Adapting the Battlegroups

by Jan Joel Andersson

The ability to respond early and forcefully to external conflicts and crises is a declared strategic priority for the EU. Among the most prominent instruments in the EU's rapid response toolbox are the EU Battlegroups (EUBGs), each consisting of 1,500-2,000 soldiers centred on a core infantry battalion. While the EUBGs are regularly criticised for having never been deployed, the fact remains that they are an EU-own instrument specifically tailored to the Union's approach to crisis management. As such, just like other current external policy instruments, they may need to be adapted on the basis of changing needs, as well as lessons learned.

Standing by

Building on a British-French-German proposal in 2004, a first interim EUBG capability was achieved in 2005, and full operational capability was reached in January 2007. Ever since, there has been one EUBG (or two) on standby, on six-month rotations, for rapid deployment in the event of a crisis. Modelled after the successful Operation Artemis in 2003 – the Union's first independently executed military operation outside Europe, in which 1,800 soldiers were swiftly and successfully deployed 6,000km away in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) – the entry of the EUBGs seemed like the beginning of a new era in European crisis management.

While the EUBGs have yet to be deployed, there are a number of 'near deployments' or proposals for deployment documented in the scholarly literature on CSPD operations – for instance, in the DRC and Chad (2008), South Sudan (2010), Libya (2011) and Mali (2012). For various reasons, however, the EU and its member states decided to pursue other options. Still, the non-deployment of the EUBGs did not mean a lack of European response. In each of these instances, other ways were found to deploy a European operation or strengthen an existing UN operation. Nevertheless, the non-deployment of the EUBGs warrants explanation. In the literature, again, the main reasons put forward can be categorised as political, military or financial in nature.

The political reasons for not resorting to an EUBG have included disagreement among the member states over the political rationale for deployment or reluctance to use a rapid reaction instrument for pre-planned operations. The military reasons have centred on the question whether an EUBG really was the appropriate force package for the crisis at hand. The financial reasons have all been related to lack of adequate common funding. Given that the majority of costs for a deployment have to be borne by the participating nations of the EUBG on standby, the expenditures have been simply too high for some member states to afford.

All these aspects are now under review. Proposals for strengthening the relevance, usability and deployability of the EUBGs are currently being discussed, and the focus is on reinforcing their modularity, preparation and funding.

Unpacking

An EUBG can undertake a variety of operations of differing scale and scope, but the concept's core element of an infantry battalion remains somewhat of a constraint. Making the EUBG concept more flexible would allow for a broader spectrum of possible tasks. There is already a list of suggested strategic enablers included in the EUBG concept, such as special forces, combat aircraft, helicopters, airlift, naval assets, engineers, gendarmerie, civil-military capabilities, and others.

However, with some exceptions, these strategic enablers have not always been prepared or trained to the same standards or readiness levels as the core elements of the EUBG on standby. Registering, training and preparing these additional assets to the same level as the core elements would greatly increase the utility and flexibility of the EUBGs. With more modular thinking and a wider selection of assets and enablers available for quick deployment, the EUBGs can respond to a broader set of missions.

Making the EUBGs more modular would make it possible for mission-tailored EUBGs or for some of the non-core assets to be deployed separately. They could then be attached to an existing EU civil-military mission or a UN-led operation. In some cases, a rapid deployment of, say, a military police unit or an intelligence cell may be what is needed rather than a full infantry battalion. Moreover, modularity may also offer member states that are not able or willing to shoulder responsibility for an entire EUBG more opportunities to contribute and thus increase interoperability. Modularity may also make it possible to substitute units from different member states in case of a member state being unwilling or unable to participate in a particular operation.

The advantage of modularity is that it gives decision-makers a wider range of rapid reaction options while maintaining the EUBG as a basic concept and organising principle. This aspect can be illustrated by Sweden's decision to activate the fighter aircraft unit of the Nordic Battlegroup (NBG) on standby in spring 2011 and detach it within days as a national contribution to Operation Unified Protector over Libya. While this decision was clearly a national one, a scenario where the decision to activate a component of an EUBG on standby comes from Brussels could also be envisaged.

Training and funding

However, a modular approach will require an adaptation of training and certification. The more modules attached, the greater the responsibility is of the 'framework nation' to coordinate and train the various modules. The possibility of partial activation of an EUBG will also mean that Command and Control (C2) issues are of utmost importance.

Much can be achieved with a more coordinated approach to exercises and certification processes of incoming EUBGs – which could, in turn, contribute to overcoming practical difficulties in operational cooperation. Moreover, standardising political exercises and integrating them into the certification process (which decision-makers from countries providing modules can practice) as part of the preparation for an incoming EUBG would also be most useful. Some of these procedures are already in place but, with a more modular approach, more can be done to coordinate the overall certification process of the EUBGs.

Equally important is increasing financial solidarity and flexibility. The current system in which most of the cost for any EUBG deployment falls on the contributing nations makes deployment unaffordable to many member states. Although the current 'Athena mechanism' reduces the budgetary impact of any CSDP deployment by assuming some common costs (often estimated at 10-15% of an operation), it is clear that funding the EUBGs remains a major obstacle to their usability. In November 2016, the EU agreed to extend the current Council Declaration on the common funding of the deployment of EUBGs within the Athena mechanism. This issue will be further considered in the broader review of Athena during 2017. Several proposals for increasing the list of common costs to be covered by the EU have been made, and calls for the establishment and financing of a 'start-up' fund made up of member states' contributions to facilitate the deployment of CSDP military operations – as allowed for in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 41.3) – have increased.

Widening the list of shared costs and launching an *ad hoc* start-up fund would increase the willingness and readiness of many nations contributing to the EUBGs to deploy. However, increasing financial burden-sharing would of course also require member states to financially contribute to deployments that they may not consider essential – but may not want to block, either. For this reason, it is important to point out that the current Athena mechanism already contains flexibility to decide on a case-by-case basis that certain incremental costs can be regarded as common costs for one given operation without establishing any precedent. Here, too, making full use of existing provisions while adapting them as necessary seems to be the best way forward.

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