



European defence – to be continued

by Antonio Missioli

Fifteen years after the Franco-British St Malo Declaration, ten after the release of the European Security Strategy, and five after the review of its implementation and the last discussion on defence matters among the EU heads of state and government, the European Council has just brought to a (preliminary) conclusion a policy debate that was long overdue. Considering the current unfavourable political context – one of fiscal austerity and budgetary cuts, turmoil in the Union's neighbourhood (and beyond), and military intervention fatigue in Europe and the wider 'West' – the text agreed by the EU leaders on 19 December can be considered a major step forward, also because it indicates a way forward, with explicit deadlines and responsibilities for reviewing, researching, and reporting. EU citizens, officials in Brussels and the capitals, as well as our allies and partners, will not have to wait another *lustrum* for the next milestone in the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Indeed, the Conclusions of the summit start with a section on CSDP. The dedicated nine pages released halfway through the European Council meeting may disappoint those who expected either a big leap forward in terms of political ambition or a series of specific and quantified decisions to be implemented right away. And although the final text does not constitute a revolution in (EU) military affairs, it is full of encouragements, calls for improvement, commitments to explore and reinforce, and invitations to re-examine, propose, and prepare. Again, given the context, the amount of tasking and scheduling

enshrined in the Conclusions gives reason for hope. In other words, the process not only trumps the outcome: it is the outcome – and those who followed the year-long debate and preparation of the summit, ever since Herman van Rompuy took the risk to put defence on the agenda, know that even this follow-up process was not a foregone conclusion.

In the pipeline

The European Council has openly endorsed ongoing projects carried out 'by Member States supported by the European Defence Agency' such as the further development of drones (including the establishment of a 'users community' and progress on regulation), air-to-air refuelling capabilities, satellite communication (involving also the European Space Agency), and cyber capacity (more training, exercises, and civil/military cooperation). It has also set a timetable for delivering on specific policy initiatives: the EU Maritime Security Strategy is to be finalised by June 2014 (and the ensuing action plans elaborated on immediately afterwards), and a new EU Cyber Defence Policy Framework is to be prepared over the next 12 months.

The Conclusions have also set some broad parameters for 'rapidly' reviewing common rules and procedures for CSDP, be it the funding of military operations (including the revision of the existing ATHENA mechanism) or the recruitment and deployment of personnel for civilian missions. Indeed, the body of

strict regulations that has progressively taken shape over the past decade is now showing its limitations, acting at times as a constraining or even debilitating factor when mobilising the necessary (human and financial) resources. Adjusting such regulations in light of the experience gained so far and setting better incentives and more flexible modalities for common action does not necessarily require treaty change and can be done on a purely functional basis. In this respect, French President François Hollande highlighted a need – for a fairer sharing of the financial burden of operations – which experts in the field had identified already some time ago and recent experience has made even more acute: the High Representative is now tasked to report on possible options.

Moreover, the Conclusions invite the member states to increase transparency and information-sharing in defence planning, with a view to ‘greater convergence of capability needs and timelines’ and inviting the High Representative and the EDA to propose an appropriate policy framework by the end of 2014 ‘in full coherence with existing NATO planning processes’. This may well fall short of the recurrent demand for a European ‘white book’ but still represents a *première* for the Union, especially at this level of political responsibility.

By the same token, the European Council encourages exploring new incentives and innovative approaches to transnational cooperation in the field of defence capabilities, including ‘non market-distorting fiscal measures in accordance with existing European law’ (an echo of the recent debate on the possible recourse to VAT reductions). It also supports the setting up of a Preparatory Action on CSDP-related research in the area of dual-use technologies – another *première*, especially for the European Commission – while the EDA will prepare a roadmap for the development of defence industrial standards by mid-2014.

This being said, the text is short on details and specifics on how exactly to review current procedures and launch new schemes. Its final version seems to have been slimmed down significantly in terms of contents and commitments, thus becoming more of an enabling than a prescriptive set of conclusions. Yet its language allows for the opening of more concrete, results-oriented discussions before the next rendezvous, set for June 2015.

On the horizon

Finally, in at least three areas, the European Council has gone well beyond the boundaries of CSDP as we know it – and defence policy proper. Following up

on the work done by the EU foreign ministers last October, the heads of state and government have called for greater cooperation in order to tackle energy security challenges – some elements of which are likely to feed the next European Council meeting in February devoted to energy policy.

The summit participants have also endorsed the creation of better synergies ‘between CSDP and Freedom/Security/Justice actors to tackle horizontal issues such as illegal immigration, organised crime and terrorism’, and supporting third states and regions to help them improve border management. Although these are all issues that may not top the traditional diplomatic agenda – and potentially challenge the established boundaries between policy communities and administrations – they may come to represent defining elements of the Union’s collective external action in the years to come.

Last but certainly not least, on the basis of the HR/VP’s preparatory report on defence from last September, the heads of state and government have invited ‘the High Representative, in close cooperation with the Commission, to assess the impact of changes in the global environment and to report to the Council in the course of 2015 on the challenges and opportunities arising for the Union, following consultations with the Member States.’ For those following the intellectual and political debate over whether to revisit the 2003 European Security Strategy, pursue a unified European Global Strategy, or insist on separate, more targeted strategies – split along regional (Sahel, Horn of Africa) and functional (cyber, maritime security) lines – this wording sounds very much like a mandate to launch a collective conversation on this – yet again, without predetermining its outcome. A mandate, however, that will likely be relayed to the next team of EU decision-makers to be appointed in 2014.

All these issues and tasks will shape the work of EU institutions and agencies in the months to come (including that of the EUISS). The summit had to manage great expectations – and deliver guidelines for the future – at a very critical juncture. Can its outcome be considered a turning point for European defence? Only the process will tell.

Antonio Missiroli is the Director of the EUISS.

