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Research Report

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SWP Comments, No. 7/2014

Provided in Cooperation with:

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin

Suggested Citation: von Ondarza, Nicolai; Overhaus, Marco (2014) : The CSDP after the december summit: To rebalance, the EU should focus less on missions and more on security and defence cooperation, SWP Comments, No. 7/2014, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/256275>

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The CSDP after the December Summit

To Rebalance, the EU Should Focus Less on Missions and More on Security and Defence Cooperation

Nicolai von Ondarza and Marco Overhaus

In December 2013 the heads of state and government for the first time in five years dedicated their European Council summit mainly to the Common Security and Defence Policy. In the run-up to the meeting there was no shortage of piecemeal proposals for enhancing the effectiveness of the CSDP and strengthening military capabilities and the European defence industry. What has been lacking is an overarching vision of where the CSDP should be heading and how individual reform initiatives should be prioritised. For sure, the European Council did not provide such a vision but instead decided on a number of follow-on processes. These now need to be exploited to the fullest possible extent in order to create a new foundation for the CSDP, which should be shifted away from crisis management towards European security and defence cooperation.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Union's national governments have come to define success and failure of the CSDP almost exclusively in terms of the sheer number of civilian and military missions (to date 30 completed or ongoing missions). This logic has led to the initiation or continuation of interventions whose security value is dubious, such as the operation to secure the airport in Juba in South Sudan or the two missions to reform the security sector in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Eleven of the seventeen ongoing CSDP operations have fewer than two hundred staff and are largely symbolic in terms of their effectiveness.

A one-sided focus on crisis management is no longer enough to legitimise and justify

the CSDP. Three political developments have to be taken into account in this regard.

Firstly, European and Western interventionism has fallen into crisis. Large sections of the European Union's populations and even governments have withdrawn their support for voluntary interventions in far-off conflicts. This is not only a matter of opinion polls; in August 2013 the British lower house rejected a military intervention in Syria, a sphere of great relevance for Europe.

Secondly, the Security and Defence Policy is not given high priority at the European Union level or in the member states. That is not in itself a new fact, as this policy sphere long ago lost its centrality for the existence of the nation, and is in that sense

no longer central to the national interest. The enormous political and financial efforts required to tackle the financial and debt crisis have further shifted priorities, resulting in deep – and uncoordinated – defence cuts in most member states.

Thirdly, hopes that CSDP operations would gradually cause the security and defence perspectives of the EU member states to converge have not been fulfilled. On the contrary, even ten years after the first CSDP mission a shared European “strategic culture” is nowhere in sight.

A Reorientation of the CSDP

The European Council summit of December 2013 was therefore staged as a turning point for the CSDP by Council President Herman Van Rompuy. For more than a year in its run-up, the “defence summit” served as a focal point for member states and EU actors like High Representative Catherine Ashton or the European Defence Agency (EDA) which prepared numerous piecemeal proposals, for example to slim down the planning and decision-making structures or to establish a number of capability development projects such as in the area of unmanned drones.

In sum, however, the long awaited conclusions of the “defence summit” amount to exactly that – a political message that “defence matters” followed by a list of often technical and institutional improvements. At the same time it falls short of achieving the fundamental reorientation that the EU security and defence policy needs. However, the European Council left a host of difficult questions explicitly open – notably capability planning, CSDP funding and the EU Battlegroups – to be decided in the near and medium future.

These open discussions should be used to shift the focus of CSDP from operations to security and defence cooperation. Essentially, the ability of individual groups of member states to act jointly must be preserved or strengthened, and at the same time integrated into a European frame-

work: “deploy less, but able to deploy more” should be the motto.

Specifically, three areas should be addressed: the instruments and processes of the CSDP in general, the EU’s rapid response capabilities and its strategic priorities.

The CSDP as Insurance

Firstly, the true core of security and defence policy – the idea of protection against (external) threats and challenges – should be returned to the centre of attention. This includes a rigorous examination of the effectiveness of CSDP operations to date and the possibility of ending ongoing missions. A military or civilian EU engagement should only be considered when the interests of several EU states are clearly affected and the Union has a realistic option for making an effective contribution to crisis response.

However, it will not always be possible to organise joint capabilities from all twenty-eight member states simultaneously. The European Council acknowledged this by promoting increased flexibility in capability development. It does not, however, lend impetus on the question of how to coordinate common European interest and the increase in regional “islands of cooperation” created through bottom-up engagement by some member states.

To retain the joint outlook on this cooperation the EU institutions – EEAS and EDA – should therefore strengthen these “clusters”. This would allow states with similar positions on security and defence questions to cooperate more closely within the joint EU framework; for example, the northern member states, the Franco-British tandem, or the Visegrád Group.

Suitable instruments for this coordination would be the development of joint security scenarios and contingency planning in the EEAS, the creation of transparency in defence planning through the EU Military Committee, and joint training measures and exercises supported by the

EDA. Joint funding of military CSDP operations (Athena mechanism) and the EU budget for civilian missions should support this, for example by providing funds for exercises. Here, the defence summit also offers a window of opportunity, as EU leaders tasked the High Representative and EDA to develop an EU policy framework for capability planning by the end of 2014. This should be aligned as closely as possible with the existing NATO planning process. In addition to organising regional clusters, the EU could also add value through synergies with other planning processes (such as the European Semester for budget planning) and with the civilian sphere.

Battlegroups and the European Union's Crisis Response

The development of European capabilities, in particular the EU Battlegroups (BGs), was another major issue in the run-up to the December 2013 Council. The BGs, introduced in 2004 by France and the United Kingdom, are still one-sidedly configured for very rapid deployment exclusively within the EU framework. The existing concept for the Battlegroups provides for high standby readiness (deployment within five to ten days) in combination with a rather rigid rotation principle. Both have proven problematic. Moreover, the experiences of Mali and Libya demonstrate that in acute crisis situations large individual nations such as France prefer to act alone or in small coalitions. They shy away from multi-lateral coordination processes when planning and preparing such operations.

The European Council endorsed some of the many reform proposals that were tabled beforehand, specifically with respect to making the Battlegroups more flexible and deployable. Already in November 2013 the Council of Foreign and Defence Ministers spelled out more detailed proposals on this (including training and advice to third countries, streamlining exercises and improving certification processes).

While these proposals still need to be implemented, the revision of the Battlegroup concept ought to be more ambitious: The BG should serve the purpose of establishing and expanding European crisis response capabilities in the member states, suitable for deployment in different contexts (NATO, European Union, United Nations).

Instead of organising its rapid response forces separately – and thus at high cost – as battlegroups, the European Union should integrate them into military capabilities through a stronger functional division of labour. Regional clusters – such as between countries with special naval capabilities – could then cooperate more intensely, for example to create rapid response capabilities for fighting piracy or securing shipping routes.

Essentially, the battlegroups need to be consolidated in long-term partnerships and systematically integrated into pooling and sharing initiatives. Smaller member states could also be offered material incentives by further expanding joint financing for these forms of multilateral cooperation.

Strategic Priorities

Thirdly, the European Union should make another attempt to integrate the CSDP into the strategic priorities of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Ever since the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 the same political dilemma has cropped up again and again: Changes in the EU's strategic environment require a revision of the ESS but a majority of EU decision-makers fear fruitless strategic debates would distract from the urgent challenges of the CFSP/CSDP.

There is also concern that a new document might fall short of the ESS, due to the requirement of consensus. Although High Representative Ashton called for a strategic review in her report for the defence summit, the European Council watered this down to just tasking the next High Representative in rather general terms to report

in 2015 on the “impact of changes in the global environment”.

Despite such worries, a strategic and political framework for the European Union’s foreign, security and defence policy remains absolutely necessary, all the more so given the increasing importance of regional clusters. A joint strategy for security and defence remains, like the CFSP, an indispensable frame ensuring that the Union stays together on security policy.

The next High Representative should therefore make more than full use of the cautious approach of the European Council and turn the report on global changes into a fully fledged strategic document. This document could thus represent the agenda for the High Representative’s work on the Union’s foreign, security and defence policy.

For sure, preparation of such a document should be preceded by as broad a process of consultation as possible. However, a unanimous decision by the heads of state and government or the foreign ministers of the member states would, unlike in 2003, not be required to adopt it.

This “strategic work programme” could thus offer a political framework through which the defence cooperation and the reorientation of CSDP could be integrated into the Union’s external relations.

Outlook

The European Council has stated that “defence matters”, but offered very few decisions to start the reorientation the CSDP needs. Mere institutional tweaking and piecemeal capacity projects will not fundamentally alter the current void in EU security and defence policy. To that extent, the windows of opportunities opened up by the tasks assigned by the Heads of State and Government to the various actors of CSDP for 2014/2015 should be used to the full extent. In this regard, the defence summit could still be used as a launch pad for the much-needed reform process.

A “strategic reorientation” of the Common Security and Defence Policy must be achieved: less crisis management and more European security and defence cooperation between member states. That will neither make crisis management obsolete nor lend the CSDP a purely military character. In future, however, the member states should concentrate their energies on a smaller number of operations, first and foremost in those cases where the European Union can really make a meaningful contribution.

The political deficits – the continuing discrepancies between member states and the low political priority given to security and defence policy – cannot be completely overcome. But they have less weight if the Union focuses on promoting the ability of its members to cooperate: through joint contingency planning, the expansion of training, exercises and standardisations at the European level. In that way the Union can both play out its strengths as a coordinating frame and, through the CSDP, in the medium term enable Europe to act effectively on foreign, security and defence policy.

The proposed shift of priorities in the CSDP would also require German decision-makers to reemphasise some of their principles. Firstly, cooperation between the European Union and NATO should be strengthened. Secondly, in the medium term Germany should explore to what extent it can function as a framework nation for smaller and medium-sized EU states. The recent reform of the German armed forces offers potential for such a role, although that would require Berlin to accept and promote regional clusters in EU defence cooperation.

The European Council is set to review the progress on the CSDP by mid 2015 at the latest. During this time, a step by step realignment of the CSDP should bring it closer to its original goal of enhancing the EU member states’ ability to jointly provide security and defence.

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ISSN 1861-1761

Translation by Meredith Dale

(English version of
SWP-Aktuell 58/2013)