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Policy | brief

Reviewing the EU's Crisis Management Procedures

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The ongoing review of the EU's Crisis Management Procedures warrants attention. What passes as an update of an arcane and technical document masks a profoundly political debate concerning what the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) should be about. This policy brief summarises the main proposals and formulates a set of critical reflections. It calls for replacing the bureaucratic scheming with a more forthright political debate, and warns against sacrificing incompatible organisational cultures on the altar of the comprehensive approach. At a time when European security and prosperity trends are increasingly pointing downwards, the EEAS and the member states must look to the future and embrace, rather than resist, change.

On 1 December 2011, the Foreign Affairs Council invited the High Representative to propose a review of the EU's Crisis Management Procedures (CMP). The original document from 2003 had lost much of its relevance as a result of the changing post-Lisbon institutional architecture and the evolving direction of the CSDP. One week later, 12 member states loudly reiterated this call for a new set of procedures and guidelines. In response, the High Representative set up a working group. Led by Yves de Kermabon, a former KFOR commander and the first head of the EULEX Kosovo mission, this working group was tasked with elaborating proposals to this end. Simultaneously, the High Representative oversaw the establishment of a crisis response system that would allow the EEAS to frame these operation-oriented discussions in the broader strategic context of EU engagement. In October 2012, the Multilayer 2012 exercise was designed to test the new set-up. The overall CMP review is expected to lead to a consolidated document to be considered by member states early in 2013.

This policy brief takes stock of the various proposals and formulates a number of critical reflections. As a way forward, it principally advocates a more forthright discussion about the EU's role in a world increasingly overcast by thunderclouds. At a time when the American commitment to underwriting European security is waning, the laudable adagio of comprehensive crisis management must not become a smokescreen masking inactivity. Trends of European prosperity and security are increasingly pointing downwards, and the CSDP must be recalibrated accordingly.

The Kermabon Proposals

The CMP review process features a technical component as well as a political component: it is not only about updating procedures but also about the political direction of the CSDP. The working group intended to deliver progress on multiple fronts. Firstly, it had the ambition to integrate the CSDP system in the broader EEAS toolkit in order to foster a 'genuine comprehensive approach'. Secondly, it aimed to speed up the planning process by reducing the number of political decisions required for launching new operations whilst ensuring due political oversight

and control by the member states. Thirdly, it strived towards harmonising civilian and military processes and standardising the planning documentation through the use of new templates. Last but not least, it would seek a rapprochement between the strategic and operational levels by introducing a force sensing exercise as well as the involvement of the operational planning teams early on in the process. To this combined purpose, the Kermabon group floated a set of proposals, contained in a short document circulated in June 2012.

The most substantive change undoubtedly concerns the establishment of an 'EU-wide strategic approach'. This first phase – preceding the adoption of a Crisis Management Concept (CMC) – is meant to foster a more comprehensive and anticipatory policy response to hot spots of instability. At the request of the member states or at the initiative of the High Representative, this would involve the drafting of a 'strategic framework document' articulating what the crisis is all about, why the EU should act and what response instruments are most suitable. This exercise would take place in the setting of the EEAS Crisis Management Board, which may decide to activate the so-called Crisis Platform as a central coordination tool. The underlying intent was to institutionalise the working method that was already pursued vis-à-vis the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. In both of these regions, CSDP action was accompanied by regional strategy documents that sought to weave together all strands of EU action. (For a critical analysis of the Sahel strategy, see Simon et al. 2012.) Such a strategic approach serves the twin purpose of embedding CSDP action within the EU foreign policy toolkit and fostering a culture of prudent planning.

The second major change the Kermabon group advocated concerns the reduction of political decisions required throughout the CSDP planning cycle. This entailed a simplification of the old planning sequence, which on paper involved a Council decision to act, a crisis management concept, strategic options, a Council decision on financing and command and control arrangements, an initiating directive for military operations, a concept of operations (CONOPS) and an operation plan (OPLAN). This was achieved by (a) considering the drafting of strategic options as an optional-step only pursued at the request of the CIVCOM or the EUMC; (b) approving the initiating military directive only at the level of the EUMC; and, (c) codifying the fast-track procedure of merging the CONOPS and OPLAN into a single document, the so-called CONOPS+. Last but not least, the overarching but often contentious 'decision to act' became merged into the 'strategic approach' discussion. As such, the overall number of political decision points drops from 7 to 4, or even 3 in the fast track mode. One must mention that this proposal already represented a political compromise: the early suggestion was to scrap the strategic options and initiating military directive altogether!

Buried within the discussion on the new planning sequence one finds a number of smaller changes. For example, the CMPD planning team in charge of writing the CMCs would be authorised to think outside of the narrow CSDP box when formulating proposals. It would also become responsible for developing the strategic reviews leading to a transition from CSDP to Commission instruments. Both of these additional authorities are intended to foster greater synergies within the overall EU response. The CMC drafting stage, furthermore, would be structurally accompanied by a force sensing exercise to gauge the appetite of the member states for committing resources to a proposed CSDP engagement. Last but not least, the Civilian Operations Commander (i.e. the CPCC Director) would become the owner of the civilian operation plans. This transforms the civilian OPLAN into a more political document, to be followed by a more detailed implementation plan drafted by the head of mission. This effectively strengthens the role of the operations commanders as 'gatekeepers' responsible for safeguarding maximum latitude for heads of mission and force commanders – i.e. making the field level the supported command.

It can be observed that most of these changes are actually about codifying existing practices. In practice, most operation planning cycles have already seen one or more steps skipped. CMPD planners have been meshing their policy proposals within the broader toolkit for a long time: the Horn of Africa example provides sufficient proof of this. It can be rightly said that the new process simplifies matters, but the dynamics do not change fundamentally: the member states remain very much in the CSDP driving seat. Having said that, a number of observations can be made that should make member states think twice about the overall direction of the review.

Critical Observations

Let us call a spade a spade. The CMP review is ultimately about the political direction of the CSDP. Firstly, the prominent call for a reduction of political decision points constitutes an attempt to rob the CSDP-reticent member states of the opportunity to pursue bureaucratic delaying tactics. There is no functional logic to simplifying the process if one is earnest about the stated level of ambition of the CSDP: large-scale operations simply require a lot of staff work. Yet there is a clear political logic to pre-empting the deliberate stalling of the policy cycle. Such delaying tactics were part and parcel of, for example, the discussions about Operation Atalanta or what became the EUCAP Sahel mission. Policy speeches frequently refer to the need for rapid-response, but the most recently launched CSDP missions have been on the drawing board for a longer time than Operation Overlord was in the making! At present, the debate about what the CSDP should be about is being conducted in the shadows. Different camps of member states are trying to torpedo each other's ideas by playing bureaucratic cards. Surely this is not a healthy political debate.

Secondly, the proposal to establish an EU-wide strategic approach – commonsensical though it may seem – is being dragged along with this dynamic. Member states may rightfully question the value of such a document if in practice it is used as a mechanism for precluding rapid response. In order to avoid such a scenario, one can leave the drafting of the framework document entirely in the hands of the EEAS – i.e. without searching for consensual approval at the level of the 27. The problem in that case becomes that the overarching document guiding CSDP action may not have the support of all member states while the ensuing steps do require an overall consensus. In other words, the strategic approach discussion creates an arena for the same difficult discussions to take place within the EEAS rather than in the PSC. The only helpful way out is to clearly ensure complementarity rather than overlap between the strategic framework document and the eventual CMC. The EU needs more regional strategies that provide a conceptual compass for CSDP action, but no one is served by a situation in which crisis responses are developed in different committees. The uneasy coexistence between the CSDP structures and the managing directorate for crisis response needs to be addressed: genuine rapid reaction requires a clear chain of command.

The streamlining of civilian and military processes, thirdly, remains largely limited to empty words. The fundamental issue is that the CSDP is built on a stovepiped system of mission planning: the pretension to plan comprehensively is largely abandoned once the CMC is approved. This stovepiping is built into the institutional preference for having separate command chains, but also into the financial arrangements. Civilian missions are resourced through the CFSP budget whereas the common costs of military operations are financed through the Athena mechanism (with individual costs laying where they fall). The breaking of these stovepipes could have been fundamentally addressed in the review of the Athena mechanism that was conducted a year earlier, but some member states precluded any substantive progress on this front. The relatively small change of making the Civilian Operations Commander responsible for drafting operation plans is therefore the only meagre point of progress on this front. It raises the question, however, to what extent member states and the Brussels institutions will be willing to delegate authority in a spirit of mission command.

Fourthly and finally, some attention is warranted to the doctrinal elaboration of the new way of planning CSDP engagements. Parallel to the more political Kermabon proposals there is an ongoing push of staff efforts to update the planning templates and incorporate the NATO Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive – the new bible for strategic planners – into EU structures. In this regard, a few critical caveats are due. Some of the draft templates, for example, suggest codifying strategically nonsensical concepts into doctrine (such as the infamous end-date). Furthermore, one can ask why international organisations such as NATO and the EU remain committed to effects-based thinking when the original developers of this methodology have long since abandoned it (cf. Mattis 2008). The conceptual complexity of effects-based planning makes it an extremely resource-intensive undertaking and ultimately does not foster better staff work. Yet such pertinent debates in the EU seem to be conducted below the political radar and without the genuine involvement of the member states.

The Way Forward

In all these discussions, what member states seem to fear above all is change itself. This relates to the widespread perception that the Kermabon team held their cards too close to their chest. Yet

these fears are unwarranted: whatever the changes to the CSDP planning process, ultimate political control remains concentrated in the hands of the member states. There is no real risk that the EEAS will take over or that individual member states will optimise the mechanisms in order to upload their policy preferences. Such political games are easy enough to detect and will surely be blocked by the other actors involved. The more insidious risk, however, is that petty politics drown any appreciation of the big picture, namely that of a rapidly deteriorating European security environment. To that purpose, two major issues should be heeded when the eventual CMP review gets adopted.

On the one hand, there is a real possibility that the horizontal integration of policy instruments in the name of comprehensiveness is complemented by a growing vertical disconnect within individual policy instruments. There are natural limits to the extent to which one can synchronise humanitarian efforts, development assistance and military operations because these instruments serve fundamentally different policy purposes: to help, to build and to protect or destroy. Sometimes these go hand-in-hand, sometimes they do not. The political drive to treat these instruments on the same level may ultimately lead to a situation where their organisational cultures may be merged horizontally but broken vertically. The EU must avoid sacrificing the impartial excellence of ECHO as well as its military teeth on the altar of the comprehensive approach.

On the other hand, the political debate about the direction of the CSDP cannot tolerate being all about how the EU structures should be fine-tuned for the type of crises faced over the past two decades. The international order is characterised by new forms of geopolitical rivalry. Future crises will look less like Bosnia in the 1990s and more like Syria today. Yet the EU seems just as petrified now as it was twenty years ago. Allowing the EEAS and the CSDP to really live up to their potential means acknowledging that the world is changing. Instability both within and beyond Europe is on the rise. The US is increasingly bent on making Europeans responsible for their own security. Fear of change will protect neither European interests nor European values. In this sense, member states should not dwell too long over accepting the Kermabon proposals. Whatever the procedures are, they will in any case only serve as flexible guidelines. The more important matters surely lie elsewhere.

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