europe's limited existing capabilities should not be the only goal: Europe's defence effort must be truly integrated so as to increase capability. That means thinking big, including in terms of operations. Brigades, not companies or battalions, must be the building blocks of European defence.

## Thinking small

During the Cold War, when European allies focused on territorial defence, the basic unit of NATO's combined force structure was the army corps. Even the smaller allies, such as the author's native Belgium, contributed a self-sufficient corps. Each national corps was pre-positioned in Germany, taking its place along the Iron Curtain. The corps were supported by the multinational NATO command structure and by specific multinational assets (such

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### Units and formation strength

While the composition of military formations can vary by country and over time, this article assumes formations of the following approximate strengths:

Company	100–200
Battalion	500–1,000
Brigade	3,000–5,000
Division	15,000–20,000
Corps or Army	50,000–100,000

as the Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS). After the Cold War, the focus shifted to expeditionary operations outside Europe, until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 put territorial defence firmly back on the agenda of a much expanded NATO. Expeditionary operations have never ended, however, and are bound to continue, in particular in North Africa and the Middle East, in either a NATO, EU, United Nations or coalition framework. Several European states have also deployed their armed forces at home to support the security services in the fight against terrorism, or to assist in the fight against COVID-19.

Today, having in most cases abolished conscription and reduced defence budgets and force sizes, many European states find themselves hard put to reconcile all these commitments. Units tend to be available for homeland security; even signals or logistics personnel can sometimes find themselves patrolling the streets. When it comes to expeditionary operations, however, most European states already count a mere infantry battalion – if not a company or half-company – as a major deployment. Only the largest European states can deploy as much as a brigade abroad, and even then only if other European states or, in most cases, the US provide support. For the defence of the national territory, it is natural for a significant portion of a nation's forces to be employable. But the forward deployment of forces, such as NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic states and Poland, in practice amounts to an expeditionary operation, and thus for most allies the same constraints apply.

To increase the readiness, deployability and sustainability of their forces, European states cooperate in various bilateral formats, as well as through NATO and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). But

even as they do so, they often think too small. For many, the most visible aspect of the CSDP, for example, is the multinational EU battlegroups, two of which are always on standby on a rotational basis. But each battlegroup is only a battalion-size force plus support units, and useable only in very specific scenarios. Furthermore, within many battlegroups inter-operability remains limited, and each one is only a temporary formation that is dissolved after its standby phase.

I am not proposing to reintroduce conscription (though some countries have done so), nor to recreate the 1st Belgian Corps and its sister units in other European states. It is clear to me, however, that the battalion cannot be the unit of measure for the defence effort of European states. Instead, this should be the brigade. A brigade is the largest army unit that every European state (except the very smallest ones) is able to field, and that is capable of independent operations. Belgium, for example, fields one motorised brigade and one special-operations regiment. It is also clear that national brigades will only be fully employable if they are permanently anchored in multinational corps or division structures, within which the contributing states will not just create technical inter-operability between the national force elements, but effectively integrate them. Finally, such military integration will be most effective under the aegis of the EU, which has developed a new range of instruments to support it. PESCO is precisely meant to promote military integration, whereas NATO does not have any specific mechanism in place. The increasingly integrated forces of the EU member states could obviously still be employed in a NATO framework; they would constitute the European pillar of NATO.

### **Brigades as building blocks**

While many European states count one or more brigades in their armies, only a very few still possess the full range of support units that should buttress a brigade's manoeuvre units. As a result, regardless of the quality of the troops, these brigades are not employable in all operational scenarios. A brigade without an air-defence unit, for example, is unsuited to nearly every expeditionary scenario, as even irregular opponents now have access to commercial drones that are easily weaponised. And when it comes to the strategic

enablers for force projection (transport, command and control, intelligence, field hospitals), hardly any European states have significant capabilities.

The key to enhancing the employability of Europe's armies lies in the creation of permanent multinational force packages, with national brigades serving as the building blocks. This approach would consist of three elements. Firstly, in the framework of a multinational army corps or division, a combination of integration and specialisation would be organised in the various support functions. In areas where some, or all, of the contributing states had only limited capabilities, these would be integrated into a single multinational support unit. In areas where contributing states had no capabilities at all, a division of labour would be established, with the national support units of some countries supporting the brigades of the others. Thus, all brigades would be more useable, in more scenarios, than in cases where they had to rely on national support only. This approach would also be much more cost-effective.

Belgian–Dutch naval cooperation is an example of this approach in the maritime domain. In this case, the national building blocks are frigates and minehunters. Ships sail under a national flag with a national crew, but most other functions have either been merged into binational capabilities (such as a single naval-operations school), or are provided by one nation for both navies. The Netherlands, for example, provides crew training and maintenance for all frigates, and Belgium for all minehunters. The same model could be applied to an army corps or division, or to an air wing, with the squadron as the basic national unit.

A second element of this approach is that, in the framework of a multinational corps or division, the participating states would harmonise doctrine as well as weapons and equipment. This would allow for maximum interoperability between all constitutive units, make integration or a division of labour much more feasible, and generate synergies and effects of scale. If all brigades were to use the same vehicles, for example, that would drastically reduce the logistics tail on operations, while making procurement simpler and more cost-effective.

Thirdly, the multinational corps or divisions would serve as the benchmark to quantify the need for strategic enablers. The states that made up

a multinational formation would acquire the necessary strategic enablers without having recourse to the assets of others. Taken together, these three elements would allow European states to greatly improve the readiness of their forces and increase their capacity to generate larger-scale deployments, be it for expeditionary operations or for the forward deployment of troops in the context of territorial defence. Such an ambitious objective could give coherence and focus to Europe's defence effort.

### **The role of PESCO**

There is, in fact, an EU project to build such a multinational force package: the EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC), which falls under the PESCO mechanism.<sup>1</sup>

So far, PESCO has mostly focused on projects to develop new platforms and systems – 47 projects have been approved. If the 25 EU member states that participate in PESCO (only Denmark and Malta have not joined) use it to collectively procure equipment for their national forces, they will surely save money. But that in itself will not remedy a lack of support units and strategic enablers, and therefore will not automatically render their forces more employable. Moreover, many of these projects are only ideas without confirmed budgets, and very few address the shortfalls in European arsenals. In other words, even if the participating EU members were somehow able to accomplish all 47 projects, they would still not be that much more capable than they are today.

PESCO is much more than equipment projects, however: it entails 20 legally binding commitments. The most tangible of these is an obligation to address the common capability shortfalls that the EU has identified through collaborative projects. But the participating states have also committed to make available 'strategically deployable formations' in addition to the battlegroups, in order to achieve the EU's military level of ambition. The overall purpose of PESCO, therefore, 'could be to arrive at a coherent full spectrum force package'. That is how the participating states worded their 'long term vision' for PESCO in the notification document in which they announced, on 13 November 2017, their intention to activate the mechanism.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this statement of purpose was later dropped from the

Council of the European Union decision that formally launched PESCO on 8 December 2017.<sup>3</sup>

A clear sense of purpose will be essential to give coherence and substance to PESCO and, ultimately, to achieve the EU's military level of ambition (or 'headline goal'), which was fixed by the European Council in 1999, and to fulfil the 2016 EU Global Strategy. The headline goal focuses on expeditionary operations and is defined as the ability to deploy and sustain for at least one year an army corps of up to 60,000 troops. EU member states have been claiming to be pursuing this goal for 20 years now. In reality, many have come to see it as an unrealistic level of ambition, though why that should be so, given that the EU members pay nearly 1.5 million men and women to wear a military uniform, is not clear. Even taking into account the need for a rotation of forces on expeditionary operations, these numbers should allow for the implementation of the headline goal without affecting the capacity for territorial defence and homeland security. This is where the CROC project comes in.

### **The role of CROC**

CROC was among the first batch of PESCO projects announced in 2017. Its aim is to 'decisively contribute to the creation of a coherent full spectrum force package, which could accelerate the provision of forces ... It should fill in progressively the gap between the EU Battlegroups and the highest level of ambition within the EU Global Strategy'.<sup>4</sup> In line with this view, which enjoys the support of the EU Military Staff, an initial food-for-thought paper released in September 2017 proposed to create a force package of one division or three brigades plus the required strategic enablers as a first step towards the headline goal, which would ultimately require a corps headquarters, three divisions and 9–12 brigades.<sup>5</sup>

CROC could become the central PESCO project and serve as a guiding framework for the other projects. It would represent the achievement of the headline goal, according to which all other PESCO projects could be tailored. The building blocks of CROC would be national brigades. Its objective should be to maximally harmonise all future equipment of these brigades, as well as to ensure that, at the level of CROC, all required combat support

and combat service support is present. This would become the focus of the other PESCO projects.

There is, for example, space for only one future main battle tank in Europe, which should at the very least equip all armoured brigades in CROC. At a bilateral summit in summer 2017, France and Germany announced their intention to build the next main battle tank together. The two countries, together with a few more states, could define the requirements for the tank. In a next step, the tank could become a PESCO project, open to all other states that participate in PESCO. States outside the core main-battle-tank group would accept not having a say on the requirements, which could not reasonably be negotiated by 25 states. Nor would such negotiations be necessary – one can safely assume that the specifications that suit France and Germany would suit Belgium as well. In return for their commitment to procure the main battle tank, however, the relevant industries of the other states would be included in the consortium that would design and produce it.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to equipping the manoeuvre and support units of CROC, another layer of PESCO projects would need to address the shortfalls in strategic enablers, in order to make sure that CROC can be put to use whenever and wherever necessary, and be sustained. These projects too could lead to the creation of permanent multinational units. Suppose the current Eurodrone project delivers a new platform, for example: would it not make sense to operate the resulting drones as one fleet, with single structures for command and control, training, logistics and maintenance, rather than dividing them up between the states that financed them? For accounting purposes, drones could still be the property of individual countries (which could even paint their national flags on them), but for practical purposes they would constitute a European drone fleet. The same model could be applied to other enablers or even, in the future, to platforms such as the envisaged next-generation fighter aircraft, the Future Combat Air System. The European Defence Fund established by the European Commission can co-finance up to 30% of this kind of PESCO project by supporting the European defence firms designing and building the chosen platforms.

CROC brings together Cyprus, France, Germany, Italy and Spain, the defence ministers of which approved an implementation study in January



2019. The current plan is to start from the illustrative scenarios of the EU Military Staff – that is, the typology of operations the EU can undertake – and develop force-element lists with detailed military-capability needs for specific subsets of these scenarios. The participating states would have to report the capabilities they possess that fulfil these requirements. The aim would not be to create a standby force or to maintain a certain state of readiness, but to pre-identify capabilities. That should accelerate force generation when a decision is made to mount an actual operation. Furthermore, as a future step, command-and-control options would also be pre-identified.

The original food-for-thought paper did not propose to identify and assign units to CROC. But under the existing headline-goal process, the EU's force catalogue already lists theoretically available capabilities without identifying units, which renders an assessment of their actual readiness impossible. Force-element lists of pre-identified units would thus be an important improvement. It should be noted, however, that the implementation study dropped the level of ambition and, as a first step, envisaged no more than a brigade-size force plus enablers. That is far too modest an ambition to have a significant impact. As a first step, CROC could aim at generating brigade-size *operations*. But even in the first phase, CROC as a whole surely needs to count at least three brigades, as originally proposed by France and Germany. Even Belgium already has a brigade – it does not need the EU or CROC to create one.

### **The role of complementary schemes**

Fortunately, other schemes exist, alongside CROC and outside the EU framework, that might yet help the EU to achieve a more serious level of ambition. Certain European states have already made the step towards deeply integrated multinational formations. The German–Netherlands Corps, created as far back as 1995, is an example of far-reaching integration between land forces. The corps' headquarters is binational, with a staff-support battalion and a communication and information-systems (CIS) battalion with mixed German and Dutch personnel. Among the units assigned to the corps is the German 1st Panzer Division, which comprises one Dutch brigade (the 43rd Mechanised Brigade). This brigade in turn

comprises one mixed German–Dutch tank battalion that operates the only tank capacity in the Dutch army.

On 8 November 2018, Belgium and France signed an intergovernmental agreement on the *Capacité Motorisée* (CaMo) project, bringing together the Belgian Motorised Brigade and the French *Armée de Terre*. Belgium will acquire French vehicles,<sup>7</sup> but more than this, Belgium and France are jointly developing the doctrine for the use of the new platforms. The objective is deep inter-operability, down to platoon level, so that the Belgian brigade would mirror its French counterparts in everything except uniforms. In theory, Belgian and French crews should be able to swap vehicles and operate them immediately. The next step could be to anchor the Belgian brigade more firmly in one of the French divisional or corps structures, and to realign the support units into a coherent whole.

These are two examples of states using brigades as a building block and setting down a path of ever-increasing integration. This is exactly the spirit and the scale that should inform CROC, which could certainly be constructed on the foundation of these two binational projects.

The countries involved, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, also participate in France's European Intervention Initiative (EI2), launched in 2018 with the aim of increasing the capacity of the initiative's now 13 members to act together.<sup>8</sup> Participating states opt to join one or more working groups (such as on the Sahel, the Caribbean, power projection or terrorism) in order to forge a prior common understanding of the joint action that they might potentially undertake if a crisis were to occur in one of these areas. Put differently, France hopes via the EI2 to create a pool of able and willing partners to build ad hoc coalitions for French-led military interventions.

The link with CROC is obvious: the understanding on likely intervention scenarios forged by the EI2 members ought to inform the force-element lists for CROC. The EI2 scenarios are much more ambitious than the scenarios that the CROC implementation study proposes to focus on: humanitarian assistance, non-combatant evacuation and conflict prevention with battle-group-size forces only. (Arguably the most ambitious scenario discussed in the study is protecting lines of communication and critical resources.) Governments may hope that they will only ever face these less threatening

scenarios, but the composition of a coherent, full-spectrum force package should be determined by the scenarios that Europeans may well be *obliged* to deal with, not those that they would *like* to deal with.

The logical step, therefore, would be for all EI2 participants to join CROC with at least a brigade. They could thus collectively shape a force package capable of undertaking the types of operations required by the scenarios that they have elaborated in the framework of the EI2. Eventually, the EI2 and CROC could be merged into a single initiative, under the aegis of PESCO.<sup>9</sup>

### **CROC, NATO and the EU**

Creating CROC using German–Dutch and Franco-Belgian cooperation as a starting point does not mean merging the two initiatives. Within CROC, there can be more than one core, each with a specific orientation.

Indeed, neither the EI2 nor even PESCO is exclusively about expeditionary operations or the EU. The Baltic focus of one of the EI2 working groups, and the launching of PESCO projects on intra-European military mobility and on artillery and missiles, clearly serve territorial defence and NATO. Previous EU defence schemes addressed only those capabilities EU member states had declared to be theoretically available to the CSDP, for expeditionary operations only. The initial focus of PESCO too naturally remains the EU level of ambition. But at the same time, without there having been any great debate about it, most capitals effectively understand PESCO as covering the armed forces of the participating states in their entirety, with the aim of achieving the NATO, EU and national levels of ambition in an integrated manner, for both territorial defence and expeditionary operations. That is a breakthrough in itself, which would have been impossible before the activation of PESCO.

Ideally, the European states would build on this breakthrough to further tear down the NATO and EU stovepipes. NATO planning envisages three army corps. Could not CROC be one of those? It would be the corps on which the EU objective of ‘strategic autonomy’ would centre.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, CROC would be ready to take its place alongside the non-EU NATO allies in case of an Article V collective-defence scenario. On the other, CROC formations could be readily generated for expeditionary operations

outside NATO/EU territory, relying only on the assets held by participating states. CROC could also be called upon to defend Europe and deter aggressors should the mutual-defence guarantee of Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union be activated instead of NATO's Article V.<sup>11</sup>

CROC could thus comprise both heavy armoured formations and more rapidly deployable motorised and air-mobile formations, organised into multinational divisions with national brigades as the building block. There could be divisions that focus primarily on territorial defence and others oriented primarily towards expeditionary operations.<sup>12</sup> This would allow all participants in the EI2 – both EU member states and others, including the formally neutral states – to join a core within CROC that fits their national-defence orientation. All could thus benefit from the synergies and effects of scale that integration into CROC would entail, while preserving maximal discretion regarding the type of operations in which they would participate.

CROC could also incorporate some of the existing corps headquarters to provide a force headquarters and ensure command and control for all operations that it might undertake. The Eurocorps headquarters in Strasbourg is an obvious candidate for this. Multinational strategic enablers could be organised around the various CROC divisions, such as a drone fleet, an air-transport fleet and so on.

### **CROC and defence planning**

In order to achieve more synergies between states and their various initiatives, and between NATO and the EU, Europeans could also revise the way they do multinational defence planning. Today, the NATO Defence Planning Process sets binding capability targets for individual allies. In many key areas, notably strategic enablers, however, the European allies individually lack the scale to meet these targets in a cost-effective way, if at all. Many targets will thus likely never be met. On the EU side, the Capability Development Plan and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence focus more on cooperation between states, but the Capability Development Plan does not set binding targets, and its impact on national defence planning is therefore limited. Instead of running the two processes in parallel, could they not be joined up?

Within the NATO Defence Planning Process, one possibility would be to insert a collective EU/European level of ambition between the national targets and the target for NATO as a whole. In addition to binding individual targets for all NATO allies, binding *collective* targets could be set for the group of NATO allies and partners that make up the EU (plus any European state that might wish to associate with it, such as Norway). Those collective targets could focus especially on enablers, which today are very unevenly spread across the Alliance, and are in fact mostly American. NATO and the EU would have to establish these collective targets together, the former deriving its input from the overall NATO level of ambition, the latter from its own level of ambition for autonomous operations, in line with the EU Global Strategy. The existing headline goal would, of course, be a minimum.

It would be up to the states within such a 'European pillar' to determine how to meet their collective targets. They could notably make full use of EU instruments such as PESCO and the European Defence Fund, and would, by embracing CROC, constitute a coherent, full-spectrum force package.

Joining up EU and NATO defence planning would serve three aims. Firstly, it would permit the European allies and partners to meet their capability targets in a much more cost-effective way, thanks to the collective approach. Secondly, it would make the EU targets, much like NATO targets, binding on participants. Thirdly, it would create a capability mixture within the European group that would permit it to undertake expeditionary operations without needing any assets from outside the group.

### **Resisting PESCO pessimism**

Moving towards NATO and EU 'co-decision' on defence planning may seem politically unfeasible today, though it may well become easier, if not imperative, if President Donald Trump is re-elected and the US adopts an ever more 'transactional' stance within the Alliance. If the Europeans are forced to assume more responsibilities, they may no longer be able to afford the luxury of maintaining parallel processes. Meanwhile, integration is ongoing, as the German–Dutch and Franco-Belgian examples, among others, demonstrate. States with ambitions in the field of defence should grasp this opportunity by defining the responsibilities that they are willing

to assume in the EI2 and providing themselves with the means of achieving their ambitions through CROC. Thinking on CROC currently focuses on land forces and the required enablers, but it is clear that similar schemes are possible – and necessary – for Europe’s naval and air forces as well, and could easily be incorporated into CROC.

Those who want European defence to advance should be truly ambitious. There is no point in announcing grand multinational initiatives that, in terms of the level of ambition, do not look beyond what individual members should already be capable of today. Similarly, every initiative that brings together a subset of the EU’s 27 members should be truly integrative from the start. Otherwise, one might as well stay within the purely inter-governmental framework of the CSDP and NATO. Yielding to pessimism is easy, but also dangerous. Do Europeans really need more convincing of the fact that nobody, not even the US, will defend their interests for them? In the context of European defence, the realists must be optimists.

Finally, a serious initiative should have a serious name. During the Second World War, Winston Churchill issued a directive to his commanders urging them to avoid ‘names of a frivolous character’ for operations, noting that it would be unseemly for ‘some widow or mother to say that her son was killed in an operation called “Bunnyhug” or “Ballyhoo”’.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, would any soldier be keen to deploy as part of the EUFOR CROC? (Croque-monsieur? Croque-madame? Crocs footwear?). Better to call it the EUROFORCE, to forcefully express that the EU and its European partners want to be a force in international politics.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Sven Biscop, ‘European Defence: Give PESCO a Chance’, *Survival*, vol. 60, no. 3, June–July 2018, pp. 161–80.
- <sup>2</sup> Participating States, ‘Notification on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to the Council and to the

- High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy', Brussels, 13 November 2017.
- 3 Council of the European Union, 'Council Decision Establishing Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and Determining the List of Participating Member States', Brussels, 8 December 2017.
  - 4 PESCO Secretariat, 'EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core (EUFOR CROC)', <https://pesco.europa.eu/project/eufor-crisis-response-operation-core/>.
  - 5 'Food for Thought Paper on the CROC', prepared by France and Germany, September 2017.
  - 6 Further consolidation of the European defence industry is inevitable, however, notably in the land sector.
  - 7 Specifically, Belgium will acquire 382 *Griffon* multi-role armoured vehicles and 60 *Jaguar* armoured reconnaissance and combat vehicles.
  - 8 The members are Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the UK.
  - 9 The precondition is that the EU member states participating in PESCO agree on a rule for third-country participation, so that the UK can stay involved. The UK may be reticent to join the more integrative parts of the scheme, certainly in the first stage. But it could ensure that its own expeditionary forces are interoperable with CROC, along the lines of its current cooperation with France in the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force, and with Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden in the Joint Expeditionary Force.
  - 10 Introduced by the 2016 EU Global Strategy, the EU has yet to formally define 'strategic autonomy'. Arguably, the headline goal already defines the minimum degree of autonomy the EU member states should achieve. As far back as 1999, the objective was to enable expeditionary operations without the need to have recourse to assets of non-EU member states.
  - 11 This has happened once, at the request of France, following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris by the Islamic State (ISIS).
  - 12 The capabilities required for these would certainly overlap.
  - 13 Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, Volume 5: *Closing the Ring* (London: Cassell, 1952), p. 583.