

Another perfect storm for European defence – but can the Union really make strength?

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On 14 November, following a jumbo meeting featuring EU foreign and defence ministers, the Council of the EU adopted the Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the area of Security and Defence.

This rather dense document is the latest development of a four-year ‘saga’, which started in December 2012 by then European Council President Herman Van Rompuy, who brought the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) back to the top of EU policy-making. The CSDP was re-energised by the release of the *EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy* (EUGS) by High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP) Federica Mogherini in June this year.

Although a major breakthrough in the CSDP is unlikely to materialise in the immediate future, the conclusions still provide an encouraging step in the long-term process of defence integration and wider strategic convergence across Europe.

From the EUGS to the November Council Conclusions: A hard-fought battle over CSDP empowerment

Certainly, renewed emphasis on the CSDP, including on its sensitive military components, featured among the main elements of the Global Strategy. Under the overall political guidance of Mogherini, and also following contributions such as the recent Franco-German and Italian papers, an Implementation Plan on Security and Defence was drafted by the European External Action Service (EEAS) in close coordination with EU member states and other institutions and bodies. The extensive plan, which was delivered very quickly by EU standards, was officially presented by the HR/VP to the foreign and defence ministers, and formed the basis of the November Council Conclusions.

Given the sensitive nature of the topics under discussion, negotiations over the plan clearly revealed some persisting dividing lines between European capitals. These include: the geographic priorities of the EU’s security projection in the eastern and southern neighbourhood; the ‘complementarity vs. duplication’ debate between CSDP and NATO; financial burden-sharing for CSDP missions and operations; a potential securitisation of migration; support for third countries in the security field; cooperation/competition in Europe’s defence industry; and if and how to inaugurate a multi-speed Europe in defence matters, notably via the instrument of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). In the end, the *gateau* emerging from the Council’s kitchen looked more like a multi-layered Bavarian cake than a homogeneous *crème anglaise*.

The Council agreed to review CSDP civilian missions and their management by spring 2017, and revise the defence capability priorities and requirements for military operations by spring 2018, based on a new “Level of Ambition” attached to the conclusions, which extended the types of potential CSDP missions and operations. It tasked the HR/VP to present a Co-ordinated Annual Review on Defence to spur greater intra-European cooperation on capability development and planning by spring 2018, and welcomed the European Commission’s forthcoming Defence Action Plan on industrial matters, including its expected proposal to fund defence research and capabilities via a European Defence Research Programme from 2020 onwards, and a (still vague) European Defence Investment Fund.

Ministers mandated the HR/VP to make proposals by mid-2017 on the strategic planning and conduct of CSDP missions and operations, notably on a permanent operational capability for *non-executive* military operations, working jointly with civilian missions. This area, however, remains a subject of controversy among member states, given the opposition of London and other capitals to the establishment of a permanent EU headquarter for CSDP *executive* military operations. The Council also invited the HR/VP to provide proposals by mid-2017 to make full use of the EU’s (dormant) Battlegroups and envisaged a ‘comprehensive’ revision of the Athena mechanism to finance military operations by end 2017. Lastly, it called for a quick implementation of EU measures to support capacity-

building in third countries in security and development, with a special focus on Africa; urged to explore practical ways to implement PESCO; and invited the HR/VP to present options for a more strategic cooperation with CSDP partner countries. In line with a tradition dating back to the 2012 European Council Conclusions, ministers then invited the HR/VP to present a first annual report on her mandated tasks by the end of next year.

An encouraging step in European defence integration

Overall, and despite unavoidable diplomatic horse-trading, the November Council Conclusions represent an encouraging step in a politically uncertain and technically complex path towards a more effective, responsive and visible CSDP.

Clearly, recent (geo)political developments, both within and outside Europe, spanning from the long-term impacts of Brexit on European military cooperation all the way to the election of a presumably more isolationist and less NATO-enthusiastic US president, are providing the umpteenth perfect storm conditions for European defence integration to make tangible progress in the near future. While external drivers, such as the US pivot towards Asia, and deteriorating security in the southern and eastern neighbourhood have not been lacking in the past, these more recent factors might affect the very political core of European and transatlantic security. They may also help generate new momentum for Europeans to walk the walk in military matters.

It will ultimately be up to member states, notably the bigger ones (especially Germany, whose new leadership in security matters is becoming clearer), with the support of EU institutions and bodies (particularly the EEAS, the European Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA)) to deliver a more ambitious mix of strategic vision, political compromise and a practical toolbox to advance the long-standing but stuttering project of European integration in military matters.

This should also be achieved by securing the support of Eurosceptic public opinion across the EU, including by better showcasing the added value of CSDP missions and operations. It is also crucial to persuade third countries and organisations, from incumbent and emerging world powers to EU partners such as the UN and NATO that – as Mogherini rightly noted in her foreword to the EUGS – hard power must go hand in hand with soft power, if the EU is serious about taking more responsibilities in a growingly uncertain regional and global environment.

Given the multiple crises affecting European political cohesion at large, ongoing visible divergences in foreign and security policy traditions and priorities among national capitals, and the severe limits posed by the legal, procedural and financial features of CSDP, it would clearly be naive to expect a major breakthrough in European defence integration anytime soon. This, without mentioning the intellectually intriguing but politically remote idea of an EU army. Yet, pragmatically investing in a stronger European defence posture, including via the EU, would represent a forward-looking decision in an international environment marked by the enduring relevance – for good and for bad – of military might.

The forthcoming European Council in December, and the following deliberations, should provide a fairly clear indication of whether the Union can make strength – this time, literally.

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