



King's Research Portal

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Meyer, C., Van Osch, A., & Reykers, Y. (Accepted/In press). From EU Battlegroups to Rapid Deployment Capacity: learning the right lessons? *International Affairs (London)*.

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

This is the Author's Accepted Manuscript version of the article: Meyer, Christoph O, Anton van Osch, Yf Reykers (accepted 2023) 'From EU Battlegroups to Rapid Deployment Capacity: learning the right lessons?' Accepted for publication by International Affairs on 28 September 2023, expected DOI: 10.1093/ia/iad247

From EU Battlegroups to Rapid Deployment Capacity: learning the right lessons?

Authors

Christoph Meyer

King's College London, United Kingdom

christoph.meyer@kcl.ac.uk

Ton A.G.D. van Osch

SecDef Consult, the Netherlands

ton.van.osch@secdefconsult.com

Yf Reykers (*corresponding author*)

Department of Political Science, Maastricht University, the Netherlands

y.reykers@maastrichtuniversity.nl

ORCID: 0000-0002-0080-1815

Abstract

The article uses the case of the development of the EU Battlegroups to the Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) to better understand the changing learning capacity of the EU in its military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The paper develops a theoretical framework to capture the most significant factors affecting learning by drawing on insights from the literatures on organisational learning and policy failure with a specific focus on military organisations and CSDP. This framework is then used to study to what degree the EU has learnt the right lessons from the creeping failure of the Battlegroups, which factors affected learning, and to what degree the EU suffers from specific learning pathologies. The article draws on elite interviews, secondary and grey literature, and high-level practitioner experience of one author. It finds that the EU has improved its learning capacities and correctly identified most of the military-operational root-causes of the failure, yet struggled to correctly identify or address the political-strategic ones. The paper offers insights to practitioners on where to best target efforts to improve learning. The theoretical framework developed could help to illuminate the challenges of political-military learning in multi-national regional organisations under epistemically difficult conditions.

Keywords

Rapid response forces, EU Battlegroups, Rapid Deployment Capacity, CSDP, learning, institutional design

Funding statement

The authors would like to acknowledge that the paper benefited from research insights gathered while researching and writing an In-Depth Analysis on the RDC for the European Parliament's Security and Defence Sub-committee. This commissioned research was published with the assistance of the Consultancy Ecorys.

The research time of Yf Reykers was partly funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) with grant 406.XS.01.043 (SSH Open Competition XS).

Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Introduction

'We need to be able to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts, with partners if possible and alone when necessary'.¹ The European Union (EU) Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, adopted in March 2022, aims to improve the EU's rapid crisis response capacity and create a Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) of 5000 troops to reach operational capacity by 2025 the latest. This ambition, which was later approved by the Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers and endorsed by the European Council, illustrated the new momentum in European security and defence integration that was under way even before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These Battlegroups were never used since reaching full operational capacity in 2007 despite several opportunities to do so – a puzzle discussed in a rich literature.² Their non-use and the falling political commitment to fill the expected rota means that the instrument failed to serve its primary purpose as stated in EU official documents.³ It has turned from a 'creeping' into a 'chronic failure' that cannot be compensated by secondary benefits

¹ European External Action Service. *A European strategic compass for security and defence*, 2022. Available online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf

² See Reykers, Yf. 'EU Battlegroups: High costs, no benefits', *Contemporary Security Policy* 38:3 (2017): 457-470.

³ Internal EEAS documents of June 2022 referred to gaps of one standby Battlegroup for 2022 (second semester), 2024 (first and second semester) and 2025 (second half). No standby Battlegroups were yet identified for the second semester of 2023.

such as enhancing EU and member states capabilities or the interoperability of their armed forces.⁴ The EU Battlegroups have become emblematic of the capability-expectations gap in European security and defence more broadly.⁵ Making a success of reformed Battlegroups within the RDC concept constitutes therefore a litmus test for the success of the Strategic Compass. A successful RDC would help the EU become a more credible and effective rapid crisis responder, able to act autonomously from other actors in a range of situations.⁶

But has the EU accurately identified, accepted and institutionalised the right lessons from the Battlegroups failure? We use the case of the development of the EU Battlegroups to the RDC to better understand the capacity of the EU to learn in a way that improves its effectiveness in the domain of its military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). In doing so, this article contributes not only to the literature on learning in EU CSDP, but also offers insights about the specific challenges of political-military learning in multi-national regional organisations. Specifically, we develop a theoretical framework to capture the most significant factors affecting learning processes by drawing on insights from the literatures on organisational learning in public policy in general, and military organisations and CSDP in particular. We then put this into action by studying the actors, substance and appropriateness of EU learning during three distinct periods: The initial conception of the Battlegroups (2002-2007); their being on standby after reaching full operational capability (2007-2016); and reform in conjunction with setting up the EU RDC since the adoption of the EU Global Strategy (2016-ongoing). Subsequently, we use the theoretical framework to explain and evaluate the findings, especially the role played by organisational factors and underlying learning pathologies.

Methodologically, we apply a qualitative strategy using empirical evidence gathered from official EU and member state documents, 13 elite interviews with current and former officials involved in the design

⁴ See Benjamin Leruth, 'Experimental differentiation as an innovative form of cooperation in the European Union: Evidence from the Nordic Battlegroup', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 44:1 (2023): 125-149.

⁵ Christopher Hill, 'The capability-expectations gap, or conceptualizing Europe's international role', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31:3 (1993): 305-28.

⁶ European Parliament, *EP plenary: The way forward of EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, EU Battlegroups and Article 44 TEU*, Speech delivered by Commissioner for Budget and Administration, Johannes Hahn, on behalf of High-Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell, 18 April 2023.; Heidi Maurer, Richard G Whitman, Nicholas Wright, 'The EU and the invasion of Ukraine: a collective responsibility to act?', *International Affairs*, 99:1 (2023): 219-238.

and adaptation of the Battlegroups and the personal experience of one of the authors in the EU's military structures.⁷ We also use data from a range of unpublished non-papers and memos that were made available to us, to look beyond formal codifications of lessons learnt and open up to informal knowledge transfer.⁸

Learning processes related to rapid reaction forces and CSDP

Scholars interested in the development of EU rapid reaction forces have focused predominantly on identifying the origins of the EU Battlegroups⁹ and explaining their non-use, either in general or in reference to specific crises where their deployment was requested or expected.¹⁰ Even as this literature recognises several structural obstacles, such as a lack of political will, dysfunctional command and control structures and flawed funding provisions, it does not investigate the capacity of the EU to learn from these non-deployments. A similar pattern can be observed in the study of other multinational rapid reaction forces, such as the NATO Response Force¹¹ or the African Standby Force¹², where most analyses identify political obstacles and institutional design anomalies, and then make a range of policy recommendations towards improvement. Multinational rapid response forces in the EU and NATO have in common that they have hardly been used so far, making them look like cases of ill-designed instruments creating programmatic failures.¹³ Although each of these organisations is or has been confronted with the question of how to learn from failure and improve upon their rapid reaction capacity, their ability to accurately identify and implement any lessons about the underlying causes of these difficulties have thus far not been addressed – in contrast to broader studies of learning or learning

⁷ Hardt, 2017.

⁸ On informal knowledge transfer, see Heidi Hardt, 'How NATO remembers: explaining institutional memory in NATO in crisis management.' *European Security* 26:1 (2017): 120-148.

⁹ See Gustav Lindstrom, *Enter the EU Battlegroups* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2007).

¹⁰ Yf Reykers. 'No supply without demand: explaining the absence of the EU Battlegroups in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic' *European Security* 25:3 (2016): 346-365.

¹¹ Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning. 'The NATO Response Force: A qualified failure no more?.' *Contemporary security policy* 38:3 (2017): 443-456.

¹² Cedric De Coning and Andrew Ywa Tchic. 'Adapting the African Standby Force to Africa's Evolving Security Landscape', ACCORD, 2023, Available online: <https://www.accord.org.za/analysis/adapting-the-african-standby-force-to-africas-evolving-security-landscape/>; Linda Darkwa. 'The African Standby Force: The African Union's tool for the maintenance of peace and security.' *Contemporary Security Policy* 38:3 (2017): 471-482.

¹³ John Karlsrud and Yf Reykers, *Multinational Rapid Response Mechanisms: From Institutional Proliferation to Institutional Exploitation* (London: Routledge, 2019).

during and after operations.¹⁴ Therefore, we lack insights into how much the development of multinational rapid reaction forces, such as the EU Battlegroups, are driven by organisational learning, where such learning takes place, and how this has shaped their design, non-use and eventual re-design.

There is, however, some writing on learning in CSDP, on peace-building and European foreign and security policy more broadly, most of which seeks to explain change through learning.¹⁵ For instance, Bossong highlighted how urgent operational pressures make learning in EU civilian crisis management possible.¹⁶ Faleg made the case that the EU's progress in the area of civilian crisis management was a result of 'learning from doing' mediated by practitioner communities, while Dijkstra et al showed how the many veto points in the EU can slow down learning in this domain.¹⁷ Most notably for the EU's military CSDP is the work by Michael E. Smith, who drew on theories of organisational learning in other fields to argue that learning dynamics with feed-back loops may explain the evolution of CSDP from 2003 to 2015 within a historical institutionalist framework.¹⁸ In common with other works using a learning lens in this area, Smith is neutral as to whether learning is functional or dysfunctional as a process and whether the right lessons have been identified or not. As such, it cannot offer specific reasons for why the EU Battlegroups did not meet their original designers' expectations or why lesson-learning was so slow and ineffective for many years.

Pihs-Lang's, in her unpublished PhD thesis, elaborates from the relevant literatures a theoretical framework revolving around five phases of learning to assess the first three military operations of the EU - Concordia, Artemis and Althea.¹⁹ In her findings, she outlines ten 'impact factors' that may either

¹⁴ In a NATO context see Tom Dyson. 'The military as a learning organisation: establishing the fundamentals of best-practice in lessons-learned' *Defence Studies* 19:2 (2019): 107-129; Hardt, 2017.

¹⁵ E.g. Cornelius Adebahr, *Learning and Change in European Foreign Policy* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009); Learning approaches are even more wide-spread outside of foreign policy, especially in the study of economic governance and EU crisis management. See Radaelli on learning post COVID.

¹⁶ Raphael Bossong, 'EU civilian crisis management and organizational learning' *European Security*, 22:1 (2013), pp. 94-112.

¹⁷ Faleg, Giovanni *The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy: Learning Communities in International Organizations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Hylke Dijkstra et al., 'Learning to deploy civilian capabilities.' *Cooperation and Conflict*, 54:4 (2019), pp. 524-543.

¹⁸ Smith, Michael E. *Europe's Common Security and Defence Policy: Capacity-Building, Experiential Learning, and Institutional Change*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

¹⁹ Susanne Pihs-Lang, *Lesson (not) Learned? EU Military Operations and the Adaptation of CSDP*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, European University Institute, 2013.

help or hinder learning processes in EU military crisis management.²⁰ Like Smith, she adopts a normatively neutral approach as to whether the right lessons have been identified or learned. For both authors, learning is about a deliberate and systemic effort that can be described as ‘successful’ only in so far as the learning leads to lessons being ‘encoded’ in new organisational routines. This reluctance to engage with the substance of lessons is in line with the literature that warns against the fallacy of inferring failures of learning processes from allegedly undesirable policy outcomes.

Despite this neutral stance on the lesson substance, both Smith and Pihs-Lang advance some criticisms of the EU’s learning process in security and defence. Smith refers to learning weaknesses such as a lack of a shared learning culture across different institutions and levels within the EU’s foreign policy system, and a learning gap between the civilian and military-side of peace-building and crisis-management; insufficient progress in building a shared learning culture that extends to member states and other international partners; and limited after-event reporting or follow-up.²¹ Pihs-Lang refers to problems of staff rotation and insufficient hand-over periods leading to institutional and case-specific knowledge being lost and not available for learning. She also notes that some lessons may be agreed, but never formally put on paper, such as the non-viability of Berlin-Plus after Althea because of the Turkey-Cyprus issue, the ‘filtering’ of lessons as they go up the hierarchy, or having two versions of lessons learnt documents, one with sensitive lessons only for the High Representative (HR/VP), and a sanitised version for member states. The issue of political sensitivity as a problem in the learning process is also mentioned by Bremberg and Hedling, who noted the predominant focus of officials on achieving ‘quick wins’ through learning rather than ‘naming and shaming’ member states.²²

So, even though the literature on learning in military CSDP does express some critiques of learning processes, the predominant purpose is to explain the evolution of capacities and policies. Questions about whether learning is more or less likely to actually improve performance through correctly

²⁰ Pihs-Lang, 2013, pp. 14-15 and p. 154

²¹ Michael E. Smith. ‘Learning in European Union Peacebuilding: Rhetoric and Reality’ *Global Affairs*, 4:2-3, (2018): 215-25.

²² Niklas Bremberg and Elsa Hedling ‘EU missions and operations: practices of learning lessons in the CSDP’, in Bremberg, N, Danielson, A, Hedling E and Michalski, A., *The Everyday Making of EU Foreign and Security Policy*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022, pp. 131-148.

identifying and tackling root-causes and spreading best practices fall conceptually and empirically largely by the wayside. This is regrettable in the light of the extensive literature on the EU expectations-capability gap and how to narrow it. It also hinders cross-fertilisation with the extensive literature on innovation in states' military affairs, most of which is interested in the link between the military's capability to innovate and its effectiveness against an adversary.²³ Learning attempts that miss root-causes of failures or that promote counter-productive practices may be successful in procedural, but not in substantive terms. We need to know more about the reasons that structurally hinder the EU to engage successfully in identifying, and communicating the right lessons. In the case of the Battlegroups, the specific challenge was to learn from a succession of deliberations that led to non-decisions, rather than action.

Theorising learning in security and defence

In constructing the theoretical framework, we draw on three bodies of literature: organisational learning with specific attention for applications in military organisations²⁴, the evaluation of failures of learning and policy,²⁵ and, learning specifically in European security and defence²⁶. We share with some of the literature on military innovation and adaptation a conceptualisation of learning as a process and an emphasis on organisational learning capacity as a key explanatory factor. Yet, the literature's main reference point is innovation for the narrow purpose of improving operational effectiveness of states' militaries against an adversary and a focus on interplay of changes in technology, doctrine, tactics or strategy. In our case, success needs to be related to the EU's comprehensive approach to foreign policy

²³ Horowitz and Pindyck (2023, p. 98) argue that innovation should hold at least “*the promise* of a significant and measurable increase in military effectiveness”. Michael C. Horowitz and Shira Pindyck. ‘What is a military innovation and why it matters’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 46:1 (2023), pp. 85-114.

²⁴ E.g. Barbara Levitt, and James G. March. ‘Organizational learning’, *Annual review of sociology*, 14:1 (1988): 319-340; Huber, George P. ‘Organizational learning: The contributing processes and the literatures’, *Organization science*, 2:1 (1991): 88-115; Benner, Thorsten, Andrea Binder, and Philipp Rotmann. ‘Learning to build peace? United Nations peacebuilding and organizational learning: developing a research framework’, *GPPI Research Paper Series No. 7* (2007); Dyson (2019); Stephen P. Rosen. ‘New ways of war: understanding military innovation’, *International Security*, 13:1 (1988), pp. 134-168; Frank G. Hoffmann (2021) *Mars Adapting: Military Change during War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press); Farrell, T., 2010. Improving in war: military adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006–2009. *Journal of strategic studies*, 33 (4), 567–594

²⁵ Claire A Dunlop, 'Policy learning and policy failure: Definitions, dimensions and intersections', *Policy & Politics*, 45:1 (2017): 3-18.

²⁶ Smith 2017, 2018.

and crisis management and its limited defence competences. Success of learning extends to political-strategic questions given the polity's still evolving and at times ambiguous institutional structures, competences and instruments. The EU's military staff work under the political authority of a tripartite High Representative who ultimately depends on political support and agreement by Member States. The participants of learning processes are thus more heterogeneous in nature and the very purpose of learning can be contested at times.

From a broader public policy perspective, McConnell recognised the objective and subjective dimensions of success and failure. He suggested '[a] policy fails if it does not achieve the goals that proponents set out to achieve, and opposition is great and/or support is virtually non-existent'.²⁷ He also identified three main types of failures: process, programme and political. We argue that the case of the Battlegroups is a failure at the process-level with regard lesson-learning and decision-making; a partial failure at the programmatic level as the Battlegroups did at least improve military cooperation in Europe, but failed at being useful for crisis response tasks; and predominantly a failure at the political level as they never met their publicly articulated objectives in terms of bolstering the EU's role in security and defence.²⁸ To explain this, we develop a three-step model.

In a first step, we develop a *process-oriented understanding of organisational learning* consisting of six phases which allows us to trace learning since the emergence of the idea of European rapid response forces: perceptions of unusual success or failure in organisational performance, knowledge acquisition about the underlying causes through information collection and interpretation, upwards and side-ways communication and diffusion of lessons, decision-making/bargaining about which lesson to adopt or adapt, and finally, the institutionalization and review of lessons. These phases are more nuanced than the three phases of the process typically referred to in the military innovation literature.²⁹ Moreover, Pihs-Lang and Smith usefully distinguish between learning that may happen at theatre (tactical),

²⁷ Allan McConnell. 'Policy success, policy failure and grey areas in-between.' *Journal of public policy*, 30:3 (2010): 345-362.

²⁸ Franco-British Summit. *Strengthening European cooperation in security and defence: Declaration*, 2003 (November 24). London.

²⁹ Horowitz and Pindyck (2023, pp. 100-101) distinguish between invention, incubation and implementation. Hoffman (2021, p. 34) draws on organisational learning theory to distinguish between knowledge acquisition, management and sharing.

headquarters (operational), and strategic (political) level either separately or in a synchronised and integrated way.³⁰ The levels of learning or the phases are in reality not necessarily so distinct and sequential, but often overlap and blur – despite efforts of organisations such as NATO to organise their learning in a step-wise process as discussed by Dyson.³¹ Yet, a more nuanced idea of learning in phases and their main focus is heuristically helpful for researchers to locate more precisely issues with learning performance.

In a second step, we distinguish between *scope conditions*, which we define as largely outside of the control of organisations and their leadership, and *organisational factors* within their control. This distinction is generally not made in the CSDP learning literature and also often subsumed in the military innovation literature under explanatory variables.³² It matters as we are interested in correctly identifying and fairly evaluating learning performance and pathologies in our specific case of the Battlegroups, not just to explain progress across phases. Making this distinction will be important for tracing learning over time in the Battlegroup case. This allows us to highlight problems that were largely foreseen by expert communities at the time and those that were not and could not, thus compensating against hindsight bias in post-mortems. In the identification of two of the scope conditions we are influenced by Dunlop and Radaelli who have differentiated between various modes of learning based on two variables.³³ Which mode of learning prevails depends on the degree of problem or ‘*issue tractability*’ – how technically difficult and uncertain an issue is from the perspective of decision-makers – and secondly the ‘*certification of actors*’ – the degree to which a widely recognised authoritative ‘group of experts exists to advise policy-makers on the issue at hand’.

We add two additional scope conditions. First, the *strength of signals of success or failure coming from the external environment* of the organisation. This aims to capture case-specific features that create strong incentives or pressures to learn. Depending on how symmetric these signals of success or failure are, they will influence how widely shared perceptions of failure or success are among the diverse

³⁰ Smith, 2018: 6

³¹ Dyson, 2019.

³² See e.g. Horowitz and Pindyck, 2023, p. 100.

³³ Dunlop, 2014; Dunlop, Claire A., and Claudio M. Radaelli. ‘Policy learning in the Eurozone crisis: Modes, power and functionality’, *Policy sciences* 49 (2016): 107-124.

decision-makers within an EU context. The strength and symmetry matter particularly in military CSDP where decisions usually require unanimity and where member states differ in their strategic cultures, threat perceptions, domestic political contexts, and overall interest in building a strong CSDP. Conversely, weak and asymmetric signals from the environment will most likely hinder the emergence of shared perceptions. We argue that this condition is more appropriate to the EU context than the distinction between innovations during war versus peace times, which is frequently used in the military learning literature. The EU as a whole have never been at war, but one could expect strong signals to emanate from the actual or potential failure of a politically salient and resource-intensive CSDP operation.

The second additional scope condition is the *prevailing political context* within which decision-makers and organisations operate. This is, again, largely out of their control. Particularly in the domain of military operations and missions, it may be influenced by prevailing threat perceptions in the aftermath of major attacks or a substantial improvement in relations to foreign countries or regions. Political context could be also shaped by optimism or pessimism regarding the role of the EU as a military actor or the economic conditions that can enable or constrain member states' spending on security and defence. We agree with authors like Posen and Avant who emphasised the importance of political will and leadership as key factors for the implementation of innovations, but highlight that the EU's political context is more multifaceted compared to that of states.³⁴

In determining the most important *organisational factors* that may help or hinder organisational learning we are drawing on scholarly work on learning in the EU and NATO. As with the scope conditions, these factors could be either positive or negative and may fluctuate over time. For instance, Dyson stresses the arrival of new staff as a source of innovation and necessary disruption, whereas Hardt and Pihs-Lang argue that too much staff rotation and short contracts harm the creation of

³⁴ Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1984). Deborah D. Avant, *Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1994)

institutional memory and learning.³⁵ In Figure 1 we outline those factors that promise the greatest explanatory power.

First, *resourcing* of learning processes captures the organisational priority given to learning capacities, whilst *expertise* focuses more narrowly on the institutional and thematic expertise needed through staffing. Second, *processes and structures of learning* capture the degree to which learning is codified and systematised and the processes and rules around learning across levels of hierarchy and between distinct units. Third, *organisational culture* captures the insight that learning is a profoundly social endeavour and is shaped by prevailing informal understandings, norms and (dis-)incentives that shape practitioners' understanding of which practices of knowledge production and diffusion are appropriate and beneficial to career progress. Finally, *political leadership* can instigate learning processes within an organisation, help to push inconvenient and costly lessons through against resistance, signal encouragement, receptivity, disinterest or even hostility to the analysis of causes or suggestion of lessons by expert communities.

In the third step, we identify four potential learning pathologies as we move from a normatively neutral explanation of change through learning to a critique of potentially avoidable problems with organisational learning capacities.³⁶ *Resource-starved learning* is a pathology where organisations undermine their capacity to learn by not investing in specialised units that can move beyond routine organisational business in collecting and interpreting information related to organisational performance and its underlying causes, identifying actionable lessons and diffusing them. Low resourcing is an indication of low organisational priority for learning and should be measured not just in terms of quantity, but also in terms of quality of staff. For instance, Hardt argues that a lack of training and awareness-raising on lesson identification and reporting has hindered NATO learning.³⁷

Disjoined & siloed learning is a pathology that arises when organisations do not manage to coordinate and integrate lesson-learning between functionally separate units or between tactical, operational and

³⁵ Pihs-Lang, 2013; Dyson, 2019; Hardt, 2017.

³⁶ Dunlop, 2017, p. 23-24 discussed ideal-typical “degenerated forms” of learning but these are not tailored enough for our purpose.

³⁷ Hardt, 2017, p. 127, 140.

strategic levels. It results in missing crucial information needed for understanding root-causes or suffering from problematic attention biases, or even blind-spots, in monitoring their environment. Bureaucratic politics within and between organisations create a well-recognised impediment to such learning. Dyson notes rightly that scholarship on military learning stresses the need for ‘well-organised learning processes’ to help ‘avoid that learning remains siloed’, for instance, through ‘cross-functional teams’ comprised of all the services or consciously including civilians in these processes.³⁸

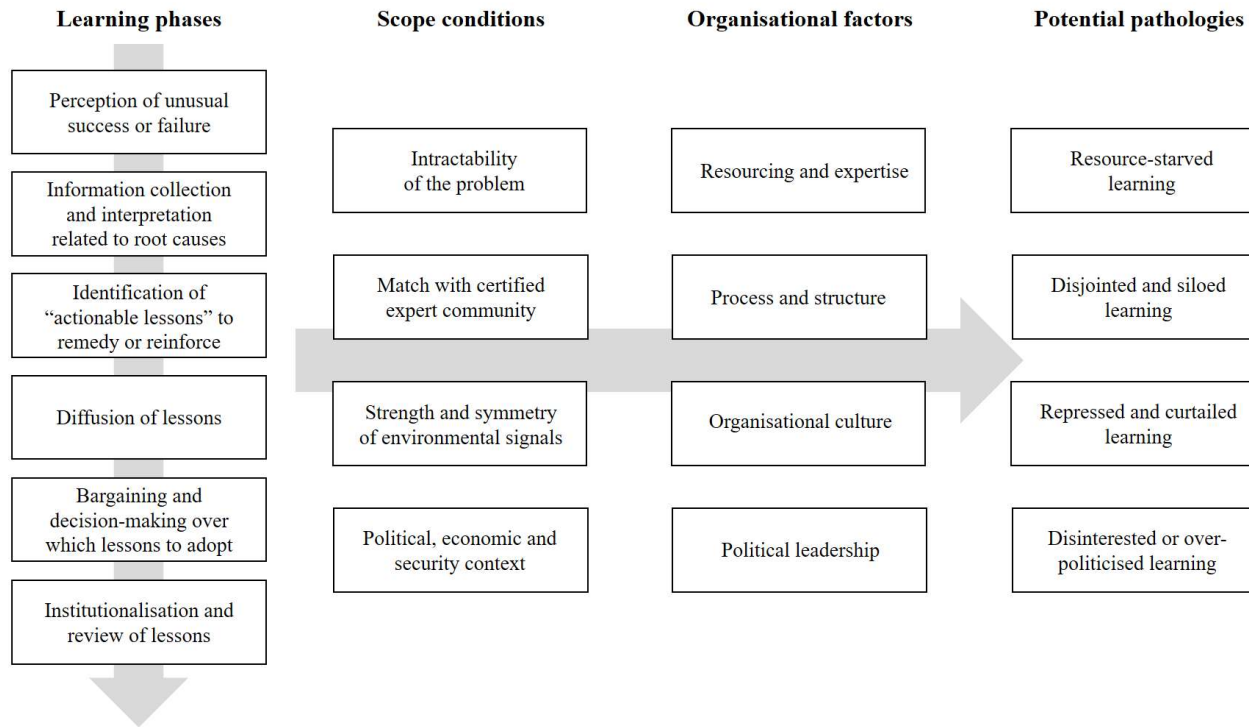
Repressed or curtailed learning is often the result of problematic organisational cultures, such as a tendency to blame-shift or over-deference to hierarchy. This can implicitly penalise the reporting of errors and discourage necessary epistemic challenge to decision-makers and the communication of organisationally or politically inconvenient ‘lessons’. For instance, Hardt found that NATO practitioners often choose not to engage with formal learning processes either because of a fear of reputational damage when putting their name to observed lessons, or because of the “need-to-know” information culture in military organisations.³⁹

Political leadership can become a systematic problem for learning when it is disinterested and non-receptive to lessons identified. Conversely, it can also become a problem when political leaders stray beyond the legitimate bargaining and decision-making over which lessons to adopt by habitually interfering in the ‘epistemic puzzling’ phases to make sure lessons identified better fit or at least not publicly jar with salient political priorities. Political leadership can intersect with organisational culture when leaders gradually rise to the top, but matters greatly in cases of politicians deciding on strategic-political lessons to be learnt and internalised.

³⁸ Dyson, 2019, p. 108, p. 121.

³⁹ Hard, 2017, p. 127; on organisational culture, see also Hoffman (2021: p. 126)

Figure 1. Learning phases, scope and organisational conditions and potential pathologies



Source: the authors, building on literature review.

The role of learning in the evolution of EU Battlegroups toward the RDC

In the following analysis, we first assess the EU's ability to learn across three distinct periods in the history of the Battlegroups and the RDC: the initial conception of the Battlegroups (2002-2007); their standby after reaching full operational capability (2007-2016); and reform since the adoption of the EU Global Strategy towards the creation of the EU RDC (2016-ongoing). We focus primarily on the actors, substance and appropriateness of the lessons identified and learnt. We then investigate how the evidence fits the explanatory factors and pathologies discussed.

Artemis to EU-Battlegroups – 2000-2007

When the EU first expressed the ambition of creating a rapid reaction force in 1999, the so-called Helsinki Headline Goal of developing a military corps-size capacity of 50,000–60,000 personnel was modelled on the size of the NATO-led implementation force IFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, the EU only reached this goal on paper. The idea was further developed during the French-British Le Touquet Summit in February 2003, where a European rapid response capacity was made a European priority. However, real progress was only made after positive operational experiences, which created a shared incentive for informal learning and an apolitical narrative of building on success among two lead nations. For the UK, the positive experience with the rapidly deployed Operation Palliser to Sierra Leone in 2000 played an important role as catalyst. It included a reinforced battalion group plus Special Forces, supported by an amphibious ready group.⁴⁰ For France, and in the EU more widely, it was particularly the rapid deployment of Operation Artemis to the DRC that triggered progress. Operation Artemis consisted of 1,800 troops provided by 12 member states with France acting as framework nation to intervene for three months until handing over to a larger and longer-term UN mission (MONUC). It offered the first real practical experience of what a rapidly deployed EU force could look like and how the framework nation concept⁴¹ might contribute to that end.

⁴⁰ Andrew M. Dorman. *Blair's successful war: British military intervention in Sierra Leone*. Routledge, 2016.

⁴¹ A lead nation provides the command structure, communication and information systems and other necessary capabilities. Other states plug their forces in.

In the Franco-British Summit declaration of November 2003, the Artemis operation was welcomed as a success story. It included a clear lesson learnt: ‘Together we now propose that the EU should aim to build on this precedent so that it is able to respond through ESDP to future similar requests from the United Nations’.⁴² The declaration laid down the framework (battlegroup sized forces, deployable within 15 days) of what would later become the EU Battlegroup Concept, proposed by France, Germany and the UK in February 2004, developed by the EU Military Staff tasked by the EU Military Committee, and approved by the European Council on 14 June 2004. Insights from a series of non-papers from 2004, made available to the authors, make reference to Operation Artemis as a blue-print for the EU Battlegroup Concept.

However, these non-papers also reveal discrepancies between political-strategic and military-operational learning processes. For instance, a senior military official argues that Artemis only gave an indication of what the EU could potentially do in the future, but in itself the mission did not have significant or lasting positive impact. Another military official, advisor to his national EU ambassador at that time, emphasised how the Artemis experience was perceived at the political level: ‘The military staff was asked to implement the political-diplomatic lesson, which was that Artemis was an operation the EU could and would do again in the future, and the Battlegroups had to mirror this.’⁴³ He added: ‘At the political-diplomatic level, they believed that every situation that required more than 1500 troops and six months deployment would be addressed by someone else, by NATO.’ The non-papers from 2004 suggest a similar politico-military discrepancy, especially regarding the Battlegroup size. In these non-papers, 1,500 troops were considered ‘the generally accepted minimum force package’ for missions within the scope of the Petersberg tasks that have a rapid response component and also need to include supporting elements together with strategic lift, sustainability, and debarkation capability. In contrast, the Battlegroup Concept approved by the Council regarded this size as a fixed goal or ceiling not to be exceeded rather than a minimum floor on which to build. Likewise, the non-papers argued strongly that

⁴² Franco-British Summit. *Strengthening European cooperation in security and defence: Declaration*, 2003 (November 24). London; Permanent Representation of France to the European Union, *Guide to the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP)*, November 2008, Brussels.

⁴³ Interview with former national military official, 14 February 2023.

more than two Battlegroups on standby for six months would be needed to mitigate the risk of potential national vetoes and competing crisis events. Yet, the approved Battlegroup Concept prescribes two on standby as the maximum. Therefore, the original design of the EU Battlegroups was at least partially the result of learning from previous operations. However, the overreliance on the EUFOR Artemis reference model and the discounting of advice on resourcing meant that the Battlegroups were from the start limited in their utility to future crises with different or more demanding features.

Another area for learning concerned the operational scenarios for which the Battlegroups – and military EU crisis management operations more generally – could be used. In the early 2000s member states differed greatly in their interpretation of the operational scenarios prescribed by the Petersberg Tasks, which guided the Helsinki Headline Goal of 1999. Observers at the time noted that while such ambiguity ‘may help to mask political differences, it is a problem for planning purposes, in particular for those working in the EU Military Committee and the EU Military Staff’.⁴⁴ The Headline Goal 2010 outlined a range of milestones to address this ambiguity and deal with capability shortfalls. The final text also stated that ‘[l]essons learned from EU-led operations will also be taken into account’.⁴⁵ Based on one of the authors’ experience, ‘illustrative scenarios’ were at that time developed and agreed by the military at the EU Military Staff and EU Military Committee level for capability-development purposes. However, the actionable lessons derived from this recognition of shortfalls did not remedy persistent ambiguity about operational scenarios at the political level.

EU Battlegroups – 2007-2016

Many of the Battlegroups military operational shortcomings were recognised already when they reached full operational capability by internal and outside sources in 2007. The new Director-General EU Military Staff, General Leakey, said that they needed ‘a more agile command-and-control to manage them. What we have now is not bad, but could be improved. We also face the same problem as NATO with strategic lift: availability and funding of strategic lift are common issues for both organisations.’⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Quille, Gerrard. "The European security and defence policy: from the Helsinki Headline Goal to the EU battlegroups." European Parliament Note (2006), p. 14

⁴⁵ European Council, Headline Goal 2010, 2004 (17-18 June). Brussels.

⁴⁶ ESDP Newsletter No 4 (2007) - http://europavarietas.org/csdp/files/esdp_newsletter_4.pdf

Expert observers such as Lindstrom recognised that ‘[g]iven its limited size and sustainability, an EU BG is more likely to be deployed in the context of ongoing operations than operate independently’⁴⁷. He predicted that ‘political pressure to employ an EU BG is likely to increase with the passage of time’ but highlighted that policymakers are ‘likely to look for very favourable conditions on the ground prior to the activation’⁴⁸. He also noted pressure on national defence budgets as a reason for contributing countries ‘to look for ways to avoid the activation of their EU BG during a time of crisis’. He furthermore critiqued narrowness of lesson-learning processes and recommended that ‘[p]olicymakers should consider additional steps to encourage the streamlining of lessons gathered across different departments and institutions to facilitate the formulation of more general sets of lessons learned’.⁴⁹

In the years following the launch, it became increasingly more difficult to fill the six-monthly standby roster. Continuous gaps opened up in the expected rota since 2012 as referenced in the introduction. These problems signalled decreasing levels of support for the Battlegroups among member states and increased the risk of a Battlegroup not being made available when called for. While some of these risks were anticipated at the conception stage, the greater puzzle is why it took the EU so long to publicly identify and implement lessons related to the problem’s root causes. The primary reason for why Member States struggled to make the Battlegroups work relates to political disincentives to use them. The prevailing political interests in cashing in on the ‘peace-dividend’ grew stronger after the 2008/2009 financial crisis. It strengthened the domestic role of Finance Ministries and fed into resource conflicts between service representatives in Defence Ministries given that Battlegroups were primarily land-based. During that period, we saw weak political leadership among Member States for a strong role of the EU and a partially disinterested, partly distracted and overwhelmed new HR/VP, Catherine Ashton, overseeing the establishment of the EEAS – difficulties well-covered in the literature. Widely discussed likely cases for Battlegroup deployment, such as the post-election uprisings in Côte d’Ivoire in 2011 or insurgencies in Mali in 2013 and the Central African Republic in 2013-14 were not

⁴⁷ Gustav Lindstrom (2007) Enter the EU Battlegroups – Challiot Papers, EU-ISS, p. 69

⁴⁸ Lindstrom, p. 73

⁴⁹ Lindstrom, p. 77

sufficiently perceived as European rather than just French problems.⁵⁰ The consequences of non-deployment did not appear to be sufficiently large or near-term and oftentimes alternative ways of acting outside the EU structure were found. Furthermore, there was a little pressure from other EU leaders on Battlegroup contributors to deliver on their commitments because of generalised fears that such naming and shaming would damage EU political coherence and support for future operations and missions.

On the funding issue, we found overly narrow and partly contradictory interpretations of the root-cause and how to tackle it. The Athena mechanism created by a 2004 Council decision on how to manage the financing of common costs of EU operations with military or defence implications included provisions that guaranteed a periodic review – initially ‘after every operation and at least every 18 months’, later revised to every three years. However, supervision and formal review of the Athena mechanism was placed under the aegis of the Foreign Relations (RELEX) Counsellors Working Party in the Council, which contributed to fragmentation of institutional responsibility about funding of EU peace and security measures – and risked contributing to disjointed learning. Pihs-Lang also noted the institutional separation of the reviews from other learning processes. Similarly, Novàky argued that Athena mechanism reviews got repeatedly bogged down in ‘diplomatic tug of war between France, the strongest supporter of expanded common funding, and the UK, its strongest opponent.’⁵¹ The 2008 financial and European debt crisis led to significant defence budget cuts across Europe, but ‘different member states drew different lessons from Europe’s economic problems’, with some arguing for more common funding to improve burden sharing and others strongly opposing such plans.

More fundamentally, the 2014 Athena review showed how opponents to common funding referred to the lack of political will and strategic interests in conducting operations in Africa as the root cause of failure, rather than to frustrations about unequal financial burden-sharing. Athena Mechanism evaluations centred narrowly on whether it worked according to the rules as described in the Council Decision. Question about whether these rules were sufficient to facilitate the use of a Battlegroup were never formally part of these evaluations, because these were seen as political questions. We are aware

⁵⁰ Reykers, 2016.

⁵¹ Novaky, Niklas. ‘Who wants to pay more? The European Union’s military operations and the dispute over financial burden sharing.’ *European Security* 25:2 (2016): 216-236.

of instances when national military representatives from countries traditionally opposed to broadening the rules for common funding were actually sympathetic to such arguments. Yet they indicated that they would find it difficult to convince the political level – and indeed any such advice was ignored when it came to Council discussions. For most of this period, the challenge of identifying the correct causes of member state reluctance was made more difficult by Member States themselves providing misleading explanations and unconvincing excuses, because the truth was seen as politically embarrassing in Brussels. For instance, Germany was opposed to shouldering a greater share of the cost based on gross national product, whereas the UK complained about having to pay twice, for its troops and for the common costs. Or Battlegroup-providing nations would come up with military-operational reasons for why their particular Battlegroup was a poor fit for the crisis at hand when in reality these reasons could have been addressed.

EU Battlegroups – to EU RDC, 2016-2023

European defence ambitions increased after Russia's Crimea 'annexation', the coming into office of Federica Mogherini as HR/VP in 2014 and the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016. This combination of events led to increases in defence spending at the national level and a shift in EU strategy towards increasing its geopolitical power and military capabilities, first expressed in the 2016 EU Global Strategy and later the Strategic Compass of 2022. These contextual and leadership changes gradually opened the door for more concerted efforts to identify some of the underlying problems and potential responses. For instance, then EEAS Secretary General Helga Schmidt created in June 2017 a task force to review the EEAS' financial instruments, burden-sharing and harmonisation, which resulted in a proposal from the HR/VP in June 2018 for creating a wider European Peace Facility.⁵² As part of this new off-budget instrument, which replaced the Athena mechanism and African Peace Facility, the financing of common costs of CSDP missions and operations increased from roughly 5-10 to 10-15 per cent of the total costs. The COVID-19 crisis created a further impetus for strengthening organisational capacity for knowledge management and learning within the EEAS under the new HR/VP. A task force

⁵² Deneckere, Matthias. 'The uncharted path towards a European Peace Facility.' *European Centre for Development Policy Management Discussion paper* 248 (2019): 1-16.

was created ‘with members from the CCPC (Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability), EUMS (EU Military Staff) and “all other relevant actors” that started to collect lessons’ both from a Headquarters and theatre perspective.⁵³ Our interviewees suggest that the current HR/VP Borrell has been keen to promoting integrative learning, including at political-strategic level, but doubts remain about the staff resources available for this purpose and whether a critical mass of Member States is sufficiently engaged in this process.

The collapse of the Afghan national army and the chaotic US-led evacuation mission of 24-26 August 2021 prompted a search for lessons about what went wrong. It was also seen by HR/VP Borrell as a political opportunity to make publicly the case for creating a renewed rapid reaction capacity – an idea we believe already existed at the higher military echelons in some member states:

We need to draw lessons from this experience ... as Europeans we have not been able to send 6,000 soldiers around the Kabul airport to secure the area. The US has been, we haven't. (...) For this reason in our Strategic Compass we are proposing the creation of a permanent European ‘Initial Entry Force’ that could act quickly in an emergency. (...) Our first entry force should be made of 5,000 soldiers that are able to mobilize at short notice. We have EU Battle Groups but these have never been mobilized. We need to be able to act quickly.⁵⁴

This so-called *Initial Entry Force* would later be referred to in the Strategic Compass as the *Rapid Deployment Capacity*. Largely in parallel with the drafting of the Strategic Compass, the EU Military Staff started working in 2021 on revisions of the Battlegroups, based on lessons identified. The proposals were presented to the Chiefs of Defence meeting in May 2022 in the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.⁵⁵ The meeting acknowledged problems with the roster and agreed the following military-operational lessons to be learned: a default standby period from 12 months instead of 6 months, staggered readiness, the Military Planning and Conduct Capability as the identified

⁵³ Bremberg and Hedling, 2022, p. 143; confirmed by our interviews.

⁵⁴ Corriere della Sera. ‘Borrell: «Afghanistan was a catastrophe. Europe must share responsibility»’, Online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/corriere-della-sera-borrell-%C2%ABafghanistan-was-catastrophe-europe-must-share-responsibility%C2%BB_en

⁵⁵ Interviews with EU Military Staff officials, 22 February and 26 July 2022.

headquarters, more pre-coordination with framework nations, avoiding overlap in training demand, and advance planning which would allow for better scenario development.⁵⁶ The Strategic Compass stressed that increased modularity would make the RDC more flexibly deployable, made a commitment to providing strategic enablers, and outlined that initial development would be based on only two concrete operational scenarios based on real life crises (rescue and evacuation; and initial phase of stabilization). This proposal would address the ambiguity problem discussed above and could help to make capacity shortfalls more visible, which in turn increases the pressure to do something about it.⁵⁷

Moreover, the Strategic Compass does not shy away from identifying and trying to address other types of root causes of failure, including a political commitment to extend the scope of common funding and to use more flexible decision-making arrangements, in particular the potential use of Article 44. For instance, Commissioner for Budget and Administration Hahn announced that the EU's first full-fledged live exercise will be financed on an ad-hoc basis through the European Peace Facility (EPF). He also highlighted progress with regard to the use of Article 44 to allow coalitions of EU member states some more autonomy to plan or conduct an EU mission or operation.⁵⁸ Yet, improvement of common funding through the EPF is not permanent. It is still dependent on a Council decision (by consensus) on a case-by-case basis. Resourcing the RDC may be deprioritised in favour of meeting the more politically salient NATO commitments given the Russian threat. Furthermore, attempts at improving flexibility through Article 44 will neither remove the requirement for unanimity voting in the Council nor will it substantially reduce on its own the risk of potential national vetoes against the use of their military 'modules'. Although member States as a collective may want a more agile EU decision-making process for military missions, individually most do not want to give up their possibility to veto a mission or operation that may harm their interest. These interests continue to differ given variable threat perceptions, geographic interests and policy priorities that may not coincide with the crisis at hand. The problem of insufficient peer pressure on or accountability of those contributor nations that do not live up to their commitments made on paper is hardly identified, let alone addressed.

⁵⁶ Information provided by interviewees, cross-checked in memos made available to us.

⁵⁷ Interviews with EEAS staff members.

⁵⁸ European Parliament, 18 April 2023.

Furthermore, scarce resources still create obstacles to successful learning in the RDC development and its supporting architecture. One clear obstacle is the continuous pressure on the EPF budget, caused by the military support to Ukraine. While the Council agreed on a significant EPF budget increase on 13 April 2023, concerns remain about how this financial pressure will affect the milestones set out in the Compass (e.g. the further development and expansion of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability, and the development of a European-level communication and information system). Moreover, interviewees at the higher EU military level noted how the current security situation and the war in Ukraine in particular, overstretches the EU Military Staff, leading to reduced involvement in conceptual learning and development. Another largely unacknowledged problem so far is that financial burden-sharing is not just about increasing the share of common costs such as those for exercises. Member states worry mostly about the non-plannable costs, the additional costs of personnel on mission, transport, building of secure infrastructure, use of ammunition and fuels, significant higher maintenance costs, higher depreciation of equipment or even loss of equipment. This illustrates a wider problem of learning about unplannable future events that create incentives to let other countries shoulder the costs and risks.

Explaining and evaluating EU learning

Our discussion demonstrated that after years of delay, the EU eventually managed to identify and address some of the root-causes of the creeping failure of the Battlegroups through the RDC concept. However, successful learning related mostly to problems at the military-operational level. In contrast, it has struggled to fully diagnose or sufficiently address those causes that are more civilian, strategic or political in nature. Our theoretical framework helps to explain why some lessons are learnt and others disappear completely or result in political ambiguity. Starting with the learning phases, we have seen that the original conception of the Battlegroups was informed by cases of perceived success which served as reference models and political arguments. Subsequently, the experience of managing this new instrument created for many years only weak or uneven perceptions of failure. The crises that triggered calls for their use generated only weak *environmental signals* of failure because they seemed too remote and small in their security or economic consequences to most member states. Furthermore, some of the

potential negative impacts were avoided because individual EU member states acted outside the EU framework instead. The political salience of failure was further limited as member states largely refrained from publicly criticising each other for blocking a mission.

Another hindering *scope condition* for learning was the *intractability of the problem*. The creation of highly prepared, effective and actually usable multi-national rapid response forces is a novel challenge for which no successful ‘off-the-shelf’ solution exist. Few organisations have anything resembling such forces and the few that do, such as NATO, are not fully comparable because of the dominant US role and because it is unencumbered by imperatives of an ‘integrated approach’ involving civilian actors and instruments. In any case, NATO’s track-record for the use of rapid reaction forces for crisis management cannot count as a success either. Moreover, designing a rapid reaction force in a multi-national setting is fraught with complexity because success depends on understanding the interplay of diverse factors situated at different levels which together create several ‘weakest links’: The force needs to be military ‘fit-for-purpose’ across multiple dimensions, but will only be used if sufficient political incentives are in place. While *certified expert knowledge* exists to identify and address military operational problems, it is less clear who can authoritatively advise on the political disincentives. In any case, there is no easy way of avoiding parochial national interests getting in the way of mobilising an instrument for common interests as long as national representatives are nationally appointed or elected and the Treaty requires unanimity in decision-making.

We have also seen how a change in how *political, economic and security context* matters to learning; first negatively in the wake of the 2008 Financial Crisis and then positively after Russia’s ‘annexation’ of Ukrainian territory in 2014. Contextual change helps or hinders political leadership to construct functional imperatives and identify lessons to be learnt. For instance, the Afghanistan evacuation operation was objectively not a realistic candidate for an EU operation for a range of reasons, but it was politically salient and was framed by EU actors such as HR/VP Borrell as a ‘close call’ to underline the organisation’s lack of critical capacity and as a ‘teachable moment’ to mobilise support for change. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the country’s fight-back with the unprecedented support of the US and EU since 2022 constitute arguably another change of context with significant implications

for learning conditions and political leadership. The invasion accelerated existing efforts to reform the Battlegroups and improve the common funding of the RDC through the European Peace Facility. Conversely, it reduced funding for EU internal improvements given the priority for support to Ukraine. Improvements in the EU will also suffer from the priority Member States tend to give to investments to improve NATO's defensive capabilities. The war may furthermore distract political attention from the type of crises that the EU RDC is best placed to address in the EU's Southern periphery.

We also identified organisational factors which could be influenced by policy makers and senior officials. The *political leadership* of successive HR/VPs mattered both negatively and positively. While more recent political leadership through HR/VPs has improved the EU's capacity to learn, there is still an unfortunate tendency to sell renewed investment in EU instruments as efforts to 'learn' from specific politically visible operations. This can create an unhelpful straitjacket in terms of setting maximum troop numbers and constraining planning. It reverses the military-operational logic that required troop numbers should follow the needs of potential operations, not the other way round. And it increases the risk that a small set of forces designed for one specific crisis will have very limited applicability for future crises. The current HR/VP seems to understand the need to resource and create expertise for the lessons learnt process in the EEAS and the wider political environment, but is limited by restrictions on the creation of new positions because of budget limitations.

Differences in *resourcing and expertise* partly explain why the military part of the EU works reasonably well because it is served by dedicated experts to run this process, including in the EU Military Staff. Although there is also a willingness to learn at the civilian side about security and defence, it is not formalised in a process nor are there dedicated experts to run through the learning phases. This is reflected and reinforced by differences in *organisational culture* between the military and the civilian side, but also informal norms shared across both. Military experts explained that in most military organisations a lessons-learnt process is part of their standing operating procedures and part of military doctrine – not withstanding some cultural differences between 'old' member states who have a longer tradition of transparent lessons-learnt processes compared to 'new' members affected by the legacy of the Warsaw Pact. In contrast, our interviewees noted career disincentives for civilian EU officials in the

EEAS to identify and communicate inconvenient lessons. We found that the closer the process comes to the political level, the more difficult it becomes to discuss all topics to be improved. There is a strong consensus and ‘face-saving’ culture around military operations that hinders formally naming and shaming those partners that do not live up to commitments, similar to what Hardt found for NATO.⁵⁹ National representatives, including the highest military representatives, generally wish to avoid that their country can be blamed of mistakes and seek to protect their national interests, of which avoiding costs is one. In some cases, member states who vetoed or pushed back against formally recording certain lessons at the EU level have subsequently solved the issue nationally to avoid future criticism. However, this does not help to overcome the problem that sensitive lessons identified at the lower military levels often cannot be discussed and resolved at the highest international political levels. It explains, for example, why it took so long to get the issue of common funding on the political table in the EU, and even when this happened it resulted in an ambiguous compromise.

The other obstacle to effectively coordinate the military-operational and civilian-political level of learning are found in *organisational structures*. For instance, while the EU RDC Concept is officially a product of the EEAS and hence a responsibility of the HR/VP, the EU Military Staff Concepts and Capabilities Directorate holds the pen. This directorate designs the RDC Concept and develops the modified EU Battlegroups, but the HR/VP is responsible for coordinating with the member states and finding consensus. The Concepts and Capabilities Directorate can identify lessons at a higher strategic or political level, but these need to be dealt with by the appropriate higher authorities, including in the EU Military Committee, the Council and its subcommittees, and by the HR/VP.

Amongst the four potential learning pathologies, resources-starved learning is a problem, but arguably the least severe one. In contrast, the EU remains prone to *disjointed and siloed learning* on problems that do not neatly fall into one sphere, despite improvement in recent years under the current HR/VP. Learning is *indirectly repressed or curtailed* by the prevailing organisational culture that prioritises face-saving for the sake of maintaining political consensus and does not sufficiently reassure officials

⁵⁹ Hardt, 2017.

that they will not be blamed or punished for reporting about shortcomings. This can feed into *disinterested learning* amongst experts who become frustrated by a lack of political interest or ambiguous political compromises. Still, the EU managed to improve its learning capacities in the present case and there is evidence of wider efforts, for instance, the creation of EEAS task forces on financing or COVID, or the consultative process leading to the EU Strategic Compass.

Conclusion

The creation of usable and effective rapid deployment forces is a difficult challenge for consensus-based regional organisations, especially for out-of-area crisis management operations. As shown in this article, they will only be used if the right military-operational, financial and political conditions are in place. We showed how the EU struggled for many years to correctly identify, let alone address, the root-causes behind the creeping failure of its Battlegroups. Yet, we also argue that the EU has demonstrated its improved capacity to learn key military-operational lessons when designing the RDC: (1) The Battlegroup Concept was land-focused only, while the RDC will become a joint capacity; (2) Battlegroups lacked the support of earmarked strategic enablers with the same readiness, which the RDC will have; (3) the size of the RDC, although still limited, will be bigger than the Battlegroups and fit for most of the foreseen tasks (except most initial entry operations) (4) the the European Peace Facility regulations foresee more common funding of missions. Yet, the EU's learning has been incomplete as most of the deeper causes of troop contributing nations refusing to meet their commitments remain either undiagnosed or unaddressed, for instance, in relation to the lack of reputational costs for renegeing or remaining funding concerns. It is therefore uncertain whether the design changes will be sufficient for ensuring that the RDC will be used to good effect by 2025, especially given the resource competition created by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In line with recent writing by public administration scholars,⁶⁰ our analysis demonstrates the merits of evaluating learning not just in terms of process, but also with regard to the substance and appropriateness of the lessons identified. Our findings align with the more recent military innovation

⁶⁰ Dunlop, 2017

and adaptation literature on the importance of organisational learning capacity, and particularly the role of culture.⁶¹ Yet, our more nuanced conceptualisation of learning phases and our distinction between scope conditions and organisational factors could be of value to his literature too. Our framework could also work for other multinational organisations, especially in a NATO context where the literature suggests similar problems.⁶² Practitioners seeking to improve learning capacities of these organisations and political leadership may benefit from the framework to better target their efforts. For the EU, this could mean strengthening the institutionalisation and resourcing of lesson-learning at the political-strategic level, to better integrate the existing military operational lessons-learnt process in a broader process for the whole of the EU, and changing organisational cultures and aspects of leadership that discourages the reporting and discussion of strategic-political shortcomings.

⁶¹ E.g. Hoffman, 2021.

⁶² Hardt, 2017