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Strengthening EU Defence: Much Ado About Nothing?

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After the sovereign debt crisis, the migration challenge and Brexit, the EU is turning its attention to the future. A secure Europe and a stronger Common Security and Defence Policy play an important role in this context. A military headquarters, a defence fund and permanent structured military cooperation have been envisaged. Are these proposals sustainable or simply much ado about nothing?

It is good to see that the decision-making phase for the further development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) that started in 2013 is leading to tangible measures. The wars and crises on our own doorstep as well as the ambiguous foreign and security policy of the new US administration have apparently served as a catalyst prompting renewed European reform efforts. Now three actors – the European Parliament, the member states and the European Commission – have put forward suggestions to advance the CSDP. The starting point for the new plans was the Lisbon Treaty, which classifies the CSDP as part of the foreign and security policy of the EU. The *Global Strategy* presented by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission in June 2016 furnishes the CSDP with a more sophisticated strategic framework. This framework will be fleshed out by the member states and the EU institutions. Since 2003, the external action of the CSDP (which at the time was called the European Security and Defence Policy, ESDP) has consisted mainly of crisis management and training measures in third states. The capabilities required to conduct civilian and military missions and operations, such as the training of judges and prosecutors in Kosovo (EULEX) and the fight against human trafficking in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED), are provided by the member states. There had previously been no permanent command and control element in Brussels for the planning and conduct of military operations.

Preparing and coordinating missions was difficult, which impeded the EU Global Strategy's strategic priority of enhancing the Europe's ability to respond to crises. With their latest plans for reform, the member states have now provided a way to remedy this state of affairs. The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC), as it is officially known, is to take on the command and control responsibility for the three ongoing military training missions. In addition, it is meant to serve as the nucleus of a future EU headquarters to strengthen the Union's crisis management as a whole. The EU institutions have been cautiously developing the internal aspects of the CSDP since 2013. It therefore took 10 years from the start of this common policy to use EU research and industrial policy, for instance, to strengthen defence. The focus in this context is on providing support to member states in order to make them fit to perform their defence tasks.

After the UK vote to leave the EU, calls grew louder for the EU to take on more responsibility for its own security and to use the potential of the EU treaties to the fullest extent. In addition, there were calls to make better coordinated and larger defence investments within the EU. Against the backdrop of the deteriorating security situation in Europe, joint organisation of the security of the EU and its citizens seemed a necessary and logical step. The European Parliament broke new ground when it introduced the first defence-related budget line in the 2015 EU budget. Defence research received funding so that joint progress could also be made in the area of defence. Today, the proposals of the European Commission go as far as launching a specific defence fund for research and development with a volume of EUR 5.5 billion starting in 2021.

A new proposal for an EU defence fund

Military operations repeatedly suffer from a lack or shortage of capabilities required for the task. This problem is well-known and has affected many EU operations and missions since 2003, the year of the first CSDP mission. The armed forces are, for example, short of air transport and reconnaissance assets. Remedying this shortfall is a slow process, as evidenced by the procurement of the A 400M transport aircraft and the plans for a European reconnaissance drone. Apparently, the member states have so far been unable to remedy these deficits on their own. Against this backdrop, the European Commission and European Parliament have started initiatives to improve cooperation, supplementation and augmentation of national military capabilities. Their aim is basically to better dovetail research, development and procurement for national defence goods, supported by EU budget funds. The European Commission intends EU-funded defence research and joint capability development to be pooled at a single source in future. This source will be the European Defence Fund. The Commission is looking to furnish the fund with EUR 590 million by 2020. The goal is to support the member states with specific measures in order to make the CSDP as a whole more capable of taking action. This fund rests on two pillars: one for research and one for capability development and promotion of the defence industry.

Keeping EU defence research on track

Embarking on EU-funded defence research is an obvious consideration. If member states are already cooperating on research, they are more likely to jointly procure, operate and employ military capabilities. Since 2014, the EU institutions have initiated two research projects based on a parliamentary initiative in order to test common processes and procedures. A total of EUR 90 million will be provided for these projects until the end of 2019. This research work is planned to lead to a specific European defence research programme at the beginning of the next EU funding period after 2020. This is meant to counter the opposite trend of decreasing national expenditures for research and development. These expenditures, which are part of the defence budgets, have been reduced disproportionately in recent years. This trend is even more worrying when strategic competitors are taken into account. Military research expenditures in Russia and China indicate rapid growth in this sector. A forward-looking EU defence policy must accept this technological challenge. In future, too, military success will depend on the technological superiority of armed forces. This can only be ensured with forward-looking research. The European Commission and European Parliament plan to provide EUR 500 million per year from the EU budget. It is advisable to use these funds where military procurements are due in the coming decades, such as for the next generation of battle tanks and combat aircraft.

European programme to promote the defence industry

In addition to EU defence research, the Commission proposed supporting member states directly in the subsequent development and procurement of capabilities. To this end, it recommended to the Council and Parliament that a European programme be launched as a pilot project for the purpose of promoting the defence industry. EUR 500 million are to be provided in 2019 and 2020. From 2021 onwards, another EUR 5 billion per year are to be made available from the EU budget. These EU support funds are not meant to replace national procurement projects. Rather, the intention is to create financial incentives for closer armaments cooperation between member states. The Commission is aiming to achieve a leverage effect. It assumes that the EU budget funds could generate additional national funds amounting to EUR 2.5 billion for 2019 and 2020 and EUR 5 billion per year from 2021 onwards. In addition, the Commission is offering to help by establishing a pool of national budget funds to be used for procurement. Additional EU budget funds could be offered as an incentive.

This could create a balance between those states that shoulder the considerable financial burden of providing start-up funding for armaments projects and those that are only looking to contribute later when it comes to procurement. In principle, these proposals are welcome as they create European added value. This added value consists of using EU defence research and capability support to promote cooperative armaments projects. But the success of the intended EU programmes will depend primarily on whether and to what extent the financial incentives are actually utilised by the member states and their defence industries.

Strengthening military cooperation through permanent EU structures

Enhancing and coordinating cooperation between the armed forces of the member states makes up a large part of the proposals put forward by the EU institutions. The goal is to expand the existing EU procedure for closer cooperation between the member states to the field of defence. Individual states could cooperate in predefined areas under an EU umbrella without all states having to participate. Currently, the civilian procedure for closer cooperation is used in the areas of divorce law and patents. Regarding defence, the Lisbon Treaty introduced what is referred to as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2009. Until now, this instrument has not yet been initiated, however. PESCO offers the opportunity to pool the already existing isolated islands of military cooperation under the umbrella of the EU. At present, for example, military personnel from five Framework Nations and from additional member states cooperate at Eurocorps in Strasbourg, a military headquarters that can be made available to both NATO and the EU. Another example is the European Air Transport Command based in Eindhoven. In this command, the six participating states jointly organise the scarce commodity of military air transport capacity. In both cases, legal arrangements had to be concluded by the participating states to make operation possible, which was an arduous process.

This could change if both Eurocorps and the European Air Transport Command are brought under the PESCO umbrella. From the perspective of the European Parliament, this would have the advantage that existing EU procedures and European funding could be used for the peacetime operation of these military units. The European Parliament, Council and Commission have taken a positive step in finally beginning to seriously discuss the establishment of PESCO. The leadership role of France and Germany in this endeavour is especially noteworthy. The creation of permanent military structures under the umbrella of the EU could indeed succeed with the aid of PESCO. This framework should not, however, be used solely for coordinating ad hoc projects.

Conclusion

Are the proposals to strengthen Europe's security and defence policy simply much ado about nothing? Or, put differently, to what extent do the suggestions for improvement address the key problems of the CSDP? It should be kept in mind that the member states are the key actors in this field of politics. When it comes to shaping the CSDP, the national governments are responsible for the current achievements as well as for the omissions. Improved procedures and institutions as well as financial incentives can contribute to increasing political efficiency as regards security and defence within the EU. But they cannot replace political will. This common political will that had so far been missing was, however, recently displayed on a number of occasions. The EU declaration to mark the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome was an impressive case in point. In this document 27 heads of state and government declared their commitment to the role of the EU with regard to the CSDP. Against this backdrop, the final assessment of the proposals put forward is a favourable one. Apparently, the Brexit referendum has loosened a knot. London's opposition to reforming the CSDP disappeared virtually overnight. In spite of all the euphoria over the political will that exists, the difficult phase of implementation now begins. Particularly in view of past faltering efforts to reform the CSDP, this will to implement reform must take hold in the defence and procurement bureaucracies. And this should certainly be possible given the ongoing crises in the south and east of Europe.

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