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At the Helsinki summit in December 1999 EU governments committed themselves to revamping their military capabilities, so that their armies would be better equipped for international peacekeeping operations. Ten years on from the Helsinki summit, this policy brief examines how much progress EU governments have made on improving their military capabilities.

Strength in numbers?

Comparing EU military capabilities in 2009 with 1999

EU governments formally launched the European Security and Defence Policy (now renamed the Common Security and Defence Policy) in June 1999, shortly after NATO's war in Kosovo. That war exposed huge equipment gaps between US and European armed forces. Europeans did not have adequate transport or communications equipment, or enough deployable soldiers. Since the Helsinki summit in December 1999 therefore, EU governments have committed themselves to a number of military reform plans. The essential aim of these plans has been to develop more useful equipment for international peacekeeping, such as transport planes and helicopters, and encourage a reform of national armies oriented away from territorial defence towards external deployments.

Ten years on from the Helsinki summit, how much progress have EU governments made on improving their military capabilities? The table below, *Selected EU-27 military capabilities 1999-2009*, which is based on estimates from the 1999-2000 and 2009 editions of *The Military Balance* – published each year by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies – shows a mixed picture. The table is not absolutely definitive. Since it is based on estimates and some national data remains classified, it is meant as a rough guide to the

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Selected EU-27 military capabilities 1999-2009 *

	1999: EU-15	1999: EU-27		2009: EU-27	change '99-'09
Defence Expenditure **					
Total Expenditure (1997/2007)	€156.2 Bn	€162.9 Bn		€209.7 Bn	+ 29%
Expenditure / GDP (1997/2007)	2.1 %	2.1 %		1.7 %	- 19%
Budget / GDP (1998/2008)	1.7 %	1.8 %		1.4 %	- 22%
Armed Forces					
Total Active Military ***	1,789,868	2,508,908		2,013,990	
Army	1,125,718	1,516,378		996,234	- 34%
Navy	281,450	327,400		222,313	- 32%
Air Force	381,605	538,925		345,153	- 36%
Conscripts	669,770	1,131,020		212,785	- 81%
Equipment					
Land					
Main Battle Tanks	10,827	17,814		9,823	- 45%
Armoured Fighting Vehicles	6,851	10,622		7,951	- 25%
Armoured Personnel Carriers	19,751	26,311		22,844	- 13%
Aviation					
Fixed Wing Aircraft	5,600	7,453		5,401	- 28%
Fighter Jets	2,684	3,835		2,410	- 37%
Transport (incl. tankers)	439	612		898	+ 47%
Helicopters	3,515	4,732		3,573	- 24%
Attack	1,000	1,312		826	- 37%
Combat Support	969	1,305		849	- 35%
Utility (incl. transport)	445	584		1,076	+ 84%
Naval					
Aircraft Carriers	6	6		7	+ 17%
Destroyers	29	31		26	- 16%
Frigates	145	155		108	- 30%
Patrol and Coastal	314	521		811	+ 56%
Mine Warfare	208	296		243	- 18%
Amphibious	267	274		494	+ 80%

* The estimates in this table above are taken from *The Military Balance 1999-2000* and *The Military Balance 2009*, both published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). The 1999-2000 edition uses figures from November 1998, including for defence budgets – the exception is defence expenditure estimates which date from 1997. The 2009 edition uses figures from 2008, except for defence expenditure figures which date from 2007.

** To calculate defence expenditure in euro, the 1997 total defence expenditure figures were calculated using the European Central Bank (ECB) fixed rates to the euro in 1999 where possible, or the earliest available annual average exchange rate provided by the ECB. For 2007 figures, where necessary, the European Central Bank annual average exchange rates of the national currency to the euro were used.

*** These figures were further revised in the online version of this policy brief in January 2010. They include all servicemen and women on full-time duty such as joint staff as well as army, navy and air force estimates. Please note that estimates are based on *The Military Balance*'s definition of total active manpower, which has changed in some national cases between 1999 and 2009; for instance 2009 figures include *Gendarmerie/Carabinieri/Guardia Civil*, whilst 1999 figures do not. The percentage change has been left out to avoid offering a misleading picture.

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progress made on military capabilities since 1999. The table indicates that while military reform in Europe is a slow process, some concrete progress has been made by EU governments over the last decade – and this despite falling defence budgets combined with a constant growth in operational commitments in places such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chad, Kosovo and Lebanon.

Budgets and personnel

The 27 EU governments spent just over €160 billion on defence in 1999, which has since risen to almost €210 billion in 2008. However, this apparent rise is misleading, since defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP has fallen in the last ten years, from 2.1 % in 1997 to 1.7% in 2007. The figures for defence budgets – which should not be confused with defence expenditure – are even lower, having fallen from 1.8% of GDP in 1998 to 1.4% of GDP in 2008. Defence expenditure almost always exceeds planned budgets, not least because of operational pressures.

Furthermore, four countries provide roughly 70 percent of EU defence spending – the UK and France (43 percent) and Germany and Italy. Add the Dutch and Spanish defence budgets to the four bigger countries, and those six accounts for around 80 percent of EU spending. Add in Greece, Poland, Sweden and Belgium and only ten countries account for 90 percent of EU defence spending. Even if the other 17 EU countries re-programme their defence spending and focus on specific specialised activities, how the largest (and richest) countries spend their defence budgets has an enormous impact on overall EU figures.

In 1999 the 27 EU governments had almost 2.5 million personnel in their collective armed forces, including more than 1.1 million conscripts, which are costly and much less preferable for international peacekeeping operations than professional soldiers. In 2008, the 27 EU governments had reduced their armed forces to 2 million personnel, and just over 200,000 conscripts. European Defence Agency (EDA) data shows that in 2007 the 26 Member States of the EDA (Denmark is not a member) could deploy 444,000 soldiers, but could only sustain 110,000 on international operations – which nevertheless represents an increase of 10 percent on the previous year. This looks like progress, but according to a 2008 report from the European Council on Foreign Relations, written by the former Chief Executive of the EDA, a massive 70 percent of Europe's land forces remain unusable outside national territory.

Tanks, planes and helicopters

For different types of equipment, there are similar trends. In the land equipment sector, the total inventoried numbers of main battle tanks, armoured fighting vehicles and personnel carriers have all fallen, but their numbers are still high. For instance, the number of tanks has almost halved since 1999, but there are still close to 10,000 in total, many more than are needed for peacekeeping missions. For aircraft, the number of fighter jets has fallen from 3,800 to 2,400.

Helicopters have also been reduced from 4,700 to 3,500, although the number of utility helicopters – a category which includes vital transport helicopters – has doubled. The problem, however, is the quality and availability rather than the quantity of EU transport helicopters. Many of the EU's transport helicopters are unusable in certain types of conditions, such as in the desert. Javier Solana, the former High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, described the problem at a March 2009 EDA conference in the following terms: 'We are all aware that there is no shortage of helicopters in Europe. Inventories are high in numbers but the problem is that they are not deployable outside Europe in sufficient numbers.'

One of the biggest equipment weaknesses EU defence ministries identified in 1999 was a lack of transport planes (a category including air-to-air refuelling planes) and they have increased their number by almost 50 percent since that time. However, EU armed forces still lack strategic transport planes which can carry the heaviest loads. Transport planes are crucial for most types of military operations, including humanitarian missions – one of the reasons EU governments could not get aid quickly to South East Asia after the 2004 tsunami was because they did not have enough long-range transport planes. They only have access to 8 C-17s, and are still waiting for the first deliveries of the A400M transport plane.

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Pooling resources

In December 2008, EU governments agreed to a 'Declaration on strengthening military capabilities', which highlighted the need for EU Member States to develop more military capabilities together. Tentative efforts to encourage greater pooling of military resources have already started, such as the multinational 'battle groups' – formations of 1,500 well-equipped soldiers – to which most Member States contribute.

A number of EU governments would also save money by pooling more of their military equipment, especially aircraft, which are very expensive to maintain. For example, France and Germany train some of their Tiger helicopter pilots together, and could use the same combat helicopter units. But pooling the support operations for fighter aircraft and transport planes could yield even more considerable savings The EDA is already drafting proposals for pooling some of the 180 A400M transport planes that six EU countries plan to buy. In order to achieve significant cost savings, a transport fleet would have to operate from one main base, using a single planning, servicing and logistics organisation to support the fleet. In a similar vein, 12 EU countries own 150 Hercules C-130 transport aircraft; seven EU countries own 420 F-16 fighter aircraft between them; plus Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK have started deploying Eurofighters.

Until the EU initiated an anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia in 2008, the maritime dimension of ESDP had generally been ignored. Military ships, like military aircraft, are expensive, and EU defence ministries have reduced their numbers of destroyers, frigates and mine warfare vessels. Conversely they have increased their numbers of aircraft carriers (by one), patrol boats and amphibious vehicles (some of which are vital for logistical support to operations). In the same way as they could do with aircraft, defence ministries could save money by pooling some naval resources, or at least coordinating their naval deployments.

Some progress, but a slow process

A comparison of EU military capabilities in 1999 and 2009 shows that some progress has been made, especially in cutting conscripted personnel and inventories of outdated equipment. Military reform is not easy, and it encompasses a number of areas, such as types of troops, equipment acquisition and development, and doctrine. But the EU has only slowly woken from the slumber of Cold war military thinking over the last decade, and some countries are more awake than others. As a result, there are still a number of key capability weaknesses, such as strategic transport assets.

The good news is that in the coming years, based on their current procurement plans, EU countries should have a number of new strategic capabilities such as: A400M and more C-17 transport planes; A330 air tankers; Eurofighter, Rafale and Joint-Strike-Fighter jets; and Franco-British aircraft carriers. EU defence ministries will also be able to use Galileo – a satellite navigation system – to guide their equipment and define their positions. All this equipment will greatly add to the military prowess of Europe's armies in the future.

First test flight of the A400M military transporter from the Airbus facility in Seville, Spain, 11 December 2009.

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