



## Defence: The European Council Matters

*Sven Biscop & Jo Coelmont*

**Defence matters. This is the opening sentence (probably the shortest ever) of the conclusions of the December 2013 European Council. And that matters too.**

It had become quite necessary for the Heads of State and Government of the EU to address defence. In December 2010 the Foreign and Defence Ministers launched “Pooling and Sharing”, which initially created a good dynamic. That was fizzling out however. Faced with austerity, many defence establishments adopted hedgehog formation. Not pooling but protecting what means were left them became the order of the day. The limited initiatives that did materialize aimed mostly at maintaining what was there. But in terms of strategic enablers, nothing much was there, only shortfalls – and a shortfall cannot be pooled, one can only share the frustration. Alas, for many Member States investing in collective enablers did not go far beyond investing staff hours in project meetings.

### **1. THE PROCESS IS ON TRACK**

Kicking the issue up to the level of Heads of State and Government revitalized the debate. The year 2013 saw a flurry of activity, including an extensive report by the High Representative and a communication from the

Commission. Defence is now back on the agenda and it is there to stay, for the European Council “will address concrete progress on all issues in June 2015”. The start of a process of top-down steering at the highest political level (and in the EU, process matters) is Herman Van Rompuy’s **1<sup>st</sup> achievement** in making defence *Chefsache*.

### **2. PROGRAMMES HAVE BEEN INITIATED**

This hectic debate has already produced concrete results, thanks to the leadership of individual Member States and the European Defence Agency (EDA). In several of the priority areas, the European Council was able to welcome multinational programmes on strategic enablers: drones, air-to-air refuelling, satellite communication and cyber security. The substantial increase in European enablers that ought to be the result will constitute the **2<sup>nd</sup> achievement** of the European Council.

### **3. THE COMMISSION IS ON BOARD**

In most if not all of these programmes, the Commission will have an important part to play. The reason is obvious: strategic enablers are mostly dual-use, for they can enable military as well as civilian actions, and they concern both external and internal security. That certainly applies to research, where a preparatory action on CSDP-related research will be set up and funds can be mobilized

under Horizon 2020. But Member States should not hesitate to make the most of the Commission's creative proposal to also (co)finance actual dual-use projects. Instead of seeing it as Commission intrusion into an area that they regard as their *chasse gardée*, Member States should welcome the application of the comprehensive approach to capability development as well, especially as their own investment budgets are shrinking.

At least an important first step has been made towards recognizing the civilian-military nature of strategic enablers, integrating the internal and external dimensions (including the CSDP, cyber security, energy security, and the area of Freedom, Security and Justice) and, consequently, enhancing the role of the Commission across the spectrum of security and defence – a **3<sup>rd</sup> achievement**.

Now that some programmes on strategic enablers have been initiated, more Member States should sign up to them and invest, to make them economically viable. The first step often is creating user communities and increasing coordination in order to make more cost-effective use of existing capacity. That is a crucial first step, but we should not lose sight of the end goal: developing new European platforms, such as drones, tankers and satellites. Furthermore in December 2011 the Council actually prioritized 11 projects: the remaining areas should not be forgotten. The capabilities that will ultimately result from these multinational projects should be managed in a multinational way; the European Council explicitly encouraged Member States “to replicate” the flexible yet far-reaching model of European Air Transport Command (EATC).

The pressure has to be kept up therefore. The knowledge that in June 2015 the European Council will assess performance is one way. In addition, as of now the EDA, the Commission and key governments should take the initiative to go around Europe and actively recruit more Member States for the projects that they want to champion.

#### 4. POOLED PROCUREMENT

At the same time as pursuing projects on strategic enablers at the European level, and partially as a precondition for that, Member States should step up again pooling and sharing in the various regional clusters. Only very ambitious pooling and sharing, allowing for the rationalization of supporting services and for concentration on a reduced number of bases, will enable Member States: (1) to maintain their current capacity for deployment, (2) eventually to modernize it by upgrading to new platforms, and (3) to create budgetary margin of manoeuvre to invest in the European projects on strategic enablers.

Belgian-Dutch naval integration is the best example of how maximal pooling and even specialization can be reconciled with maximal sovereignty and flexibility. Using the same equipment, national platforms manned by national crews are now entirely supported by headquarters, logistics, maintenance and training that are either binational or only provided by one nation for both forces. Objectively, there is no reason why the same model could not be immediately applied to other capability areas, between the Benelux countries as between the Nordic, Baltic, Visegrad and Weimar countries. The European Council invited the EDA “to examine ways in which Member States can cooperate more effectively and efficiently in pooled procurement projects”, and report to the Council by the end of 2014 already. This can be a great facilitator in this regard, as would eventual incentives (fiscal and other) – a **4<sup>th</sup> achievement**.

#### 5. CONVERGENCE OF DEFENCE PLANNING

In some areas capability will thus be offered by several Member States and/or smaller clusters of Member States (and Member States will of course participate in several, partially overlapping, clusters at once, choosing partners in function of the capability areas in which they want to remain active). In other areas there will likely be only one large cluster, because strategic enablers require a much bigger critical mass. To make sure that this

complex puzzle in the end produces a coherent set of capabilities at the level of all EU Member States together (without each Member State having to be active in each area), requires “increased transparency and information sharing in defence planning, allowing national planners and decision-makers to consider greater convergence of capability needs and timelines”, as the European Council rightly stated. Its tasking to the High Representative and the EDA “to put forward an appropriate policy framework by the end of 2014, in full coherence with existing NATO planning processes”, is a crucial **5<sup>th</sup> achievement** therefore.

Today we have national defence planning, and the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) for the Alliance as a whole. Yet in reality, significant additional capability will more likely be generated by clusters of European countries than by individual nations. And when it comes to operations, because of the “pivot” of the American strategic focus to Asia and the Pacific it is more likely that interventions in Europe’s broader neighbourhood will be launched by Europeans than by NATO as a whole. The European Council’s tasking would thus precisely fill the gap in defence planning between the national and NATO levels: what is the level of ambition for the European pillar of NATO/the CSDP? Those collective goals can then be incorporated into the NDPP.

The High Representative and the EDA need not start from scratch, but can build on the ongoing update of the Capability Development Plan (CDP), increasing the degree of information-sharing, and endowing it with a mechanism to identify and act upon opportunities for convergence. This concerns the already identified 11 priority projects, but now is also the time to start a collective reflection on the longer-term capability needs, so as to be able to launch actual development collectively from the start as well. Most new capabilities entering our arsenals today have been initiated 15 to 20 years ago or more. Because of the focus on the immediate operational needs of our major engagement in Afghanistan (and, for some, Iraq) no major

initiatives have been taken for a decade or so. If we want to avoid a gap in 20-25 years the time to act is now.

## 6. STRATEGY!

Defence planning leads us to the eminent political question. Yes, defence matters – but why? The High Representative in fact answered that question in an unexpectedly bold fashion in her preparatory report. Europe needs strategic autonomy; which starts in its neighbourhood, broadly defined (including the Sahel and the Horn, to which we would add the Gulf); where we have to be able to project power; with partners if possible but alone if necessary; in order to protect our interests. Read together with the fact of Europe’s global maritime interests, as evidenced by the European Council’s call to adopt a Maritime Security Strategy by June 2014 (and subsequent action plans), these five points constitute the clearest political statement yet on Europe’s role as a security provider. This would have been the logical starting point for the update of the CDP and any reflection on future capabilities. The European Council had only to copy and paste from Ashton’s report therefore – but alas it did not.

All the more unfortunate because moreover, like the tasking on convergence in defence planning, these five points address the European pillar of NATO/the CSDP simultaneously. In other words, this really concerns “the state of defence in Europe”, as Van Rompuy originally envisaged, and not just the CSDP. The real question is not what are NATO and what are CSDP prerogatives, but what is *Europe’s* role as a security provider and its consequent military level of ambition, regardless of whether in a specific crisis Europeans will act under the national, NATO or EU flag. Unfortunately, and in spite of Van Rompuy’s bold statement, the European Council was prepared through the usual EU channels and thus ended up being “just about the CSDP” anyway.

The European Council did at least invite “the High Representative, in close cooperation with the Commission, to assess the impact of

changes in the global environment, and to report to the Council in the course of 2015 on the challenges and opportunities arising for the Union, following consultations with the Member States". In layman's terms: please produce a strategy for Europe's role as a security provider – a **6<sup>th</sup> achievement** which will allow us to salvage the excellent language from Ashton's report.

### 7. VISIBILITY

To say that the "state of defence in Europe" is in a state of emergency is only a slight exaggeration. The European Council did not bring us into a state of grace yet, but at least we are no longer in a state of denial. The issue is on everybody's mind now, from the Heads of State and Government to public opinion and the media. Perhaps this is a good starting point for

the High Representative to develop a real communications strategy on European defence, the absence of which is a strategic shortfall in its own right. Visibility was an item on the agenda of the European Council and has certainly been achieved for now – a **7<sup>th</sup> achievement** to prove that this European Council matters.

*Prof. Dr. Sven BISCOP is director of the Europe in the World programme at Egmont, and teaches at Ghent University and at the College of Europe in Bruges. Brigadier-General (Ret.) Jo COELMONT, former Permanent Military Representative of Belgium to the EUMC, is a Senior Associate Fellow at Egmont.*