Dickow, Marcel; Linnenkamp, Hilmar; Mölling, Christian

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The Case for a European Defence Review

Why National-level Armed Forces Planning Is Not Enough

Marcel Dickow, Hilmar Linnenkamp, and Christian Mölling

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is on the verge of collapse due to a lack of common resources and capabilities. Indeed, the EU Member States have an excess of some things, such as frigates and fighter aircraft, but an inadequate supply of other important components, including aerial refueling and reconnaissance capabilities. This is primarily because national preferences and traditions continue to play the decisive role in European defence planning. Despite the financial crisis and resulting austerity measures – and despite the often reiterated commitment to the CSDP vision – there is still a lack of resolve among EU Member States to building common ground in security and defence policy. It is not enough to seek cooperation in isolated areas through the pooling and sharing of capabilities or to announce the advent of "smarter defence". These measures will not be enough to move armed forces development from the narrow national level to a broader European base. A European Defence Review would establish a new point of departure for the development and coordination of the required capabilities. National military planning – an ongoing element of national sovereignty – requires such a framework if it is to be useful for the CSDP.

The European Union Member States are still struggling with the joint development of a security and defence policy for the EU – even now, more than ten years after this policy field was first introduced, and especially in the area of military policy. Clear evidence of insufficient coordination and the lack of shared resources and capabilities was seen in the NATO-led military operation in Libya, conducted outside the CSDP framework. In recent years, many EU states have taken stock how much they can and are willing to spend on defence efforts, but have done so only at the national level. An overall assessment of European defence policy and cooperation – a European Defence Review – is still urgently needed. Such an evaluation would transcend the usual declarations of intent, announcements of limited cooperation, and national illusions of sovereignty, and look squarely at the whole of Europe's possible and necessary contribution to joint defence and security.

The end of the illusions

Four emblematic approaches can be identified in the EU Member States' defence

Dr. Marcel Dickow is a Senior Associate, Dr. Christian Mölling an Associate in SWP's International Security division
Dr. Hilmar Linnenkamp is an Advisor to SWP's International Security division
The authors are members of the SWP cluster "Armament and Technology"

policy responses to the financial crisis: the reiteration and reinforcement of political assertions; increased orientation towards NATO; the establishment of regional, limited forms of cooperation; and the circumvention of the European Defence Agency (EDA). The financial pressure on public budgets in almost all of the EU Member States has not led to fundamental reflection on the current state and existing weaknesses of the CSDP. Even the workarounds of the recent past – especially the pooling and sharing of military capabilities, but also bilateral cooperation schemes (UK–France, France–Germany) – can no longer sustain the illusion of a common security and defence policy. All these activities lack a guiding European perspective. All of them – including regional initiatives like Nordefco and Visegrád, as well as the "smart defence" approach in NATO – are oriented towards using cooperation to plug gaps, dividing responsibilities on specific tasks to save money, or rationalising individual military capabilities. At most they add a European dimension to military capability planning that has already been fundamentally determined at the national level.

With the founding of the EDA in 2004, the European Union created an institution whose aim is to promote and strengthen the European dimension of national armed forces. The agency's core tasks explicitly included evaluating the military capability commitments made by the EU Member States and coordinating initiatives to facilitate European defence capability development. To this end, it can and should submit comprehensive alternative proposals encompassing everything up to a European Armed Forces. It is not doing so for two reasons. First, the national governments and the agency itself have resigned themselves to the idea of the EDA functioning as an outpost for national defence bureaucracies in Brussels. At best, therefore, it can express the widest possible consensus of the 27 defence ministers. Second, if the EDA should, of its own accord, present a comprehensive vision of common defence policy, the broader public might finally recognize that the Europeans have established a self-critical institution that has more than paid for itself by providing suggestions for the rationalization of European defence efforts – but in Europe's capital cities, scepticism towards "Brussels" would take the upper hand and cause these efforts to fail.

The sovereignty problem

The crisis in the CSDP has been smouldering almost unnoticed in the shadow of the financial crisis. Yet both developments are rooted in the same dilemma: common instruments (i.e., the euro and the strategies for saving it in the case of the financial and debt crisis) are destined to failure if common – that is, shared – responsibility is not assumed. But this calls the traditional concept of national sovereignty radically into question. The symbolic efforts that have been made in the CSDP (pooling and sharing, bi- and multi-lateral cooperation) barely infringe on the core of national defence policy sovereignty. The traditional guarantor of security in Europe, the Atlantic Alliance, is one reason why the CSDP is of only secondary importance in the eyes of many governments. The pressure from tight budgets in Europe has therefore led to a variety of workarounds but has not brought about any fundamental change in thinking in the direction of sharing sovereignty. One step in this direction would be to create a European air defence force. But even such a widely visible island of deepened cooperation and division of sovereignty would not be enough to slow the ongoing political erosion of the CSDP. This can only result from the EU reaching broader understanding over what military capabilities the Member States are willing and realistically able to jointly provide. Only then will it be possible to determine which political goals can be achieved through the maintenance and deployment of European military capacities.

This would mean nothing less than a complete reversal of the principle that has

guided defence planning up to now. The classic question has been: *How much is enough*? But for Europeans today, the question is: How much do we want to invest in defence and security, and how do we want to put it to use? The deeper reasons underlying this change are to be found in the nature of present-day threats, which are no longer so easily to predict or calculate as they were during the Cold War.

A joint review of European defence

Based on all the previous experiences, a new strategic approach – involving a shift of perspective from the national to the European level – cannot be built on the foundation of existing defence bureaucracies. Up to now, states have only been willing to contribute resources to joint planning when they had capabilities that seemed expendable from a national perspective, or where their own capabilities could only be maintained through cooperation with others. The forced austerity that will come to bear in the coming years will almost undoubtedly cause this practice to continue ad absurdum. Only an independent, outside perspective will be able to demonstrate potentials for innovation, savings, and cooperation so persuasively that Member States will put aside their narrow interests in their own sovereignty in favour of a broader interest in the common European good. Only then will it become plausible that the increased capacity for joint action can outweigh the loss of national sovereignty.

To illustrate the necessary change of perspective: a European air transport fleet cannot be conceived and developed based solely on what the individual states would be willing to contribute in case of need. Rather, the focus should be on developing the unique potential that can only be achieved through the carefully planned consolidation of national contributions. It is both necessary and useful to pool aircraft for EU deployment. But a European Air Transport Fleet will only be able to realise its full potential for joint savings and deployment when it is finally placed on a common foundation (development training, maintenance, procurement) and oriented toward European planning. What must be done, therefore, is to create joint instruments for joint European action. What the EU needs now is a broad assessment of the existing national capabilities with regard to their potential for the creation of joint European capabilities – the European Defence Review (EDR).

The EDR Commission

For this task, an independent commission of high-level experts from the security policy community should be established through a decision of the EU Council, and its members should be appointed by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR, who should not be part of the commission herself). It is important that the EDR Commission be given its own Secretariat and be supported by the EDA. The commitments of the EU Member States to cooperation would already be formulated in the Council decision. The European Commission and the European Parliament should each participate by sending one representative, who would not be subject to directives from their hierarchies. The High Representative would appoint at her own discretion the other members of the commission, consisting of ten or at most twelve members in total, with a preference for politicians rather than experts, generalists rather than generals. As proposed recently by Nick Witney, founding director of the EDA, the heads of government of the Weimar Triangle countries could press for an initiative of this kind within the EU.

The aim of the independent commission should be to submit a European Defence Review to the European Council, via the High Representative, within a period of twelve months. It should consist of two parts: an overall assessment of the national potentials relevant to common capabilities, and proposals for coordinated national

armed forces planning aimed at developing the joint military capabilities of the EU. To this end, the EDR commission would have to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the individual countries' military forces. Its primary task would thus be to identify existing redundancies and shortages – the individual EU Members have too much of some equipment (frigates, helicopters, fighter aircraft), but Europe has too little of others, including important joint capabilities (reconnaissance, communication, logistics). The commission should also identify where it would make sense to create complementarities and where excess capacities could be reduced.

The methodology of the Ghent initiative (categorising capabilities) can be extended further from a European perspective, applying to:

- first, capabilities that can only be created through the joint efforts of several or many EU Member States and are thus genuinely European;
- second, capabilities that are contributed by individual states or groups of states out of their national military resources for deployment in (national and) European operations;
- third, capabilities that Member States possess for use in their own interests and that remain outside the sphere of European plans and objectives.

The independent commission – a new opportunity

Although it would actually make a great deal of sense for the EDA to conduct a European Defence Review, the EU Member States have not granted it this role. The independent commission proposed here thus remains the only encouraging alternative. Its essential characteristics would be decisive in determining its chances of actually being used and of producing successful results. Most importantly, it should provide the EU Member States with advantages that they cannot gain on their own.

The commission would offer four particularly beneficial features:

- independence as a necessary precondition for its work. It would be free from pressures to accept national positions as legitimate and given, or to accommodate the interests of the political leaders who formed it;
- freedom and radicalism in its thinking – a way of thinking that opposes the conservative, status-quo-oriented, risk-minimising culture of the existing military bureaucratic apparatuses;
- decisions of a non-binding nature: the heads of state and government establishing the commission will not promise in advance to follow its proposals, but will instead retain their right to gather input and convince themselves – or, on the other hand, to shy away from too much bold change, too much integration, too much European rather than national sovereignty; and finally
- a sense of realism, the willingness to gaze unflinchingly into the chasm of budget consequences resulting from the financial crisis. What still appears possible to individual states in terms of incremental adaptations to the harsh limitations of resource scarcity (shifting, eliminating, or extending projects; reducing staff) will become apparent when looking at the broader European perspective as a patchwork. The Commission is obliged to take precisely this broader view.

In the CSDP, the traditional understanding of sovereignty is still dominant. The Member State governments should create a new opportunity for European common defence and security by appointing the independent commission proposed here.

SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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