

CEPS COMMENTARY



Thinking ahead for Europe

The EU's Winter Package for European Security and Defence

Javier Solana and Steven Blockmans

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The security and defence of the European Union touches on a core area of national sovereignty. Lack of political will and mutual trust among EU member states has long been an obstacle to achieving the treaty objectives and has blocked the framing of a policy that could lead to a common defence. In recent years, defence budgets all over Europe have been slashed in an uncoordinated manner, hollowing out most member states' capabilities. For this reason, the leaders of the EU member states meeting at the December 2013 European Council decided to buck the trend. But delivery has lagged behind.

Tapping into the political momentum generated by the fraught security climate in and around Europe, the prospect of Brexit and the unpredictability injected into US foreign policy by the election of Donald Trump, the European Council has now endorsed a 'winter package' to strengthen the common security and defence policy of the Union. It has urged speedy implementation by institutions and member states alike.

The package has been hailed as an ambitious set of proposals. Although its three 'pillars' were indeed developed and endorsed with remarkable speed, it is not a game-changer. The strategic direction had already been determined in a more *realist* fashion in the 2015 review of the European Neighbourhood Policy and then in the EU Global Strategy presented in June this year. The implementation plan for the security and defence part of the EU Global Strategy (the first pillar of the package) clarifies the stated ambition but does not pitch it at a new level.

That said, the lists of concrete proposals and detailed timelines contained in the implementation plan, and in the European Commission's Defence Action Plan (the package's second pillar), are most welcome. The initiatives to create a small "permanent operational planning and conduct capability" (i.e. headquarters) for EU missions and "non-executive military operations" (i.e. non-combat missions); a "Coordinated Annual Review on Defence" (i.e. a kind of European semester); and a European Defence Fund all deserve support. As does the plan to start harmonising standards and requirements for a single market for the European defence industry.

Javier Solana is President of the ESADE Center for Global Economy and Geopolitics, a Distinguished Fellow at the Brookings Institution, and was EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (1999-2009) and Secretary-General of NATO (1995-1999). Steven Blockmans is Head of EU Foreign Policy at CEPS.

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As the EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini has stressed time and again, such efforts are not intended to duplicate or compete with NATO's big structures and headquarters, but aim to streamline and improve the functioning of the existing structures of the EU. The latter include headquarters in France, Germany, Greece, Italy and a Brexiting UK, from where EU operations are currently run. NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has given his seal of approval to these initiatives, provided that the two organisations act in full complementarity. To that end, a common set of 42 concrete proposals for enhanced EU-NATO cooperation in areas such as countering hybrid threats, cyber security and operational cooperation in the Mediterranean (the third pillar of the package) was approved last week by the respective Councils.

As with the other two pillars of the 2016 winter package, these proposals represent no sea change in the *modus operandi* of European security and defence. They attempt to banish ghosts from the past in coordination between the two Brussels-based organisations, and every small step to move EU-NATO cooperation up a notch is to be welcomed. Given the EU's commitment not to duplicate structures, this is important. Member states operate a single set of forces, so by using instruments and developing member states' capabilities the EU will in fact strengthen capabilities that are also available to NATO and the United Nations. Moreover, a stronger EU will be in the UK's interest once it has left the Union.

The cautious diplomatic wording used in the winter package is still useful, it seems, to paper over differences among EU member states. Yet, as always, the devil is in the detail. Two examples illustrate this point. First, the reference to "permanent structured cooperation" (i.e. the treaty mechanism allowing a core group of member states to integrate further) is a placeholder: the current proposals are all about capabilities, without dealing with the institutional consequences. Second, the plan to earmark €500 million per year to spend on R&D is groundbreaking but also conditional on a future agreement on the EU's post-Brexit multi-annual financial framework (2021-27). Even if agreed, its potential to turbo-boost defence spending is likely to be limited as it will probably only be able to bridge existing shortfalls. Until then, a mere €90 million per year is available. This is hardly the big bazooka the EU needs to boost its common security and defence.

The key to success is greater strategic convergence, whereby EU member states fully recognise the link between the inevitable restructuring of their armed forces in the short term (which is already under way through defence spending reviews in most states) and the long-term added value of pooling and sharing military capabilities in terms of sustainability and effectiveness. Without a common agreement on which capabilities can be scrapped, which new ones should be developed together and for what purpose, the targets laid out in the current package are unlikely to be reached any time soon.

While the 2016 winter package hints at promising developments for the future of European security and defence, the initiatives are still in the experimental phase. In and of themselves, they fail to provide the EU with the level of input needed to effectively meet current and future challenges. Progress in the three pillars will be evaluated by the European Council in March 2017 and will be a real test of credibility. Assurances that 'work is in hand' must not suffice. At their next summit, EU leaders should seize the opportunity to go beyond the modest agenda set out so far and agree on a higher level of ambition to create a more integrated framework for their defence cooperation. They should be even more demanding and ask for detailed, costed plans to achieve these ambitions within strict timeframes. That would truly be a qualitative leap towards a European Defence Union.