



Defence without direction

by Sophia Besch

French President Emmanuel Macron recently made headlines with his comment that we are seeing the “brain death” of NATO – an alliance that is nominally functioning but lacks strategic aim and political focus. When asked for solutions, he pointed to the progress Europeans had made boosting defence initiatives outside of NATO. But EU defence also currently lacks direction.

Europeans have come far in the last three years, particularly in terms of capability development. The European Commission proposes to allocate a total of €13 billion to defence research and development in the EU’s 2021-2027 budget cycle, compared to just €590 million in the previous one.

To use this money effectively, the EU will need to fix its defence planning process. The European Court of Auditors recently pointed out that the EU has now created as many as four different planning tools – the capability development mechanism, the capability development plan, the co-ordinated annual review for defence and Permanent Structured Co-operation, or PESCO – that often overlap with or even contradict one another.

But in developing the EU’s defence policy, Europeans face challenges that will not be easily fixed by rearranging its capability planning instruments. Europeans risk losing sight of what they want to do with their military capabilities once they have developed them. EU foreign and defence ministers agreed in 2016 that the EU should invest in its ability to carry out

crisis prevention and management in its own neighbourhood, to help build up the capacities of its partners, and to protect the union and its citizens. To give substance to these intentions, the EU should do three things.

First, Europeans need to flesh out the military implications of these strategic priorities. For example, what does ‘protecting citizens’ mean? Should it refer to the EU conducting counter-terrorism or cyber operations? Could it encompass the territorial defence of member-states? The EU has a mandate for the latter: Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union says that EU countries are obliged to come to the aid of a fellow member-state subject to an armed attack on its territory. But governments have quite different views of how this commitment should be interpreted in the future.

France, in particular, wants European militaries and defence ministries to war-game EU responses to a cyber or even conventional attack on a non-NATO EU member-state such as Finland or Sweden. Paris would like to see an EU political declaration during the French EU Council presidency in 2022 that would define what

Image:

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member-states would do if the mutual assistance clause were invoked. In a similar vein, France's European Intervention Initiative – a co-operation format outside the EU, proposed by Macron in 2017 – also encourages its members to discuss threat assessments and exchange expertise and intelligence. The aim is to align their security and defence objectives and make it easier to deploy together in the future.

But other member-states worry that even engaging in these types of exercises could divide the union further: some support a stronger EU defence policy to balance a weakening NATO, while others are concerned about alienating the US further by developing a separate EU defence policy. Germany therefore wants to start a process of discussion and deliberation with all member-states, a so-called 'strategic compass', during its 2020 EU Council presidency. The goal is to unite everyone behind a political and military interpretation of the union's level of ambition.

Both a high-level debate and military exercises are necessary to clarify the military and political implications of the EU's defence ambitions. And time is of the essence: developing new military capabilities can take years, sometimes decades.

Second, the EU should ensure that every new piece of equipment, weapon system or training facility that member-states build together should have a clear link to the EU's strategic priorities. Member-states have so far largely used PESCO, a framework launched in 2017

to help countries work better together, to get financial support for ongoing multilateral projects. The result is a long list of 47 projects, many without a clear link to the EU's ambitions. PESCO would benefit if member-states instead created thematic clusters of projects needed to fulfil one of the union's core defence tasks. They could, for example, group together all cyber defence and security projects related to the goal of protecting European citizens.

Third, Europeans should take another look at the operational side of PESCO, which has not received much attention since the framework's launch. PESCO members pledged to improve their militaries' ability to deploy together, and to reform the way joint military operations are funded. Since PESCO has neither deadlines nor sanctions for failing to meet targets, it is difficult to hold its participants to account. But more public attention to the operational commitments that member-states have made could make a difference. A PESCO review to assess the framework's progress, planned for 2020, could be a good opportunity to put pressure on governments to deliver.

Getting member-states to develop capabilities together is difficult. But getting them to agree on how to use these capabilities is the real challenge. This is where the EU needs to take action, lest it be branded braindead itself.

Sophia Besch
 Senior research fellow, CER @SophiaBesch

CER in the press

The Economist
 21st November
 John Springford, deputy director of the CER notes that farming emissions have been creeping up since 2012, partly because of increases in livestock.

The Guardian
 20th November
 As Sam Lowe of the CER says: "Where we start [on UK alignment with the EU and its impact on the future relationship] isn't what matters, it's all about where we want to end up."

Financial Times
 20th November
 "A commission will not solve the problems of credibility

that NATO faces, problems of burden-sharing, a lack of shared threat perspectives, and illiberal members in its own ranks," said Sophia Besch of the CER.

The New York Times
 1st November
 "The French think that they can act unilaterally without talking to everyone and get away with it, because they have a dynamic young leader with power and no one else does," said Charles Grant, director of the CER.

Financial Times
 21st October
 "It is widely agreed that [Draghi's] pledge to make the ECB the de facto lender

of last resort to governments was the key to arresting the euro crisis," said Christian Odendahl, chief economist of the CER.

Euronews
 17th October
 "Turkey could trigger Article 5 but it would hardly be credible unless Turkish territory was attacked by Russia or Syria," said Luigi Scazzieri of the CER.

The Guardian
 14th October
 "It looks like this [takeover of the upper house of the Polish parliament by the opposition] may be a small step in the right direction – but it's clear the opposition

still has an awful lot of work to do," said Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska of the CER.

The New York Times
 10th October
 Camino Mortera-Martinez of the CER said, "The Parliament never misses an opportunity to flex its muscles, but it was a misstep by Macron to put forward a candidate [Sylvie Goulard] that he didn't think was OK to be in his own government."

Kyiv Post
 4th October
 "If either Shokin or Lutsenko told me the sun was shining I would look out of the window to be sure," said Ian Bond of the CER.