

Planning for the future of EU defence



Lessons and visions from the Austrian and Romanian Presidencies of the Council of the EU

A seminar co-organised by the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS) and the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU.

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Final report

On 21 November 2018, the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), the Direction Générale des Relations Internationales et de la Stratégie (DGRIS) of the French Ministry for the Armed Forces and the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the EU organised a seminar in Paris, the second of its kind following a pilot seminar held in June 2018. The aim was to look back at the outgoing Austrian EU Presidency and forward to the incoming Romanian EU Presidency. The participants of this seminar discussed in detail the progress made in the various EU defence initiatives launched in 2017-2018, as well as the way forward in terms of synchronising those initiatives and keeping up the forward momentum.

Lessons learned from Austria

During the first panel session, it was acknowledged that the Austrian Presidency has been a success story. Not only did it see to the finalisation of a second wave of 17 PESCO projects, but it also steered agreement on the general approach of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and supported the completion of the strategic review of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC). Additionally, following its trail run, agreement in the Council on the need for a first full cycle of the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) in 2019-2020 was secured, and the EU adopted the civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) compact too. What is more, work is progressing on the general conditions for third country participation in PESCO, the establishment of a European Peace Facility (EPF) and developing military mobility both as one of PESCO's primary projects and as an important action item for NATO-EU cooperation. Finally, the Austrian Presidency managed to push the Western Balkans to the top of the CSDP agenda again, and it started a structured discussion on the role of the military in the management of the EU external borders. Here, it was stated that the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) will not be able to fully see out its tasks over the next decade in the absence of military support.

Asked whether they thought recent defence initiatives had led to a 'Europe that protects', the panellists answered positively although they observed that the various EU defence initiatives are still very much a work in progress. It was noted, for example, that not all PESCO projects are being implemented with the same impetus and that some of them still seem to reflect ad hoc national projects rather than EU strategic needs. One of the participants even compared the Capability

Development Plan (CDP), which defines short and long-term future capability needs, to a 'Christmas tree' due to the lack of a clear prioritisation when it comes to capability development.

Turning to a debate about strategic autonomy, audience participants argued that the concept is not binary or 'black or white' in nature and that some dependencies are welcome. This being said, some of the panellists argued that the EU has to be more autonomous because of some very worrying geopolitical shifts. Not only does Russia continue to menace European security, but China poses a challenge, too. With regard to the US, participants learned that there are certain trends in the transatlantic relationship that will outlive President Trump, and Washington's decision to eventually renege on the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty highlights the necessity of autonomy. In this regard, EU member states need to think seriously about how they would collectively respond to Article 42-7 situations in the future. To this end, EU member states clearly need to spend more on defence but in such a way as to enhance European defence capabilities leading to greater standardisation and interoperability. In this regard, the panel agreed that it is good that the European Commission already plans to invest in disruptive defence technologies as part of the EDF.

Looking forward with Romania

The second panel centred on the priorities of the forthcoming Romanian Presidency. The motto of the Romanian Presidency, 'Cohesion, a common European value', recalls the principle of unity between member states. Working alongside Finland (Jul-Dec 2019) and Croatia (Jan-Jun 2020) as part of the new trio, the Romanian Presidency will move forward with the further implementation of the EU Global Strategy. With ongoing negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), Brexit on 29 March 2019, and the European Parliament elections a few weeks later on 23-26 May 2019, the Romanian Presidency will find itself in a moment of transition, where the momentum on EU defence will need to be particularly sustained.

Nevertheless, Romania will push forward with the first review and assessment process of the National Implementation Plans, which detail how member states participating in PESCO intend to fulfil each of the 20 binding commitments they have made to one another. Furthermore, the first full CARD cycle will take place in 2019, as well as continued discussions on the implementation of the MPCC's strategic review and the roll-out of the European Defence Industrial Development Programme as part of the EDF. It was also pointed out that 2019 will be a special year for both the EU and NATO, because the CSDP will celebrate its 20-year anniversary and NATO its 70 years of existence. Closer EU-NATO relations will thus be an important feature of the Romanian Presidency.

Turning the debate towards what the EU has achieved over the past few years, it was highlighted that PESCO is already one year old, and it is therefore a time to reflect on EU efforts. Additionally, more attention needs to be placed on sequencing and interlinking PESCO, EDF, CARD, and CDP with one another and even non-EU initiatives (e.g. the European Intervention Initiative). But it means foremost that the EU needs to focus on delivering on the PESCO projects. Keeping in mind that PESCO is a member state-driven process, the EU needs to ascertain how many projects it can realistically handle (currently 34 projects) and to develop an evidence-based assessment of where member states sit in relation to the binding commitments and projects.

The panellists continued the discussion about strategic autonomy. Panellists and audience members asked a number of pertinent questions including: What level of autonomy should the EU strive for? What purpose should it serve and what should the EU be autonomous from? It was acknowledged that, while NATO is the cornerstone of defence for most EU member states, and the EU treaties circumscribe EU involvement in territorial defence, these types of questions should prompt an EU

reflection on the nature of CSDP, what more can be done on hybrid threats and how to better address Article 42-7 situations.

However, it was stressed that strategic autonomy and EU defence efforts have been largely misinterpreted, not only in Washington but also within the EU. For example, it is not clear whether the concept of strategic autonomy refers only to military capabilities or also extends to the industrial capacities to produce them. This confusion seems to have prompted some member states to believe that strategic autonomy could endanger their relationship with the US. This is certainly the case for Nordic countries, which see their security intimately bound up with that of the US (even in the case of non-NATO members). This is especially true given that recent EU defence initiatives are still immature and there is a need to ensure complementarity between the various EU and non-EU initiatives. The seminar ended with a plea for better strategic communication when using terms such as strategic autonomy.