



Setting the stage for the defence summit

by Anna Barcikowska

In the midst of mounting pressures for Europe to act as a more capable and credible global player, last week in Vilnius EU defence ministers considered a set of recommendations to strengthen the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) on the basis of an interim report put forward by the HR/VP and Head of the EDA, Catherine Ashton.

The report frames the debate on how to enable the EU to live up to its security and defence obligations in the light of new 'geostrategic developments' ahead of the European Council meeting in December where – for the first time since 2008 – the Heads of State and Government will address defence issues.

The EU as a security provider

The world as a whole, the report states, is facing 'increasing volatility, complexity and uncertainty'. State power is becoming more fragile, as new patterns of interdependence and new technologies empower new players, while intra-state conflict is becoming more common. Both long-lasting and emerging challenges that affect the security environment cannot be met with just 'soft' power. If Europe wants to confidently protect and advance its interests both at home and abroad, it needs a strong security and defence policy underpinned by robust and readily available military capabilities. Yet, more often than not, Europe falls short of what 'resolving crises and projecting power' require – in terms of capability,

balance of contributions and, most importantly, the will to act as a security provider.

EU member states possess a wide range of defence capabilities, yet largely as the result of past and mostly uncoordinated investments there has often been a wasteful duplication in some areas, with critical shortfalls in others. Recent operations have thrown into sharper relief military capability deficiencies in such strategic enablers as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), precision targeting, and air-to-air refuelling. The economic and financial circumstances precipitating deep cuts in defence budgets further exacerbate this situation and make it difficult to fix it in the short term, especially as 'there is no agreed long-term vision on the future of CSDP'.

Developing and maintaining credible military capabilities is therefore not just an issue for military planners. It is a top-level political priority that requires a strong impetus from Heads of State and Government to restore and solidify the commitment to a more systematic and longer-term approach to European defence cooperation firmly rooted in delivering key capabilities enabling the EU 'to engage all five environments (land, air, maritime, space and cyber)'.

Building and sustaining in the long term the military capabilities required to project power and maintain defence is no longer tenable without a coordinated European approach allowing member states to develop and acquire together capabilities that are out of reach individually: as the interim report underlines,

'no European government alone can launch major new programmes: the necessary investments are too high and the national market is too small'.

The Pooling and Sharing (P&S) initiative (as well as NATO's complementary 'smart defence') developed by the European Defence Agency (EDA) to maximise overall capability output through enhanced collaboration is clearly an important part of the solution. Early progress has been already achieved in key areas of air-to-air refuelling, helicopter training, counter-improvised explosive devices training, medical field hospitals, maritime surveillance and satellite communications; and recently identified opportunities as regards cyber defence, route clearance counter-improvised devices and NH90 helicopters may enable a more effective use of resources.

Nonetheless, rather than resorting to *ad hoc* initiatives, adopting a more structured approach firmly embedding Pooling and Sharing in member states' defence planning and decision-making processes would make a real difference. The EDA Code of Conduct on P&S, endorsed by defence ministers in November 2012, provides an important framework to systematically consider cooperation from the outset in national defence planning for the whole life-cycle of a capability, as well as minimise the number of variants of the same equipment to optimise potential savings, improve interoperability, and promote 'rationalisation of demand' (as the report also states). The first annual report on the Code's implementation, due later this year, will be part of an overall contribution to the European Council deliberations, thus enabling decision-makers to determine how to best tackle critical capability shortfalls. It will also provide a basis to improve transparency and information sharing between the member states especially as regards potential budget cuts, national defence strategies and 'White Books', national defence acquisition plans and future planning for key capabilities.

Such actions would in turn boost more specialisation (in terms of missions, roles and geographic location); greater sharing of technology; alignment of research and development programmes; and deeper cooperation in support activities, including logistics and training. This would considerably advance interoperability among the member states, making more capabilities deployable for EU, NATO, multinational or national purposes. Similarly, the report highlights the untapped potential of the Lisbon Treaty regarding the creation of a start-up fund for rapid deployment and the use of art.44 to 'entrust a task to a group of member states'. On the other hand, concerning the implementation of the treaty provisions on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the report notes that 'the appetite to move forward seems

limited at this stage' – despite initial exploratory discussions in 2009 and 2010.

Ways ahead

HR/VP Ashton's proposal to develop 'a strategic level Defence Roadmap' setting out specific targets and timelines to be approved by the European Council could help both minimise the impact of defence cuts and anchor systematic and long-term defence cooperation to develop appropriate capabilities to address current and future challenges. The report also supports the launch of 'pioneer projects' to develop new capabilities with both military and civil applications – including Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS) – and the identification of 'innovative financing arrangements' to this end.

Previous attempts at reviving CSDP had failed largely because of the lack of a solid mechanism to monitor progress and make sure that political declarations were followed through. The 'European defence reporting initiative' and the 'European semester on defence' tentatively suggested in the report – in addition to the Defence Roadmap – could indeed provide a better structured framework process to synchronise budget planning cycles, coordinate defence plans, streamline the implementation of concrete capability projects and set convergence benchmarks. To avoid past mistakes, no serious effort at making CSDP more effective can overlook the imperative to pursue greater coordination between the EU and NATO, not only through strategic dialogue and staff-to-staff contacts, but also through practical cooperation, in particular to address common capability shortfalls.

Perhaps most importantly, the report underlines the need to agree on 'a robust follow-up process' at the European Council in December. This may well turn out to be the key challenge for the summit, falling as it does towards the end of the mandate of the current EU institutions and shortly before the beginning of what already looks likely to be a difficult electoral campaign for the European Parliament. European citizens need to be presented with concrete deliverables but also with a sense of direction, including a convincing argument on why 'defence matters' in times of economic and social crisis. In this respect, what HR/VP Ashton's interim report says about the need to improve CSDP 'visibility' and the work being carried out among all EU institutions and bodies to prepare a specific communication campaign is surely another important piece of the European defence puzzle.

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