European Union Institute for Security Studies

Expert Discussion 1 – Planning and launching military operations

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This session focused on the issue of military planning and CSDP operations. The military planning community in the EU currently finds itself confronted with a major challenge: how to ensure the continued relevance of the military instrument in a political climate that is hostile to expeditionary engagement? A novel set of crisis management procedures and a joint communication on the EU's comprehensive approach cannot hide the fact that European member states have collectively adopted a lukewarm attitude towards new EU military operations. The floundering of operational CSDP is tempting some members to return to a tradition of United Nations peacekeeping, nationally-led operations or a deterrent posture. This expert discussion addressed the implications of this state of affairs and sought to identify possible remedies to ensure that the EU remains a credible security actor.

The successive campaigns in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq have gradually sapped the basis of support in Western public opinion for overseas crisis management. Although the EU may not have had much to do with some of these individual engagements, it is nonetheless confronted with their impact in terms of popular perception. EU operation commanders experience grave difficulties in generating sufficient forces for filling their requirements. The recently launched EU military operation in the Central African Republic (EUFOR RCA Bangui) constitutes a case in point. If EU member states – with together close to 1.5 million personnel under arms – struggle to assemble a battalion-sized force in support of the shared objectives of the international community, it becomes clear that political rather than military hurdles constrain the EU's crisis response. The present atmosphere of euroscepticism and concerns over domestic issues such as unemployment create a very challenging context in which to shape an effective foreign policy. Political leaders inevitably need to strike a balance between competing imperatives, but must not lose sight of challenges over the longer term.

At the same time, there is growing clarity on why the EU engages in overseas security operations. As far as the military instrument is concerned, the EU does not act out of altruism, but out of interest – albeit in strict accordance with common values. Although interests are often interpreted from a national perspective, this does not negate the fact that many common European interests exist, even if the latter often manifest themselves asymmetrically. The example of trans-Mediterranean migration is a perfect illustration of this. Because of their shared borders, all member states participating in the Schengen area will eventually feel the impact of irregular maritime migration. As a result, European leaders must better communicate the commonality of many of their interests. This does not amount to an abdication of sovereignty; it rather reflects a desire to safeguard the ability to act by cooperating with European partners. The drafting of EU-wide Political Framework for Crisis Approach (PFCA) documents constitutes a useful procedural corollary in this regard. These framework documents help to spell out what are common interests and what Europeans can do to safeguard these collectively. As such, they help to better embed CSDP actions in a comprehensive European foreign policy and prove that the working mechanisms of the European External Action Service must continue to evolve.

The thorniest question concerns how to deal with the inevitable asymmetry of those interests European member states have in common. A recent German-Italian non-paper on the revision of the EU framework nation concept sought to address this issue at its core. A bottom–up approach towards contemplating new CSDP operations could allow for greater flexibility. When an individual member state initiates a military operation in response to an emergency situation, the Council of the EU could contemplate subsequent Europeanisation of the operation in the event that common interests can be identified. The initiating member state can then act as framework nation and integrate force packages offered by other member states into a coherent operational design. By relying on the assumption of national initial entry into an operational theatre, this proposal would dramatically improve the EU's military rapid response capabilities, as it offers an alternative to the ill-fated EU Battlegroup concept. The notion of pooling and sharing (already well-established in terms of capability development) would then acquire an operational counterpart. This of course presupposes that participating nations have forces available and have obtained national approval to engage them in a broader European effort. Whether such a variable geometry approach would strengthen Europe as a whole remained a matter of debate, however. It was pointed out that a framework nation tends to set a ceiling in terms of operational ambitions because it remains ultimately responsible for generating all mission essential capabilities. In that sense a framework nation acts as a cap rather than providing a common baseline.

Another response to the political reticence about launching military operations is to rely on proxy forces. Several participants observed that European member states have rediscovered the merits of pursuing an indirect approach. These ideas have deep historical roots. When the price per professional soldier increased in the course of the eighteenth century, European leaders became increasingly reluctant to contemplate military campaigns – at least until the concept of mass mobilisation made its first appearance in the French revolutionary wars. The similarities between the present are somewhat uncanny. In recent conflict theatres individual European member states have attempted to influence events by training or arming various local factions. This new approach also finds an expression in the EU's CSDP, the military strand of which is increasingly characterised by a preference for military training missions. Launching small operations on a regular basis is also seen as a practical way of maintaining force readiness. The rapidly increasing interest in unmanned systems and robotics arguably constitutes a contemporary counterpart to the industrialisation of warfare in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Effective military action depends to a large extent on the credibility of leadership. Political will and military credibility go hand in hand: this is the reason why the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy needs a close working relationship not only with European foreign ministers, but also with the ministers of defence. Political decisions on operational deployment cannot be separated from actual contributions: a force catalogue of what is theoretically available cannot substitute for a clear indication of what member states are ready to commit. A similar point was raised about command relationships. Unity of command in a military sense cannot exist independently from political unity. This was deemed to be the primary reason why the discussion on common European interests is key: all military activities must ultimately form the expression of political choices. Simultaneously, the credibility of European institutions and their leaders has an impact on the available political will of member states. If national politicians do not have confidence in the European command chain, they will be reluctant to engage their soldiers.

The expert discussion featured numerous complaints about sclerotic bureaucratic processes and discrepancies between authority and responsibility. Decisions on operations always have resourcing implications and military leaders had a clear message

to their political masters: either the EU must do less or member states must increase the level of resources devoted to their defence establishments and military operations. Modern militaries have a clear preference for lean organisations, but starved organisations are not effective either. Addressing such concerns was primarily seen as a communication challenge: politicians and public audiences need to be engaged in a frank debate about risks and emerging threats to the rules-based international order.

Various experts acknowledged that the institutional fault lines predating the Lisbon Treaty still exist. As a result, the EU's much-vaunted comprehensive approach presently relies on rhetoric rather than action. Ultimately this was deemed to reflect a constant challenge of mutual understanding. The military needs to learn a new language (colloquially known as 'civilian') and accept that the military instrument plays the role of junior partner in the EU. At the same time, civilian counterparts should learn to recognise that military organisations are designed to deal with extremes. In essence, military men and women are born and bred to go where no one else will go. Mutual respect for such institutional differences forms the basis for delivering a more effective European foreign and security policy.