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Research Report

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A Doable Agenda for the European Defence Council 2013

Three Proposals

Hilmar Linnenkamp and Christian Mölling

The EU heads of state and government have made their December European Council a litmus test for Europe's commitment to global security and defence. Yet the summit's agenda is a patchwork of dozens of tiny bureaucratic dossiers that will neither get CSDP back on track nor impress anybody outside Europe. To make the Council a success member states should opt for a sober assessment of the current situation through a European defence review as a basis for future decision making, increase their capacity to act jointly on defence matters by bolstering the European Defence Agency and agree on a small number of bold and realistic flagship projects.

When the EU heads of state and government meet for the December 2013 European Council they will debate defence for the first time since 2008. Bold calls for ground-breaking progress on CSDP from Berlin, Paris, and other capitals have created great expectations.

At the same time the agenda remains poorly defined, and the positions of the relevant players – member states and European Commission – are not visibly converging. For the time being only the agenda's threefold cluster structure is clear: effectiveness and visibility of CSDP, capabilities, and defence industry.

In any case, the Summit will signal how seriously Europe takes its own CSDP rhetoric and how seriously it should therefore be treated by the United States and the rest

of the world. The Council needs to establish a solid work programme that puts heads of state and government back in charge of defence policy. Otherwise, the question returns unaddressed to the hands of the foreign and defence ministers, who will continue taking only conservatory care of it – as they have done over the last five years.

The Council's Agenda: Situation and Context

Currently, the foreign and defence ministries of all 28 member states are busy generating their national contributions to the summit. When capitals think big, they float a new security strategy or even a European "Grand Strategy". When they think small, they become entangled in long lists of

procedural improvements and tiny projects like renovating the EU battlegroups – all worth debating but without the benefit of simplicity and political momentum. Nor has the other important player, the European Commission, come forward with any groundbreaking initiative. Its Communication of July 2013 sets the scene on defence industry matters but fails to reach beyond its traditional portfolio.

Strategic Choices: The Art of the Possible

National defence policies are dominated – besides cuts – by national and regional risk perceptions. The summit will not change that. Instead it must accept the divergence of political priorities as a given. While there is a general consensus that the EU wants to remain capable of bringing civil and military instruments to bear in crisis management operations, there is little consensus on where and when to engage militarily.

The European Council agenda should concentrate on realities, not wish lists or lofty but futile strategy documents. The fundamental question before the heads of state and government is: What is the real state of European defence? What military and industrial capabilities do the EU and its members have today and which will they have in twenty years time?

Asking which future capabilities EU-states would like to have would replicate two key mistakes of CSDP: first, assuming a consensus over priorities that does not exist, and, second, evading painful decisions in the present by debating how a bright future might look.

As strategies are permanent processes that continuously adapt ends and means to changing realities, a strategic approach to CSDP can start with a closer examination of the current and future availability of means. Adapting political objectives is a legitimate strategic choice if the means will not be available for the foreseeable future. Decision-makers should debate political ends once they are aware of the possible.

Complicated Context

What EU governments currently propose are either political commonplaces or incremental bureaucratic progress. And outside circumstances complicate the Council agenda. First, Germany will hold elections in September and the new government will not be up and running until immediately before the Council. It would be advisable for the ministries to have a well-prepared dossier of palpable proposals ready for the incoming government. Second, the United Kingdom will be unable to assume leadership for domestic reasons – at least not in the multilateral context of the European Council. Their 2010 Lancaster House agreement with France remains symbolic of the British preference for bilateral efforts. And France, for its part, seems not to strive for an ambitious all-European endeavour either, notwithstanding their modest commitment to European defence expressed in the 2013 White Paper.

Third, besides a potential restructuring of the EEAS, upcoming changes in key personnel at EU institutions will definitely impact on the implementation of any Council Conclusions. In fact they may already be reducing appetites within the institutions to channel energy into the tedious diplomatic groundwork. The Council President and High Representative may be replaced in 2014, as will the European Commission. In addition, there will be a new EU parliament in 2014.

What the Summit Can Achieve

One should not expect EU States to make the Summit a revolution – but it is not too much to ask them to implement what they have decided and build on what already works. Three initiatives should be on the table.

A European Defence Review

Heads of state and government should demand a European defence review, to be delivered within a year. There is already a

mandate for such a review, as the Council in November 2012 requested a coherent strategic reporting to the political level.

Europe needs an assessment before it decides how to develop its military capabilities in the following decades. Leaders need to know what they have today and what they will have in twenty years in terms of capabilities and in terms of industrial base. Such an assessment can significantly influence debates. For example, EU capitals are currently discussing buying armed drones that provide fire support from the air. Helicopters can cover the same task. A defence review will find out that Europe today has about 200 attack helicopters of the latest generation. In ten years the number will double to 400. These simple figures could change the perceived need for armed drones.

The review should be conducted by an independent commission to keep it as objective as possible: political but disinterested in national politics, oriented solely on a comprehensive and coherent European perspective.

An Empowered European Defence Agency

The heads of state and government should reinforce the European Defence Agency and reaffirm its comprehensive mandate. The EDA is authorised to deal with almost all aspects of defence and defence industry, whilst the market dimension clearly remains the European Commission's business. Moreover, the EDA is the core institution of the intergovernmental pillar of European defence. As the Commission seeks to increase its standing on defence, EU-States risk losing influence because the EDA lacks powers and resources to deal with the Commission on equal terms. Many decisions concerning defence already require the Commission to be involved, be they in industry, technology or trade policy. While individual capitals lack the bargaining weight, the EDA is the key to a successful balance between intergovernmental and supranational perspectives.

Leaders should allow the EDA to take a more active role in shaping the European defence technological and industrial base (EDTIB). Such a role would include the responsibility to monitor – in coordination with the Commission – strengths and weaknesses of member states' DTIB, along with potential for cooperation and consolidation. An EDTIB report would be prepared for a subsequent European Council. In addition, the EDA should receive more resources to set up joint programmes promoting streamlining of defence industry structures in Europe.

The Council provides an opportunity for a bold signal on the EDA's future – not because 2013 is the tenth anniversary of its establishment but because EDA is "its" institution, not one invented by defence ministers. Heads of state and government gave the agency very strong backing when they decided to establish such a body. It is only logical for the top leaders to take a look at how defence ministries have used the agency that was entrusted to them.

Flagship Projects

Potential flagships can send a political signal and trigger development in key areas of capabilities and industry.

A UAV programme as a technology driver

The EU states could immediately kick off a European UAV programme to develop a demonstrator for all the necessary technologies for the next generation of unmanned aerial systems. This would send a long-awaited signal to the European aerospace industry that member states are serious about closing the transatlantic gap in this important technology. An explicitly European programme would also prevent further fragmentation of the EDTIB by national programmes (as occurred with the last generation of fighter jets). And it is currently the case that neither national nor bilateral UAV programmes manage to gather

the necessary resources to fund a successful programme.

UAVs are also an issue for heads of state and government. Responsibility is distributed among various ministries – finance, interior, research, transport, defence – that have so far failed to come to a successful conclusion. Certain crucial competences belong to the Commission. If the states were to set up such a programme jointly with the Commission, they could also ensure greater coherence and applicability of the final product. As well as establishing a single standard for technologies and operation, the Commission could also finance such a programme on the basis of its dual-use character. While alternatives like helicopters may reduce demand for armed UAVs, the best market opportunities exist in the non-military domain.

A European air-policing wing as a defence cooperation driver

A European air policing wing could further defence cooperation. The model has already been shown to be successful, with many EU member states contributing to NATO's Baltic air policing. Building explicitly on NATO experience would establish an EU-NATO dimension for the Summit: it would make sense to have a forum where NATO and the EU can discuss lessons identified from cooperative air policing. Unlike many other defence cooperation projects, such a wing would have an obvious peacetime mission. It would not need war-like operations to demonstrate to the political level that such a formation was useful. Last but not least, such a wing would reflect the operational reality. Examples like the war in Libya show that future major air operations will most likely be conducted by formations with mixed platform types including assets from different nations. The wing could be used as a laboratory to train such cooperation and develop joint doctrines and training. Step by step, other areas like maintenance could be added.

The European Air Transport Fleet as a service industry driver

EU governments have already agreed to set up a European air transport fleet (EATF) by 2017. As implementation has been slow, the Summit would offer an opportunity to reaffirm the commitment. Strategic airlift is a key deficit for all European countries. Like air policing, airlift is also a peacetime mission. The EATF will need more than the commitment of national defence ministries. So far, several member states have signed maintenance contracts with national suppliers. Persuading suppliers and national air forces to establish an international repair and maintenance centre will inevitably involve economics and transport ministries. To make effective use of combined industrial resources the centre should be based upon national contractors but usable by all nations contributing to EATF.

A Doable Agenda

The December 2013 Council should not be a one-off, but a relaunch of the CSDP infrastructure: capabilities, industry, and the EDA as the key catalyst of progress in both areas. All three agenda items would come before the Council again in December 2014, with the defence review conducted between December 2013 and December 2014. That is also the timeframe in which the EDA, with the Council's agreement, reconsiders its more ambitious industrial agenda and prepares an action plan in concert with the European Commission. And, third, 2014 is the year the flagships set sail.

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