



## With PESCO Brought to Life, Will European Defence Live Happily Ever After?

*Jo Coelmont*

In 2003 already, the draft constitutional treaty elaborated by the European Convention included several articles that amounted to a move from an entirely intergovernmental European Security and Defence Policy to a Common Security and Defence Policy. These articles found their way, unchanged, into the Lisbon Treaty. But, they have hardly been used, including the clauses on Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).

### **SLEEPING BEAUTY**

An attempt was made to activate PESCO, in 2010, under Belgian Presidency, but there was no political appetite for it. “Pooling and sharing” was feasible, but that soon turned out to be nothing but another buzzword, another euphemism for muddling through. The result was predictable: a further shrinking of military capabilities.

At the time, many experts on CSDP declared PESCO to be dead and buried. Some however – those who, like Churchill, are well aware that “success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm” – persistently kept publishing policy papers about it. And now a first success has been achieved: the European Council has decided to awaken the sleeping beauty.

The point is now not to become overenthusiastic and to act very cautiously. For even in a fairy tale, miracles happen only once. The most important sentence of every fairy tale is the final one: and they lived happily ever after. How can we ensure that once awoken, PESCO this time around will remain alive? Does the political ambition to fully exploit its potential exist? If not, it will be a lost opportunity, and we may not be able to try again for many years, or ever.

### **PART AND PARCEL OF A GENUINE EU PROCESS?**

In the EU process matters. It's even a *conditio sine qua non* to achieve success. Is there a political process today aiming at more union in European defence?

A first step was taken in the autumn of 2012 by the then President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy. Having attended first a NAVO Summit in Chicago – hometown of then US President Barack Obama – and subsequently a G 8 meeting, Van Rompuy noticed that at this level the impact of the participating EU member states and of the Union as such was rather suboptimal. Not just on defence, but also on issues of geopolitics and even of geo-economics.

Apparently something was missing. He then decided to put defence regularly on the agenda of the European Council, i.e. at the level of Heads of State and Government. Henceforth

it was no longer strictly about the “hailed” bottom-up approach. Some top-down steering was to be injected as well. This introduced nothing less than a new mind-set into the Union. Defence was now to be considered a collective responsibility. At the European Council meeting of December 2013 a new EU process was launched.

The second step was taken one year ago, mid 2016, with the publication of the *EU Global Strategy*. Contrary to the 2003 *European Security Strategy*, this is a call for action above all: a call for permanent and structured cooperation between Member States and the Union as such, for an implementation plan, and for regular reviews.

A clear military level of ambition is the only element that is lacking in the *Global Strategy* to turn it into a genuine strategy. Thus the *Global Strategy* should also be read as a call is to collectively identify the military level of ambition that is to underpin the political level of ambition that the strategy expresses.

With all these calls for action stemming from the *Global Strategy*, we are witnessing the start of a permanent EU process, at so many levels.

A third remarkable step was taken last month, on 7 June, by the Commission, which proposed a European Defence Fund with links to PESCO, to the European Investment Bank and even to a series of other EU policies, including the Stability and Growth Pact. Over time this initiative may well reveal to be the long-awaited *practical* game-changer. Indeed, from a military, industrial, financial and even from a political perspective, the direct benefits for Member States in taking part in PESCO and CARD (the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence) are all too obvious. For big and small countries alike. Once again this is nothing less than a new mind-set bridging Justus Lipsius and Berlaymont. Times are a-changing.

And last but not least, we have the recent European Council decisions on defence. PESCO is to be launched by October. A process is definitely ongoing.

## A NEW STATE OF PLAY

Moreover the current state of play of European Defence is crystal-clear. We are now dealing with 5 new realities. (1) All the perceived taboos or fabricated excuses put forward not to launch a credible European Defence are gone with the wind. (2) We have a tick in the box on treaties, strategy, process, instruments, agencies, incentives – you name it. (3) On working together with NATO “to the extent possible” we have a tick in the box as well: it is an ongoing process. (4) For Member States that in the past were hiding behind a UK position (or opposition), that is no longer an option. (5) A Franco-German axis in defence is in the making.

We are witnessing a genuine movement, embedded within the Union and supported by most if not all Member States. It is in line with the new geostrategic era that we just entered and with what public opinion is expecting from the EU.

Political leadership is and will remain crucial throughout this process. There are clear signs of strong leadership within the Commission and the Council. As to the launch of “a PESCO fit for purpose”, the Franco-German axis in defence may well prove to be decisive.

## STILL A HALLUCINATION?

All preconditions to reach the political objectives may be present, yet success is still very far from being guaranteed. The military is known to be but a catalyst, but at times an indispensable catalyst to achieve the desired political outcome. A security strategy without military capabilities is nothing but a hallucination therefore. In other words, it is now about generating capabilities. On this the ball is meanly in the camp of the Member States and by extension in the hands all of our European citizens, you and me.

## THE “TO-DO LIST” OF THE 27

Three actions ought to be taken rather urgently.

First, to collectively identify the quantitative

and qualitative *military level of ambition* that is consistent with our declared political level of ambition. Some of our capitals advocate sticking to the existing Headline Goal. In all honesty, that would amount to preparing for the past. Looking to the future, perhaps even the immediate future, we ought to be able to handle a Libya scenario or a Sahel scenario. This would probably require the current Headline Goal *times 2*. That is an ambition more in line with the EUGS. It is also a reasonable challenge for Europe. For Europe has more citizens than the US and Russia together and boasts an impressive GDP. Against this background, the existing Headline Goal is below level. (And the Battlegroups no more than a detail – at most a useful first-entry unit for a larger force).

Also, let us not forget that not that long ago, European countries deployed over 100,000 troops on crisis management operations conducted in the context of NATO, the EU, the UN, ad hoc coalitions and/or national operations. One must indeed note that the total number of men and women in uniform has gone down. Hence, in the future, if we want to generate that same level of effort and even go beyond that level, we will only be able to do so if most – and preferably all – of the 27 Member States cooperate in a very permanent and a very structured way, on capabilities, on interoperability and on effectively deploying together. And on doing so together with our partners, such as notably the UK. This is reasonable, doable, and more than commendable.

Second, we need to set up a genuine HQ, for non-executive and for executive EU operations alike. If you have the ambition to launch crisis management operations, you need a dedicated HQ, a permanent one, and a “full OPS” one, not only for preventive actions, but for all scenarios one can imagine. That simple military logic is applied worldwide, in each country, alliance or organisation dealing with operations, with but one notorious exception: the EU. Let’s no longer be too timid.

Last but not least we ought to launch PESCO. Of the essence is to ensure that it is fit for

purpose. The “Do’s and Don’ts” to that end are quintuple.

### ON AMBITION AND INCLUSIVENESS

PESCO has to live up to its declared ambition: politically, militarily, operationally, financially and industrially. The motto should be: as inclusive as possible and as ambitious as the EUGS – with the emphasis on ambition. The necessary solidarity among participating Member States to live up to the obligations of PESCO cannot be put into question. Up to each Member State to choose whether it wants to join – and thus commit.

Of course, it is important for each capability programme to reach the required critical mass of participating countries. But that can also be done by cooperating with countries that have not joined PESCO. This should leave us sufficient space to have a constructive debate on the most apt degree of inclusivity of PESCO.

### ON INDUSTRY

It is not up to industry to select projects and programmes for military weapon systems and, subsequently, to absorb the financial incentives offered by the Commission. Henceforth EU funds are involved – meaning financial means provided by all 27 Member States. This implies we ought to act very, very cautiously. If ever there are signs that EU money is being spent simply to please some industries by selecting programmes that are not in line with CSDP requirements, PESCO is in danger of sudden death. At all times the focus has to be on the priorities that have been collectively identified within the CSDP structures.

### ON CAPABILITIES

Capabilities must be integrated to the extent possible. Integration is not restricted to common procurement: we need common programme management from cradle to grave, with common logistics, common updates to preferably preserve a single common configuration, and even common doctrines, training and exercising. Capabilities exist to be deployed when and where necessary. PESCO is to *facilitate* common deployments. That is one

of its most essential objectives, while fully respecting the sovereign decision-making by Member States on taking part in military operations.

### **ON OPERATIONS**

PESCO should make an end to the famous saying, about EU force generation conferences, that goes as follows: never before in the history of the European Union, have so few countries had to do so much in the name of so many. For perpetuating this condition is not only lethal to PESCO, but to the Union as such.

### **A NEW MIND SET AT ALL LEVELS**

To make all of this happen, to arrive at tangible results on capability development and on joint deployments, we have to have all stakeholders on board. Heads of State and Government is not good enough. We need to have the MODs, the CHODs, the Armament directors and many others. Also a series of bureaucratic circles, for we need to inject a new-mind set. To do so, it is advisable to start at the top. Perhaps the EU monetary union may inspire us. We could for instance propose to the MODs to elect a kind of permanent chairman of informal PESCO meetings.

### **CONCLUSION: L'ARGENT, LE NERF D'UNE PAIX DURABLE**

The conclusion can be very brief. Without proper funding, whatever percentage of GDP this will entail, PESCO and for that matter European Defence as well will remain a hallucination. It has become very clear that Europe can no longer afford the cost of a neglected defence, for it is very high indeed – and it does not help our sovereignty.

In the end PESCO is about 100% national sovereignty coupled with 100 % European solidarity. You can't have the one without the other. And that goes for smaller and bigger member states alike.

*Brigadier-General (Ret.) Jo Coelmont, former Permanent Military Representative of Belgium to the EU Military Committee, is a Senior Research Associate at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations and at the Royal Higher Institute for Defence.*