THE EUROPEAN UNION'S PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION MECHANISM

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THE EU'S PERMANENT STRUCTURED COOPERATION (PESCO) [Article 42(6) and 46 of the Treaty on European Union] is a mechanism that seeks to provide a formal (albeit flexible) institutional framework for willing EU Member States that meet certain military operational and capability criteria (identified in Protocol 10 of the TEU) to establish a closer cooperation in the field of security and defence through ad hoc projects. Scholars like Sven Biscop have been advocating a practical implementation of PESCO since the Lisbon Treaty was signed about a decade ago.

The idea of a common European defence is not new: it was first proposed in the form of a European Defence Community which failed to come to fruition in 1952. Ever since, this idea has become somewhat of a taboo, not least because of the emergence of NATO and the European project's association with the idea of 'civilian power'. The European project's 70-year-old lingering ambition culminated in the launch of PESCO (which was still deemed impossible at the time of the launch of the EU Global Strategy in 2016), as it was embraced by the Council through the adoption of an implementation roadmap in March 2018, in association with other structures and initiatives such as the European Defence Fund and the European Defence Industrial Development Programme.

If it was deemed impossible before, what changed?

In November 2017, 25[1] out of 28 EU Member States pledged their intention to formally activate the PESCO mechanism with the goal of maximising the EU's interoperability and effectiveness in matters of defence spending and overall international security actorness. This was considered by many to be a historic moment in the development of the security and defence field at the EU level, driven by changes in the EU's complex domestic and surrounding security environment that pushed the organisation to reach for all available tools. But to understand the context that led to the Member States' adoption of PESCO, we must first look at the changes operated in the EU's geopolitical security environment, as well as concerning the evolution of the conceptual framework that accompanied these changes.

In the period that preceded and surrounded the launch of the EU Global Strategy, events such as the civil war in Syria and the emergence of new complex and unconventional transnational terrorist networks (such as Daesh) led to political instability in the European southern neighbourhood and within the EU itself, which was simultaneously affected by the refugee crisis that emerged in the Mediterranean region. To the East, the Ukrainian revolution – often dubbed 'Euromaidan' revolution – that took place in 2013 and 2014 in favour of increased European approximation or integration, was followed by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the emergence and intensification of territorial disputes between pro-Russian separatist forces and pro-Ukrainian/pro-European forces. Domestically, the EU was also dealing with the practical implementation of the Lisbon Treaty and the establishment of the European External Action Service, as well as with the first steps in an unprecedented withdrawal of a Member State – the United Kingdom – from the European project, in the midst of a growing wave of populism and Euroscepticism. These various growing domestic and external challenges and threats that the EU had to deal with during this period strengthened the link between external and internal dimensions of EU security and reinforced changes in the EU's normative ambitions in many areas of foreign policy, including crisis management.

> " (…) Despite its ambiguity (…), it is clear that PESCO is (…) a model and promoter of peace in the world. "

The 2013 'comprehensive approach' to external conflicts and crises was replaced by an 'integrated approach', proposed with the EU Global Strategy in 2016. This latter approach, an evolution of the former, maintains the 'comprehensive' aspect at its core, but is rooted on ideas of resilience and stabilisation. Resilience is about the EU's ability to adapt, endure, and especially to recover in face of adversity, and it became increasingly important in light of the EU's own perception of its vulnerability and of the volatility and unpredictability of its surrounding security environment. The goal of strengthening the EU's ability to defend itself and ensure stability – through mechanisms such as PESCO – reflects a growing acknowledgement of the link between external and internal aspects of EU security, as well as a 'pragmatist' turn in EU foreign policy. Stabilisation, in this context, entails an understanding of security as an ontological goal for the EU, encompassing more than traditional territorial and structural protection from external threats, and, as such, is seen as a process of mitigating uncertainty and ontological insecurity. The overall tone of the EUGS was that of a commitment to an increase in the EU's strategic autonomy (despite this concept's vagueness and ambiguity), and PESCO reflects the EU's attempt at a practical implementation thereof.

Brexit and American scepticism: constraints or opportunities?

The launch of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation, thanks to the leadership of France and Germany, with the help of Italy and Spain and all of the remaining participating Member States, shows an opening for the development of an actual EU security and defence policy that goes beyond just crisis management, reflecting the EU's lingering determination to become increasingly more autonomous in these matters. As the President of the European Commission stated recently on Twitter, 'our security cannot be outsourced'.

Despite most of its Member States' pledge to NATO and its principles of no duplication, no decoupling, and no discrimination, the fact is that the EU collective is striving for the ability to act independently from the Alliance. Brexit means that one of the EU's biggest spenders on defence matters will soon be gone, but it also means that one of the EU's biggest obstacles to the advancement of a security and defence policy at the EU level will also be gone (even though the UK was, ironically, one of this policy's main supporters and drivers in the 1990s). Nonetheless, there is ample opportunity for the UK to participate in PESCO, so long as significant expertise and funding is provided in exchange (in other words, so long as it is deemed useful and beneficial for the EU).

The United States' detachment from European defence is not new, as the previous administration had already shown, through its Pacific pivot, that its priorities had changed. The current US President's recent questioning of NATO's purpose was another contributing factor for an amenable environment for the launch of PESCO. Yet, ironically, the American reaction to the EU's growing defence autonomy was not only one of ambiguity, but rather of scepticism and criticism, even though the idea of global burden-sharing and complementarity to NATO seems like a more accurate interpretation of what the EU was going for. This is especially important, as, according to the Council of the EU, military capacities developed in the context of PESCO may be made available in other contexts, such as NATO or the UN, by the participating EU Member States, if they so choose, because those capabilities do not become EU collective assets, but rather remain

17 PROJECTS APPROVED

The implementation of the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation entails a closer collaboration between willing and able Member States but is open to any Member State that shows similar levels of ambition and commitment to this shared responsibility. So far (as of June 2018) 17 projects have already been adopted within three broad areas that seem to predominantly support crisis management activities: common training and exercises, operational domains (including land, air, maritime, and cyberspace), and joint and enabling capabilities (which seeks to bridge operational gaps). According to the EEAS, 33 new PESCO project proposals are currently being evaluated until the end of 2018. When these projects are made public, a glimpse at the direction and future ambitions of the PESCO mechanism will be possible, perhaps better defining its role in the context of EU defence policy and vis-à-vis NATO.

The 17 PESCO projects that have been approved so far include a European Medical Command Centre; the development of common technologies for European military radio communications; the improvement of strategic logistic support and force projection in EU Missions and Operations; the improvement of the speed of movement of military forces across Europe; an EU Training Mission Competence Centre to improve interoperability and skills of EU personnel; the standardisation of procedures among European Armies; the development of new systems of energy supply for camps in the context of joint operations; a Deployable Military Disaster Relief Capability Package; a Maritime (semi-) Autonomous Systems for Mine Countermeasures; a maritime capability for surveillance and protection of specified maritime areas; the integration of land-based surveillance systems, maritime and air platforms; a Cyber Threats and Incident Response Information Sharing Platform; Cyber Rapid Response Teams and Mutual Assistance in Cyber Security; the improvement of command and control systems of EU missions and operations at the strategic level; a prototype European Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle/Amphibious Assault Vehicle/Light Armoured Vehicle; a mobile precision artillery platform; as well as the EUFOR Crisis Response Operation Core, which seeks to accelerate the provision of forces.

the property of individual Member States. So PESCO results as both an alternative and a complement to NATO (which the EUGS still acknowledges as Europe's primary pillar of security), allowing the EU to be stronger on its own while simultaneously strengthening its role within the Atlantic Alliance.

Inspiration for other sectors of EU integration

When the initial pledge was made in November 2017, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy commented that the launch of PESCO could become an inspiration for other sectors of EU integration, particularly considering the taboo that had surrounded the development of EU security and defence policy practically since its inception. The High Representative mentioned that the EU is oftentimes not aware of its own capacity and potential, and that its political will is stronger than it is perceived from the outside and even domestically. Joining the entirely intergovernmental PESCO mechanism is voluntary and projects are created on an ad hoc basis, but once Member States are in, Council decisions made by qualified majority voting are legally binding. This makes PESCO a significant step in terms of defence integration, even if it ends up resulting in a multi-speed EU (although the very high rate of Member State participation suggests otherwise), while ensuring the integrity of the sovereignty of individual Member States. Not only does the activation of PESCO show that there is indeed political will for furthering the pursuance of a common defence, but it also shows that the EU is taking advantage of the many hurdles and challenges that it has been facing in the last few years – Brexit in particular – to improve its ability to assert and protect itself.

Despite its ambiguity somewhere between crisis management and territorial defence, it is clear that PESCO is rooted in the EU's long-standing narrative as a model and promoter of peace in the world with an underlying responsibility, due to its own domestic success as a peace project, to spread its values, norms, standards and to be a 'point of reference' for other actors in the international system. ∎

Notes

[1] All EU Member States but Malta, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, namely Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, and Sweden.