



# DON'T BE TOO SHY ABOUT PESCO



By Sven Biscop (<http://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (6 September 2018)  
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## DON'T BE TOO SHY ABOUT PESCO

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These points are not without ground. First, the notion of a European army has become toxic, and therefore counterproductive. Presenting PESCO as a step towards a European army will generate resistance that would not otherwise be there. Second, Member States have but a single set of forces, hence care should of course be taken that the EU and NATO do not create competing demands on those forces. As the means are limited, unnecessary duplications of tasks and structures should be avoided. Third, expectations management is important. Many times in the past, both the EU and NATO have announced grand initiatives with a lot of fanfare, only to see them fizzle out quietly. It is understandable that many are sceptical about yet another scheme, PESCO. At the same time, others are perhaps too enthusiastic and unrealistic in their expectations. It will indeed take a lot of time before PESCO results in a substantial increase of military capacity and a significant degree of strategic autonomy.

By being all too nuanced about it, however, the EU is at risk of undermining PESCO even before it has really taken off. The EU should not set unrealistic goals, but it should not sin in the other sense either. By setting goals that are too modest in relation to the available means and the threats and challenges to Europe's vital interests, the EU risks defeat. Let us be nuanced about the nuances, therefore.

A European army is, in fact, a very good idea. Had the six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community gone through with their plan to create a European Defence Community and merged their armed forces into a single European force in the 1950s, things would have looked very different today. It is indeed advisable to avoid the use of the words "European army", but the EU should stress that the aim of PESCO is to make a real leap forward in European defence. That will not be possible just by stepping up cooperation between Member States' armed forces. This effectively demands European military *integration*. National combat units must be anchored into permanent multinational formations, with permanent multinational command and control arrangements, supported by permanent multinational enablers. In many areas, multinational structures will have to replace national structures. The low-hanging fruit has already been plucked; now it is time to start chopping off superfluous branches in order for the tree to grow stronger.

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Complementarity between the EU and NATO is a concern, but it should not be allowed to become a constraint. In fact, complementarity is more or less automatic, since the purpose of PESCO is to generate military capability. All additional military capability that the EU Member States acquire through PESCO, whether it be operated on a national or on a multinational basis, ipso facto enters the balance sheet of NATO, since these states are all members or partners of the Alliance (except one). In fact, PESCO is the *only* way through which NATO can expect significant increases in European capability in key areas, notably strategic enablers. Even if all European allies would spend 2% of GDP on defence, they would still not be able to afford capital-intensive enablers if they would all spend these sums separately – they could only do so if they pool their defence effort. In PESCO, the EU now has a mechanism to do just that, and it directly serves both the Union and the Alliance.

Finally, scepticism should not turn into cynicism. There are good grounds for expecting more from PESCO than from any previous initiative, because it is fundamentally different. First, it truly is Member State-driven: if France and Germany had not initiated it, and then gathered the support of other capitals, PESCO would not have been activated. Second, it has been institutionalised and therefore cannot simply fizzle out and disappear: it is part of the EU machinery now, and every year the Council will assess the National Implementation Plans that Member States will have to draw up. Third, for the first time Member States that take the initiative can be rewarded with co-funding from the EU budget, thanks to the Commission's European Defence Fund. There is, of course, no guarantee that PESCO will deliver: Member States have equipped themselves with the tool, now they must put it to good use. But it certainly has a very good chance.

Obviously, capability projects do take a long time. The much talked about next generation combat aircraft is a case in point. If an industrial consortium would emerge (which would probably have to encompass all, or nearly, of Europe's aerospace industry) that would construct the future European combat aircraft, that would be an emblematic achievement for PESCO and European defence. But no aircraft will be operational before the 2040s at the earliest, if work on it starts today. That is precisely the point to be emphasised: it is because of the long timelines that work must be started in earnest as soon as possible. This will be the benchmark against which the success or failure of PESCO will be judged: will significant capability projects have been launched in the first three to five years after its activation?

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