Ten years of EU military operations
by Katarina Engberg

In the run-up to the European Council´s summit on defence, the EU´s six military operations to date can be considered a quiet success. They have contributed to the stabilisation of war-torn countries in the Balkans, stopped the escalation of conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, shielded vulnerable refugees in Chad, and helped stem piracy off the coast of Somalia.

The operations have frequently taken the form of a coalition between one of the EU´s 'big three' (most often involving France) and groups of small and medium-sized countries that have found the EU to be a convenient framework for modernising their forces and achieving synergies and savings. In the process, EU member states have built up a common operational culture that will facilitate future endeavours.

The European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) – later Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – has provided a structure for European countries to face common security challenges, retain a position in the global system, promote 'democratic peace', defend certain political interests, provide global public crisis management goods, pool dwindling resources, and reduce the cost of externalities.

Indeed, the EU´s collective use of force represents a historic development that warrants further

investigation: is it likely to endure or was it merely a brief historical parenthesis? As the combined effects of intervention fatigue, force overstretch, and defence budget cuts become apparent, an analysis of the dynamics underpinning the EU as a strategic and military actor can help determine the strength of countervailing factors that may (or may not) over time offset the current malaise.

The practice of multilateral intervention

A comparison of the six operations (along with some cases when operations were envisaged but did not materialise) reveals a pattern that says as much about the EU as it does about collective security in general. The Union´s own operations have certainly been an expression of a growing European defence ambition and profile, but they also reflect the unwieldy development of multilateral intervention as practised in the last decade by many actors. The EU has become part of an implicit international division of labour in which regional organisations play an increasingly important role.

First, it is important to underline that, during the last decade, Europeans have recurrently deployed some 60,000 expeditionary forces: about as much as they can mobilise and sustain at the

same time. Most of these forces have served under US or NATO command in the Iraq and Afghan wars. During that same period, 20,000 European military personnel altogether were deployed on the EU´s six military operations. And while the political objectives of these many different military campaigns have varied greatly, what most of them have in common is that no vital national interests have been at stake.

In other words, they are seldom guided by the supposedly precise goals established in 'Grand Strategies'. Instead, they have the murky and sometimes questionable purpose of trying to maintain a semblance of order in the international system. There is limited understanding of this approach, in particular at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, where the EU tends to operate. In analysing the patterns discernible in the EU´s operations (and non-operations), several factors stand out in particular.

• Local actors

To start with, there is good reason to highlight the growing importance of local actors in relation to the dynamics that trigger or inhibit military operations in general, including those carried out by the EU. Determined local actors have often shaped the context for the Union´s military involvement. This was, for example, the case in EUFOR Chad/CAR, when President Déby was able to influence the mandate for the operation in a way that made it more supportive of his political position than a multifunctional, UN-led mission with a political mandate would have been. In 2006, EUFOR RD Congo was deployed with the aim of stabilising the situation in the country during the elections. At first, the force was perceived by the population in Kinshasa as a means to prop up the incumbent President Kabila and EUFOR RD Congo had to earn its reputation for impartiality through its intervention during violent disturbances in Kinshasa.

By contrast, in two non-operations – the Lebanon war (2006) and eastern DRC (2008) – the opposition of local actors to the deployment of European forces played a role in the EU´s decision *not* to intervene. In Lebanon, Europeans would have risked being caught between retreating Israeli ground forces and irregular Hezbollah forces hostile to a Western presence. In eastern Congo, the possible

confrontation with regular Rwandan forces influenced the French decision not to be the 'framework nation' for an EU operation.

Moreover, during its pioneering decade as a military crisis manager, the EU has chosen to intervene in conflicts that have looked more like opportunities than challenges. They have situated themselves in the low-to-middle bandwidth in terms of values, interests and risks at stake. A conflict such as the Lebanon war, marked by a high level of unregulated violence, set the threshold too high for the EU to involve itself. Yet a conflict situation with the potential for escalation – as was the case in the DRC in 2003 – was manageable for the EU and its Operation Artemis. In the Horn of Africa, the EU has carried out counter-piracy activities in the form of Operation Atalanta and the training mission of Somali security forces, all consistent with the Union´s 'comprehensive approach'.

• Precedents play a role

The EU has tended to intervene where Europeans have done so before, as reflected in the various operations and training missions undertaken in Africa. For the EU, as 'the new kid on the block', the presence of other well-established institutions has framed the parameters for its own action. A pre-existing UN presence in a conflict area, such as the Levant, provides the UN with some authority to decide whether an EU presence is also desirable or not.

In the 2011 Libya conflict, the lack of interest by UN OCHA in seeing its humanitarian aid being protected by EUFOR Libya doomed the planned operation. NATO´s wish to assume command and control of both the air and naval campaigns effectively preempted the role that might have been played by an EU-led maritime embargo. Furthermore, for the air campaign, France and the UK wanted to make use of US resources in the familiar areas of European capability shortfalls as a way of reducing the risks of a prolonged campaign.

• Resource constraints

The creation of joint EU forces, in particular the EU Battlegroups, initially created an impetus for their actual use. This was soon offset *inter alia* by the difficulty of mobilising some of the earmarked national Operational HQs for command and control

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purposes. The EU´s own structures have been limited by both political design and their initial inadequacy. These limitations also hampered the planning and conduct of more modest operations.

The ATHENA mechanism played a role in alleviating the financial burden incurred by the deployment of troops at the EU´s request. Much of the operational costs, however, remained a national responsibility. And when the EU´s military operations came into being by the mid-2000s, the global overstretch of expeditionary forces caused by the Iraq and Afghan wars impacted negatively on them. The constraints on the availability of *ground* troops for the EU´s first military operations were initially relative, rather than absolute, but by the late 2000s had become more of a hindrance. Naval and air forces, however, remained available.

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• Intra-European drivers

For the EU, this meant that in particular the UK, one of the key initiators of ESDP/CSDP, came to play a limited role, with the exception of the first phase of the EU's Balkan operations and later for EU NAVFOR Atalanta. For Great Britain, NATO would always be the first choice, with the EU ideally performing less demanding operations and being the provider of civilian public goods.

France, the other main leading actor in the ESDP/CSDP effort, was keen on 'Europeanising' part of its Africa policy and has played a prominent role in the conduct of EU military operations, often in cooperation with small and medium-sized member states. By the late 2000s, France had reinforced its relationship with the US, further integrated itself into NATO´s military structures, and reoriented its security and defence policy towards the Middle East and South Asia. Paris has indeed experienced some EU 'fatigue' after several frustrating experiences of lack of support for African operations, including EUFOR Chad/CAR, EUFOR Libya and Operation Serval in Mali. Notably, the situation in Mali refocused French attention on Africa, as can be seen by renewed counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel.

For its part, Germany was initially caught between residual pacifism and a reluctance to get involved in African operations, particularly if pushed by the UK or France. Instead, Berlin tended to emphasise its military engagement in Afghanistan. Germany proved also particularly restrictive with regard to the use of the ATHENA mechanism for financing the deployment costs of military operations; it played a reluctant, if essential, role in the eventual provision of its OHQs in Potsdam to EUFOR RD Congo, and famously refused to take part in the NATO-led Libya campaign.

The different perspectives of the 'big three' have at times hampered the EU´s military operations. Smaller EU member states tended to provide follow-on-forces to those of the larger players interested in shifting resources to areas of potential new tensions in the Middle East and Asia. Some (such as Poland, Sweden, and Ireland) found the EU military umbrella a convenient one for coordinating their resources, transforming their defence sector and acquiring greater political influence.

Finally, the EU constituted an attraction pole for third countries (such as Norway, Ukraine, Croatia, Turkey, Switzerland, even Russia), interested in taking part in the EU's military operations, in part as a way to engage politically with the Union, and in part – for some of them – as a way of reinforcing their bid for EU membership.

• Regional security providers

The phenomenon of the six EU military operations cannot be understood exclusively from the perspective of European security or national policy. The multilateralisation of intervention since the end of the Cold War has opened up a new functional role for regional and sub-regional security providers.

Growing cooperation between the EU and the African Union in the security domain has allowed for a more equitable relationship between European and African states. The integration of different European countries into the EU has allayed (if not entirely overcome) fears in parts of Africa regarding post-colonial 'machinations' by European powers. Security cooperation between regional organisations also provides greater legitimacy to military crisis management. There are, however, limits to post-colonial redemption through the EU. The post-colonial legacy has at times been an inhibiting factor, as experienced in eastern DRC in 2008. That being said, in some specific areas of East and

West Africa, the respective legacies of Britain and France have instead provided a positive impetus. Finally, regional organisations increasingly field forces for their own security while outside actors (including the EU) provide financial means and training for these forces.

In fact, an implicit division of labour with regard to multilateral intervention is developing in which the EU has become a global actor while at times serving as a regional subcontractor to UN-mandated missions, often in the form of hybrid operations with regard to command and control. This is particularly evident in conflicts where the UN is the main venue for negotiation and there has been a previous UN military presence on the ground. The UN has not, to its chagrin, been able to access the rapid reaction tool represented by the EU´s Battlegroups, for the Europeans have been eager to retain their own command and control. The transition to expeditionary forces also meant that fewer European forces were available for traditional peacekeeping.

In the Balkans, a candidate region for EU (and NATO) accession, EU troops played the role of follow-on-forces to NATO, in accordance with the 'Berlin Plus' formula and after the termination of war due to the intervention of the Alliance.

In North Africa, NATO sided with the opposition in the Libyan civil war, through the provision of air superiority and training rebel forces. In this context, there was little room for an EU military role for a mixture of functional and political reasons.

Finally, in the anti-piracy operation in the Indian Ocean, EU forces entered into cooperation with new global partners (such as China) interested in maintaining the sea lanes of communication open and the uninterrupted flow of global trade.

The distinction between the local, regional and global levels has thus become less meaningful, as actors move freely in the international system. The global agenda has become more crowded as regional organisations such as the EU and NATO have taken on more of a global role.

A sustainable collective security

The multilateralisation of intervention has been a salient feature since the end of the Cold War. It has served many and sometimes opposing purposes, including the promotion of democratic peace, the legitimisation of humanitarian intervention (at times *ex post facto*), and the need to share costs and risks. During the 2000s, the number of conflicts did not increase, but some mutated into regional conflict 'clusters' that were more difficult to solve, be it by political or military means. The increased opportunity to intervene in failed states was tempered by the lack of success and, in several cases, the utility of force became problematic to ascertain.

The nearly spontaneous development of an international division of labour with regard to military crisis management has not been accompanied by any serious attempt to adapt the mechanisms of cooperation accordingly. This has been particularly inhibiting in the interface between the UN and regional organisations, recognised in principle by the UN Charter as a consequence of the inherent selectivity of the international security system and the persistent dominance of individual states at the negotiating table: well-positioned actors in the system can 'play the institutional piano' and participate in multiple contexts. This state of affairs is potentially dysfunctional and hampers transparency with regard to the ways conflict situations are chosen (or disregarded) for intervention. Deliberations on the reforms to the Security Council should include the accommodation of regional security providers.

The EU´s military operations serve interests and communities beyond (and larger than) the EU itself. The Union still has room to grow in order to fill the functional space for a European security provider in an international division of labour for military crisis management. And the pressure for the Europeans to assume greater responsibilities for security in and around their continent will increase. The resulting, underlying dynamics are therefore likely to continue to be felt in the coming decade.

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