

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE?



A discussion with Finland and Croatia

EU2019.FI

Report - 15 November 2019, Paris.



On 15 November 2019, the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS) co-organised a seminar on European security and defence. Working closely with partners, the Finnish Presidency of the Council of the EU and the Croatian Ministry of Defence, and hosted by the French Ministry for the Armed Forces in Paris, the event welcomed some 40 participants from governments, EU institutions and think tanks.

THE JOURNEY SO FAR...

During the course of the seminar, developments in European security and defence were situated within the evolving global and regional geopolitical landscape and the various challenges it posed to Europe, including in the military, space, climate, hybrid and technological domains. In this context, there was consensus that increasing Europe's responsibility and capabilities for security and defence was a necessity. Cooperation at the EU level was key in that respect, given member states' limited capacity to address these challenges individually. It was also noted that member states would have to remain in the driver's seat, as defence touched upon the core of their sovereignty and popular legitimacy.

The discussion underlined that the past three years had witnessed an unprecedented degree of EU activity in defence and the EU's progress in consolidating initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). For the Fund, it was noted that it was moving ahead very quickly and that it was already operational through the Preparatory Action on Defence Research (PADR) and the European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP). Although it is still in its early days, and despite the limited budget and timeframes, the two programmes are beginning to show encouraging results in terms of both cross-border cooperation and SME participation. What is more, participants were encouraged to look at the project calls under the EDIDP, which demonstrated the Commission's ambition to fund strategically relevant capabilities.

Concerning PESCO, it was stressed that participating member states had come a long way, with 47 projects launched in three waves, but much remains to be done. Its governance framework is still incomplete and it lacks an overarching strategic orientation and structure. Moreover, although most PESCO projects meet CSDP capability shortfalls, they mostly cover the lower end of the spectrum and many are still at the earliest stages of implementation – if they had started at all. Consequently, while being a step in the right direction PESCO is not expected to be a game-changer in terms of capabilities, at least not in the immediate short-term period. In this sense, one conclusion was that more attention should be given to the binding commitments, especially those related to enhancing the EU's operational robustness, readiness and deployability. It was acknowledged that the EU is still far from reaching the Helsinki Headline Goal first set back in 1999.

Beyond the EDF and PESCO, the seminar highlighted progress in areas such as countering hybrid threats, cyber security, promoting a discussion on Artificial Intelligence and enhancing EU-NATO cooperation. Moreover, increasing

consideration was given to Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union and the lessons learned from its activation by France in 2015. With regard to military deployments, the discussion highlighted the negative trends in terms of force generation, which reflected member states' lack of appetite for undertaking ambitious operations. Overall, it was argued that the EU still had a long way to go in terms of becoming a responsible security and defence provider. That said, recent steps should not be underestimated, as the EU now has a clear level of ambition and a skeleton of a defence policy, which constitutes a significant development politically.

...THE WAY AHEAD

Participants learned that 2020 would be a pivotal year with continued work on the Multi-annual Financial Framework (MFF 2021-2027), the PESCO review, the first full cycle of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), the start of the EDIDP, final agreement on the EDF, and the evolution of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). On the Fund, it is necessary to start a strategic reflection on capabilities that will be financed by the EDF and to ensure that there is coherence between defence research and capability development over the first seven years of the Fund. There is also a need to consider the balance between high-impact flagship projects and smaller, innovative ones. Regarding PESCO, it was important to develop a way to measure progress and to maintain member states' commitment. Here, a key challenge would be to ensure that the 47 projects deliver real impact and that they do not become disjointed – coherence between projects would therefore be crucial.

The second key point raised during the seminar was the need to balance the consolidation of new initiatives with maintaining a forward momentum in EU defence. Accordingly, there was a consensus that a genuine strategic debate on European defence is needed. The key role of France and Germany was highlighted in this regard, but so too was an acknowledgement that they do not always see eye-to-eye on defence. In this respect, there appeared to be little appetite for repeating the process that led to the 2016 EU Global Strategy, and any 'Strategic Compass' on defence should involve all relevant stakeholders so as to ensure that the outcome reflects a common understanding on fundamental issues. Such a strategic reflection could be conducted at the level of the European Council, and the idea of having a 'classified' strategic document was floated to allow member states to share their views openly.

Relatedly, it was noted that any 'strategic compass' could focus on defining goals, threats, priorities and means. In terms of strategic autonomy, further refinement is needed in terms of the Union's threat assessment, understanding the EU's limitations and reaching consensus on how the EU should relate to the US and China. Other thoughts focused on operations, with a call that the new initiatives and any future 'strategic compass' need to be better linked to CSDP missions. In terms of timelines, there was some debate: some believed that a strategic reflection should keep pace with rapidly shifting global developments, whereas others advised against rushing in order to attain consensus and thus more relevant results. Nevertheless, there was consensus on the need to start the reflection in 2020 and that any 'strategic compass' should focus first on an EU threat assessment, then moving on to clearly define 'European strategic autonomy' and indicators to measure it, as well as deciding on a concrete level of ambition for autonomous EU action. In this respect, some participants underlined the importance of setting realistic goals and avoiding unnecessary duplication with NATO, thus noting the limits of EU defence capabilities and a persistent dependence on the US.