



EU Battlegroups – ready to go?

by Anna Barcikowska

Nearly 15 years ago, in December 1998, at the Anglo-French summit in Saint Malo French and British leaders called on the EU to develop a ‘capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises’. That was quickly followed by the EU’s first Headline Goal, with a view to developing and deploying a corps-size force (50,000-60,000 troops) within 60 days and sustaining it in the field for at least one year.

Another Franco-British summit, held in Le Touquet in February 2003, developed this new approach further and concluded that, in order to conduct several operations concurrently and improve its rapid reaction capacity, the Union should set new capability objectives, both quantitative and qualitative. It became clear that the UK and France considered developing the capacity for rapid reaction as an EU priority that would also enhance Europe’s contribution to the NATO Response Force announced at the NATO Summit held in Prague in November 2002.

The fledgling EU military rapid response concept was put to the test during Operation Artemis – the first autonomous EU-led military operation, launched in June 2003 under UN mandate in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to help stabilise the security conditions and improve the humanitarian situation

in Bunia. Artemis demonstrated that the EU can successfully conduct an operation in a distant theatre (over 6,000 km from Brussels) with a small multinational force (approximately 2,000 troops). However, it also made it apparent that Europe lacked some key rapid response capabilities.

French and British leaders were determined to build on that experience. Actively supported by Germany, on 10 February 2004 they put forward the ‘Battlegroup Concept’ setting a new level of ambition for the EU as part of the new 2010 Headline Goal, which put greater emphasis on such capabilities as the ability to deploy forces rapidly, sustain them at distance, and operate multi-nationally.

The concept

The Battlegroup initiative aimed at correcting the shortcomings of the European Rapid Reaction Force by advocating smaller, but more rapidly deployable, more mobile and more self-sustainable, higher-readiness forces. To this end, it recommended:

- stand-alone Battlegroup-size forces (around 1,500 strong, including Core Battalion, Combat Support and Combat Service Support with appropriate strategic lift, sustainability and disembarkation assets)



- Battlegroups formed with contributions from one or more member states (yet open to participation by third parties)
- Battlegroup formations deployable within 10 days following a Council decision and able to sustain operations for 30 days (extendable up to 120 days if appropriately resupplied)
- Battlegroups designed to operate within the typical UN Chapter VII mandates to restore international peace and security (although conceivable also for such operations as the evacuation of EU citizens).

The Battlegroup proposal initially garnered a high level of political support throughout Europe. At the time it was also seen as closely associated with the blueprint for ‘permanent structured co-operation’ as set out in the then ‘Constitutional Treaty’ to allow member states to make more binding commitments to each other in defence matters.

The Franco-British-German initiative was further developed by the EU Military Staff and officially launched at the Military Capability Commitments Conference on 22 November 2004. The EU Battlegroup Concept intended to provide the Union with *initial* operational capability in 2005 and *full* operational capability from 2007 onwards. The concept specified further that an EU Battlegroup could be formed by a ‘Framework Nation’ or by a multinational coalition of associated member states with deployable Force Headquarters. While it did not formally identify a precise composition for an EU Battlegroup ‘package’, it outlined interoperability and military effectiveness (including availability, employability and deployability, readiness, flexibility, connectivity, sustainability, survivability and medical force protection) as key criteria to drive its development. It also emphasised the need for pre-identified operational and strategic enablers. Thus, without being overly prescriptive, the concept made it clear that the Framework Nation would be expected to ensure the following core modules:

- Command and Control (C2): a nominated/ Preferred Operation Headquarters (OHQ) and a dedicated Force Headquarters ((F)HQ), as well as a Communication and Information Systems element;
- Combat: an infantry battalion;
- Combat Service Support: including logistics (transport, supply and maintenance), medical and administrative groups.

The initiative drew preliminary commitments from 22 EU member states (plus Norway) generating a

total of 13 Battlegroups. In addition, some member states pledged a number of specialised niche capabilities in support of the Battlegroups, including the structure of a multinational and deployable Force Headquarters (France), a Sealift Co-ordination Centre (Greece), a water purification unit (Lithuania), and a medical group (Cyprus).

The EU Battlegroup Concept was also developed to be mutually reinforcing with the larger NATO Response Force (NRF). While both aim at providing impetus for improving military capabilities and interoperability, the type of missions for which they were intended are complementary. The NRF is designed to participate in the full range of NATO missions ‘including contributing to the preservation of territorial integrity, making a demonstration of force, peace support and disaster relief operations, protection of critical infrastructure, security operations and, as part of a larger force, conducting initial entry operations’. Conversely, EU Battlegroups are not envisioned for high intensity war-fighting but for deployment in response to a UN request to provide robust peace enforcement on a more limited scale – and they have been foreseen to be used alongside civilian assets, as part of the EU’s ‘comprehensive approach’.

The challenges

The EU Battlegroups (BGs) reached Full Operational Capability on 1 January 2007. However, they have never been deployed since, raising serious doubts about the viability of the overall initiative and its future usefulness. While the BG Concept *per se* offered the potential to spur the development of European expeditionary capabilities (and improved interoperability through joint planning, training and exercises, and ultimately deployment), it quickly ran into stumbling blocks which have considerably hindered its successful execution. If the EU member states really want the Battlegroups to be Europe’s flagship military rapid response tool, they may have to address the challenges – particularly resource constraints and lack of political will and commitment – that continue to plague the BGs’ credibility and effectiveness.

Surely the test of the EU Battlegroups’ success lies in generating new capabilities or leveraging existing ones, and in ensuring that national contingents can work together effectively. However, the critical benchmarks are not only whether member states actually meet their commitments to form BGs but also whether they maintain that commitment when it becomes necessary to deploy ‘out of area’ to protect and advance Europe’s interests in a new environment.

The EU Battlegroup Concept and its usability must be also seen against the wider background of the overall EU Rapid Response approach – of which it is an integral part – laid down in the *EU Civilian and Military Capability Development beyond 2010*, which identifies the Union's comprehensive civil-military level of ambition. It aspires to make the EU able to plan and conduct simultaneously operations and missions of varying scope, including: two rapid response military operations of limited duration using *inter alia* EU Battlegroups, as well as around 12 CSDP civilian missions in different formats. Thus, depending on the nature of a specific crisis situation, the appropriate rapid response tools could be (i) entirely civilian, (ii) a combination of civilian and military elements, or (iii) purely military, e.g. EU BG, Single Service (Land, Maritime, Air) or Joint Rapid Response combination of Land, Maritime and/or Air, or an EU Coalition Task Force.

Similarly, member states' willingness to take on rapid response might differ from one crisis to another, especially when it comes to the use of military force. Therefore, EU Battlegroups have to remain adequately flexible to incorporate rapid response capabilities and modules of the countries that are most willing to engage in a given crisis. While member states commit to the BG roster without knowing in advance the nature of prospective deployments, it is vital to enhance Battlegroups' adaptability across the spectrum of potential crises, through both a better definition of the required capabilities and advanced planning. These could include the development of most likely rapid response scenarios, such as humanitarian corridors, securing sea and air ports of disembarkation, or securing chemical/biological/radiological/nuclear (CBRN) material and storage sites. Improved generic scenarios of the crises that are most likely to occur should probably also take into account lessons learned from EUTM Somalia and Mali in view of devising mechanisms for expanding training and advising with regard to specialised capabilities. However, training missions, which are generally prolonged endeavours and not urgent by nature, do not fall in the rapid response domain. The adoption of a capability-based modular approach (including for example electronic warfare, naval combat assets, and Special Forces) would likely enhance the BGs' ability to tackle a wider spectrum of essential tasks – rather than an entirely generic set – and deliver a better tailored response to specific crises.

‘If the EU member states really want the Battlegroups to be Europe’s flagship military rapid response tool, they may have to address the challenges...that continue to plague the BGs’ credibility and effectiveness.’

The EU Battlegroups could also be considerably strengthened through joint, regular training and certification, which would further enhance the interoperability, readiness and operational effectiveness of member states' forces. Currently, the 'Framework Nation' of each BG coordinates the overall certification process. However, each participating country (whether a member or a third state) remains responsible for its own training, evaluation and certification. A more coordinated approach to exercise and certification would be certainly beneficial to overcoming many of the practical difficulties of operational cooperation, as well as incorporating the Political Exercise (POLEX, already practised by Sweden and the UK) allowing decision-makers at ministerial level – supported by military experts – to consider potentially contentious issues. Furthermore, seeking synergies with NATO – notably in the context of its Connected Forces Initiative – would also help ensure coherence and mutual reinforcement.

Sharing the burden

Given that most of the member states are grappling with the fiscal constraints adversely affecting their defence budgets, earmarking additional resources for the EU Battlegroups is becoming ever more difficult. The financial burden of setting up BGs, maintaining high readiness when on standby, and deploying them falls entirely on troop-contributing nations, much to the disadvantage in particular of smaller states who simply cannot afford to participate in the initiative. The EU Battlegroup Concept does not foresee reporting of data with respect to the costs incurred by member states, yet they are often seen as a major obstacle preventing some nations from offering BG packages. For example, the cost of the Swedish contribution to the Nordic Battlegroup in the first half of 2008 is believed to have substantially exceeded €130 million. The costs associated with deployment – especially with regard to the strategic transport necessary to move forces and supplies into and around the theatre in a timely manner, possibly amounting to billions – could be even more prohibitive. While certain costs may be designated as 'common costs' to be financed through the ATHENA mechanism, within the current arrangements these would cover only a small fraction of the estimated expenses of an early deployment.

In principle, ATHENA covers the incremental costs for deployable or fixed headquarters for EU-led operations, the incremental costs incurred for providing support to the force as a whole (as a result of the force's deployment to its location) as well as some costs covered upon request of the Operations Commander following approval of the Special Committee. These may include acquisition of information (satellite images, theatre-level intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance including air-to-ground surveillance, human intelligence) and other critical theatre-level capabilities (demining, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear protection; storage and destruction of weapons and ammunitions collected within the area of operation). However, the existing requirement that the Special Committee's consent on the specific costs must be obtained each time poses serious obstacles to *rapid* deployment.

To remedy the persistent funding shortfalls, the EU might consider a number of possible avenues. A revision of the ATHENA mechanism to help subsidise EU Battlegroup funding, to incorporate in particular the cost of strategic transport without financing the capability itself, could encourage nations to volunteer national contributions to the BG roster and to eventually enable them to go into action. Furthermore, the acquisition of information and other critical theatre-level capabilities could be included in the 'common costs' that are automatically covered, thus becoming the rule rather than the exception. Member states might also consider financing through ATHENA exercises and certification during the preparation of a Battlegroup and the stand-by period. Another possibility to improve cost-sharing and better use of scarce resources could be pooling demand, in particular for logistics and satellite communications. The European Defence Agency (EDA) has already developed a tool facilitating joint procurement of capabilities and equipment that support the BGs: in 2012, for instance, the EDA concluded a €228 million Framework Contract covering Basic Logistic Services to support the German-led EU Battlegroup.

Still, the revision of the funding arrangements cannot be limited to procedural fixes alone. Member states may consider candidly addressing the underlying problem of inequitable burden-sharing and acknowledging that the current 'costs lie where they fall' system creates an additional disincentive to volunteer for operations. In fact, the countries that volunteer assets and put their soldiers' lives on the line to protect EU interests should not be required to bear all the costs on top of the risks. A more equitable division of the financial burden between the member states who contribute forces and those who do not is a very sensitive issue, of course, but it may need to be tackled if Europe truly wants to make a

significant contribution to international peace and security through effective crisis management.

Living down to expectations?

While the initial conception of the Battlegroup initiative gained widespread support across Europe, its execution has magnified the fundamental problems underlying it. Although the deployment of Battlegroups was contemplated on a number of occasions to respond to a deteriorating crisis situation – for example in DR Congo (2006 and 2008), South Sudan (2010), in support of a possible UN humanitarian operation in Libya (2011) and in Mali (2012) – in each case the EU was unable to forge a course of action. The reluctance to lend political support for military intervention shows that although member states are prepared to pledge their contributions in principle, the commitments are not generally seen as binding and tend not to materialise when called in. Moreover, the growing gaps in the BG roster demonstrate that, while some countries cannot participate in the initiative because of resource shortages, many refrain from volunteering – even though they could do so – as they are unwilling to bear the brunt of a burden that, ideally, should be shared more evenly among all EU members.

Ultimately, six years after announcing their full operational capability, the recurring abstention from using Battlegroups in distant theatres during crises is not just a problem of money or 'usability' of the concept, reasons that are often invoked to conceal the dwindling appetite to activate the hard edge of CSDP. The ability to undertake a rapid intervention to prevent mass atrocities or facilitate the provision of urgent humanitarian aid is becoming increasingly important in a world that, as the HR/VP's recent report on CSDP reminds us, 'faces increased volatility, complexity and uncertainty'. Recent examples – in Africa and elsewhere – have not only provided a timely reminder of the need for such ability, but have also demonstrated that a fairly small number of forces, if deployed swiftly with the support of appropriate capabilities, could have a significant impact in a short period of time.

Whereas *militarily* Battlegroups have been 'ready-to-go' for quite some time now, *politically* they are far from it. Yet, the longer EU Rapid Response remains a hypothesis, the more Europeans will fall short of their ambition to make a major contribution to global security.

Anna Barcikowska is an Associate Fellow at the EUISS.

