



Pool it, Share it, Use it: The European Council on Defence

Sven Biscop

The December 2013 European Council will address the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Pooling & Sharing of military capabilities will be high on the agenda. What should be expected from the Heads of State and Government? Capabilities now, capabilities in the future, and a common idea on what to use them for.

When the European Council decides to devote its precious time to the CSDP, it can only mean that the stakes are high. European defence definitely needs another major push.

Back in 2010, the Foreign and Defence Ministers set a dynamic in motion, launching the “Ghent Initiative” for Pooling & Sharing of military capabilities. That ball has rolled its course without as yet producing a real breakthrough. Pooling & Sharing initiatives do not come close to making good the defence cuts resulting from austerity budgets. That does not prevent Europeans from assuming responsibility for security in their near abroad, in Libya and most recently in Mali. But they struggle to do so and continue to rely heavily on American enablers. But just now

Washington is making it clear that it really expects Europeans to deal with their neighbourhood on their own.

It is not for the European Council to deal with the minutiae of capability development. Making *Chefsache* of the CSDP, the Heads of State and Government can use their political authority to set the national defence establishments to work, with the support of the EU institutions, and oblige them to achieve results. The desired output is threefold: capabilities now, capabilities in the future, and a common idea on what to use them for.

CAPABILITIES, PLEASE!

The European Council takes European defence seriously, or it would not put it on the agenda. For our publics and partners to do the same, the first thing is to demonstrate that its indispensable processes, institutions and long-term plans do generate tangible capabilities. In public diplomacy terms, the only eye-catcher at the European Council can be the launch of one or more major projects.

That would be none too soon, for by the time of its meeting, it will be a full two years after the Foreign Affairs Council in December

2011 prioritized eleven “specific concrete” projects for Pooling & Sharing, focussing on key enablers. Important progress has been achieved: a Helicopter Training Programme and a European Satellite Communications Procurement Cell have been established e.g., and Letters of Intent signed by fifteen countries on field hospitals and by ten on air-to-air refuelling.

Yet, to make a difference most projects need both widening and deepening: *more* Member States should join in *further-reaching* cooperation. That is the case for air-to-air refuelling, at least if the objective is a substantial European fleet that would effectively reduce dependence on US assets. In other areas, as the European Defence Agency (EDA) notes, Member States have yet to act: smart munitions, future military satellites, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.¹ And there are important areas beyond those prioritized by the Council, such as drones, in which European cooperation is of the essence to achieve critical mass for projects now being envisaged by one or a few Member States.

Will the momentum created by the December 2013 *rendez-vous* suffice to convince more Member States to sign up?

In the end the capitals must come forward, but the EU institutions can stimulate and guide the on-going dynamic debate. It certainly is in the interest of Britain and France to take the lead. As they deploy the most, they more than others directly feel the lack of enablers. If they can muster the vision, they have the weight to launch major initiatives, but not the scale to see them through – not even together. That requires more Member States to participate, which is in their interest too. Not only are they even more denuded of enabling capacity, but contributing part of a key enabler would be one step towards regaining the influence in decision-making which increasingly they are losing for lack of meaningful capabilities to

bring to the table.

The budgetary reality remains though that most Member States, big and small alike, are cutting defence budgets. How to convince them to cut even deeper in order to free up the means to contribute to essential collective European projects?

The European dynamic can be reinvigorated by stimulating cooperation at cluster level and directing it towards the European goals. In several of these (smaller and overlapping) groups of Member States there is today a strong dynamic towards deepening the cooperation. Urged on by austerity budgets, the Baltic, Benelux, Nordic and Visegrad countries, the Netherlands and Germany, the Benelux, France and Germany in EATC, and Britain and France most notably are taking very concrete steps to maintain relevant capabilities by Pooling & Sharing them. Indeed, pooling what you have does not get you more. But launching new capability projects, particularly for strategic enablers, surpasses the capacity of any individual cluster.

More synergy between the clusters and the collective European level is the obvious answer. The most performing clusters – which simply means those that want to be seen as such – can be encouraged to accelerate the deepening of their cooperation, and to use the European Council as a platform both to highlight their achievements and intentions and at the same time to announce a contribution to some of the major collective projects. This might also induce clusters that have so far engaged much less in actual Pooling & Sharing of capabilities and Member States that have remained somewhat outside the cluster dynamic, to commit more.

To make it very concrete: Belgium and the Netherlands e.g. have to all intents and purposes integrated their navies. It makes perfect sense to apply the same model to their

air forces: keeping national platforms with national crews, but supported by a bi-national command structure and bi-national or specialized logistics, maintenance and training, all concentrated on a single base each for all transport and all combat capacity. Equally far-reaching integration, incorporating Germany as well, is possible between their airmobile forces. Nothing less than such ambitious Pooling & Sharing schemes will guarantee the survival of significant expeditionary capabilities and, after the initial investment, create some budgetary margin to over several years pledge to collective European projects to acquire strategic enablers. That ambition and that pledge Belgium and the Netherlands, and others, could announce in December.

WE'RE IN FOR THE LONG HAUL

More than a deadline, December should be a starting point. In order to ensure continued and systematic attention for European defence and effective implementation of all plans and intentions, the European Council should launch a process, deciding on the tasking and on a mechanism for reporting and evaluation.

A point of departure and a logical complement to urging Member States to implement in the short term the eleven projects that they already prioritized in 2011, is to task a reflection about which further capabilities Europeans aim to develop in the long term, by 2030 and beyond. The capabilities that are coming on-line today and over the next few years (the A400M, the NH90 and others) have all been initiated decades ago. For more than a decade now however few if any new major initiatives have been taken, as the focus was on immediate requirements necessitated by operations in Afghanistan especially. Dealing with wear and tear of equipment (and did we not all plan as if there is no such thing) and with threats such as IEDs left neither budgetary nor mental space for much else. If new collective programmes are to yield collective capabilities (and there is no other way) by 2030-

2040, the time to start thinking about this is now.

Such a reflection should involve the political level, directly involving the actual decision-makers, rather than risking political attention to slip by relegating it to working groups of officials or even to a wise pen group of some sort. The European Council could task the High Representative, as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council, to organize this reflection at ministerial level and to report back in a year's time, with the aim from the start to continue the process afterwards. To trigger debate, concrete and innovative input papers can be tasked to the EUMC at CHOD-level, to the EDA, and perhaps to a wise pen group (rather than entrusting such with the reflection itself).

Starting from a quite concrete question, such a strategic-level reflection can generate more permanent and structured ways of thinking about defence planning among Member States, ultimately leading to harmonization.

To continue with the Benelux example: though they might not advertise it, Belgium and the Netherlands even today no longer do national naval planning. Any unilateral decision that would reduce the existing level of cooperation, e.g. the choice of a different platform, would incur prohibitive costs, for neither can afford to regenerate installations for logistics and maintenance that it closed down and entrusted to the other. As various clusters deepen cooperation in various capability areas, de facto Member States will end up harmonizing planning for each particular area with the concerned cluster partners.

The next step is that Member States go beyond this "tactical" level of coordination, per capability area, and move to the strategic level: coordination of defence planning as a whole. This step will follow gradually yet automatically from the reflection about new long term capability objectives. Any major project

resulting from it will require a critical mass of a dozen or more Member States. Those most willing to commit are likely to be the very same Member States that are already the most engaged in several overlapping and ever more integrated clusters each. Managing the resulting complex puzzle (of capabilities offered by several smaller clusters, enablers generated by only one larger cluster each, and of course remaining national capabilities) will inevitably lead to coordination at a level above the various individual clusters.

Likely therefore the most engaged Member States in Pooling & Sharing will come together and create a permanent and structured dialogue about their national defence planning. Only thus can they ensure: (1) that they are all building the puzzle from the same box top image, i.e. the set of capabilities which they decide that collectively (but not necessarily each individually) they require; (2) that no piece of the puzzle is missing, i.e. that all shortfalls are addressed; and (3) that there are no superfluous pieces, i.e. that redundancies are done away with.

Such a permanent dialogue can be supported by a formal group within the EDA, without the need to create new institutions or activate the Protocol on Permanent Structured Cooperation, but to which Member States send the real decision-makers. It is in fact exactly the sort of collective top-down guidance which the creation of the EDA aimed at, but which until now never happened. The EDA can furthermore assist them by systematically assessing draft national defence planning and white books from the collective European perspective. Within such a group, trust can be reinforced by pledging specific sums or a share of the defence budget (as proposed by General Hakan Syren as outgoing Chairman of the EUMC)² to the realization of selected major projects for a certain period. Furthermore, in dual-use capability areas some projects could also be launched and led by the Commission.

Any Member State can join this dialogue at

any time, but the key is that those that are the most active in Pooling & Sharing already take the initiative.

POOL IT TO USE IT

What is the box top image that would convince Member States to buy the puzzle? What is the European capability mix that Member States will want to be a part of?

The detailed list of European capability requirements and shortfalls has been established well over a decade ago, based on a translation into five illustrative scenarios of the 1999 Headline Goal of projecting an army corps, itself based on an extrapolation of the Balkans experience in the preceding years. Since then, Europeans have deployed far beyond the Balkans, for operations ranging from humanitarian relief to war, under different flags and in different constellations – which alas often exposed great political differences. The implicit geopolitical map underlying European defence clearly no longer is up to date. More and more involved actors are coming to advocate that the European Council surely cannot debate capabilities without any reflection about what it is Europeans want to use these capabilities for.

European thinking is in fact evolving fast. Already the French intervention in Mali gained far more political support from fellow Member States (though not necessarily translating into military support) than the Franco-British intervention in Libya. Collective awareness of the interests at stake in specific regions and contingencies is growing, as of the fact that with US strategic attention focussed on the Asia-Pacific region, either Europeans themselves will take charge of crisis management in their near abroad (whether through NATO, CSDP or ad hoc coalitions) or nobody will. It is too early for sure to write this up in a European white book or similar. Nonetheless, the European Council can build on this momentum and agree on the first

(non-exhaustive) elements of political guidance on which regions and which types of contingencies Europeans a priori want to assume responsibility for, if necessary on their own.

Even if only in a few paragraphs, a mention of interests as drivers of policy and an indication that Europe assumes responsibility for peace and security in the broader neighbourhood (including the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, probably the Gulf, and perhaps Central Asia) and has a stake in global maritime security (and not just off the Somali coast) will offer most useful political guidance: for capability development, contingency planning and intelligence, as well as for the full-scale preventive effort of the Union. If put to good use by all relevant actors, it will allow Europe to be much more prepared for contingencies in these priority regions, and ought to facilitate action by the able and willing Member States, making use of the command structure that best

fits the contingency, under the political aegis of the Union. It is crucial therefore for another dimension of the December European Council's agenda as well: rapid and effective deployment on the whole spectrum of crisis management.

As the reflection progresses, the tasking by the European Council of a full-scale European white book or defence review can result from it later, a sub-strategy to the European Security Strategy³ setting priorities for conflict prevention and crisis management, and detailing the institutional and capability implications. The yearbook envisaged by the EDA can then form the basis for an annual "state of the union" in defence at the European Council. Not just the Heads of State and Government, but our publics as well will not take an interest in capabilities unless they have ownership of the reasons why we not only need them, but use them.

REFERENCES

¹ EDA, *EDA's Pooling & Sharing*. Fact Sheet, 30 January 2013, www.eda.europa.eu.

² At the seminar on Innovative European Defence Cooperation – Pooling and Consolidating Demand, organized by the Cyprus Presidency, the EDA and Egmont in Brussels on 19 September 2012.

³ Which itself ought to be reviewed and completed into a real grand strategy no later than at the start of the new mandate of the High Representative after the 2014 European elections.

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