

The EU's Battlegroup in perspective: addressing present challenges for future deployments

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Origins and goals – Brief background perspective

The European Union Battlegroup (EU BG) was designed as a military unit within the framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and reached Full Operational Capability (FOC) on the 1st January 2007 to perform mainly in North Africa, Middle East, Balkans and Caucasus. It is composed of an infantry battalion-sized force (1500 troops) based on the contributions from a coalition of member states set under a "lead nation" on existing *ad hoc* missions that the EU is undertaking under the political control and strategic direction of the Council.

The EU BG concept was officially created in 2004 due to the success of the Operation Artemis as requested by the United Nations to intervene in the Democratic Republic of Congo. At the time, the Secretary-General Kofi Annan emphasised the value of the Battlegroups in helping the United Nations to deal with instability crisis all over the world. Indeed, Artemis showed the ability of the EU to rapidly react and deploy in a short time and distance scale since, in just three weeks, the EU managed to agree on the Crisis Management Concept (CMC) and launch the operation. In fact, in only 20 days the deployment took off. As a result, the success of the Artemis mission gave the impression that all future rapid response deployments would be easily putted in practice.

In 24th November 2003, a Franco-British Summit concluded that the EU should be able to respond to all the requests made by the UN, both in Africa and anywhere else in the world. The proposal suggested

the name "Battlegroups" (British) or "Tactical Groups" (French), but the final "label" was only approved on 10th February 2004 when France, Germany and the United Kingdom released a document proposing a number of autonomous groups based on Artemis. The "Battlegroup concept" was finally approved and then submitted to the Political and Security Committee (PSC) which, in turn, requested the advice of the EU Military Committee (EUMC). The EU BG started to gain force after the informal meeting that brought together ministers of defence and chiefs of staff on 5 and 6 April 2004, with higher expectations to be operational early in 2007.

The EU Military Staff (EUMS) soon developed the Battlegroup Concept which was finally agreed upon in June 2004. These groups would be at the disposal at short notice for any UN request and be rapidly tailored to specific missions including conflict prevention, evacuation, humanitarian aid or initial stabilisation. Moreover, the Battlegroups would have enough range to deal with all those tasks, although ought to be limited in "size and intensity" due to the small nature of the groups. They were defined as combat-trained, so their full potential would be best realised in tasks of combat forces in crisis management, bearing in mind their limited size. Battlegroups operations would be conducted under a UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR), although operations could be drawn in situations with no need of such procedure, like the evacuation of EU citizens.

The BG succeeds in an area of employment at a distance up to 6000 km from Brussels as the centre of the range, but can be

used anywhere and globally. After "notice to move", the BG has then 10 days to its projection, guarantee its capability up to 30 days, and if replenished, remain on the field up to 120 days.

On 1st January 2005, the BG reached its Initial Operational Capability (IOC) and on 1st January 2007 has reached its FOC with ability to «undertake if so decided by the Council two concurrent single Battlegroup-sized rapid response operations, including the ability to launch both such operations nearly simultaneously» (European Union Council, 2007), «either as stand-alone actions or as part of a larger operation» (Consilium, 2013).

The initial thirteen Battlegroups were proposed on 22 November 2005, but further groups have joined them since then. In order to assure full capability, the Battlegroups rotate every six months (EUMC, 2006). The principles of multinationality (European Parliament, 2007: 4) and interoperability are of great importance to ensure the effective use of military forces on the field.

Challenges and prospects – a critical insight

Though the BG concept is properly updated and appears to be conceptually appropriate for the missions and tasks that were designed to for the EU to rapidly react in trouble spots, there are still some major problems dealing with political decision making and military force deployment deadlines, as well as lack of additional resources for strategic force multiplier assets (transports, satellites).

Furthermore, to be consistent with a comprehensive approach, there is the need to include a robust civilian component and review the Athena mechanism (Paccaud, 2012) in order to address and mitigate the current impact of the financial crisis on the European defence capabilities, namely following the pooling and sharing milestones.

In fact, Europe surely wants to take care of its *backyard*, but without supporting an expensive model or duplicating its efforts in similar structures such as the NATO Response Force (NRF). In fact, EU and NATO members need proper planning, coordination and cooperation in order to assure the different commitments towards collective security, both in terms of troops and specially the financial resources. In addition, a unit cannot be on stand-by for the EU Battlegroup and the NRF at the same time. Therefore, though it is a project running within the European framework, a permanent tactical group clearly presents relevant implications for both EU and NATO. If the EU Battlegroups were available for future NATO operations or used as a contribution to the NATO Response Force, European security and defence could also highly benefit in terms of lessons learned (always useful for building the alliance's security and defence framework) as well as certification process (NATO's pre-planned trainings and exercises could be plugged into the Battlegroup certification process and vice-versa).

Another feature that deserves to be highlighted is that the EU Battlegroups are not permanent, but created on an *ad hoc* basis to fill the roster and always based on voluntary offers. For that particular reason, Gros-Verheyde (2012a, 2012b) warns us about some "holes" on the Battlegroup calendar. In fact, even differing from what prevailed until the year 2012 (where there have always been on call two BG), from the first semester of 2013 until the year 2016 only one BG is available per semester (except for the second half of 2014 where there's none, as well as from 2017 ahead). As a result, «[t]he high operational,

the substantial costs associated with the preparation and the possible deployment of Battlegroups, combined with current financial crisis and austerity, pose, however, challenges to fill the Battlegroup Roster. This situation has triggered intensive work and initiatives to mitigate existing shortfalls» (Consilium, 2013).

One of the reasons that may explain the difficulties to pursue its mission is the lack of political will of the EU member states to send troops abroad (frequently the "remote" abroad off to the neighbourhood), as well as (or specially) the already mentioned economic constraints. In fact, the EU BG formations are based on contributions from the member states and the troops and equipment are drawn from the EU member states under a "lead nation".

Along with the lack of political will two other "classic" obstacles still remain: first, the huge differences on the national perceptions of security and safety; and second, the time-consuming discussion, approval and launching process of extremely short-notice combat missions. In fact, many of the nations that supply the troops need a parliamentary approval for such assignments and the very short timeline between the approval of the CMC, the political decision to launch the operation and the troops to be projected on the ground frequently doesn't converge on.

To overcome these problems, Gros-Verheyde (2012a) present us some solutions, including: the gathering of the member States and the formation of each lead nation (in turn, the smaller States should crowd and organize themselves into regional partnerships to build leading nations); the inclusion of a civilian component; introducing changes around some of its rapid response capabilities, such as medical support, establishing contracts for logistical support strategic transport, an enhanced cooperation between the EUMS and UN logistical structures. The author also accepts the possibility of the BG to be used as a reserve force.

In addition, another future challenge refers to ongoing initiatives encouraged by groups of "small" states that seem to have less money available but more interest in gathering interests and capabilities for defence. No wonder that «in consequence, their added-value [BG] has been more significant for individual member states than for the Union as a whole, and for its role as a global actor» (Hatzigeorgopoulos, 2012). One of the best examples is Sweden and Finland that recently announced the creation of a joint Nordic Battlegroup and urged a Non EU country (Norway) to gather in order to make up the required 1500 elements.

Nonetheless, this kind of initiatives may also warn us on a "two speed" EU BG, since the larger member states will generally contribute with their own Battlegroups, while smaller members are expected to create common groups. In fact, each group must have a 'lead nation' or 'framework nation' which will take operational command and will also be associated with a deployable headquarters in order to assure that at least one Battlegroup is on standby every six months. However, although the Battlegroup concept is open to non EU countries (Norway and Turkey, participate in a group each) other EU member states already stressed its opting out clauses and "a la carte" solutions. Those are the cases of Denmark that is not obliged to participate in the common defence and security policy according to its accession treaty, as well as Malta that doesn't participate in any Battlegroup. Other Member States decided to focus in specific capabilities in support of the EU Battlegroups: Cyprus (medical group), Lithuania (a water purification unit), Greece (the Athens Sealift Coordination Centre) and France (structure of a multinational and deployable Force Headquarters).

Concluding Remarks

Although the Battlegroup was born and raised as a “standing army” for Europe and eighteen BG have been created so far, as of today we are still waiting for their operational deployment.

As Arnaud Danjean, a French member of the centre-right EPP group, argues «like all the other observers, the European Parliament has noted that these groups have never been used: they remain a virtual instrument» (2013). In addition, «the current tactical group on standby has troops from France, Poland and Germany, which all three are in favour of reviving the European defence policy and are quite ambitious about it. It’s a shame that one of the tools of the European defence policy that was available has not been used» (Danjean, 2013).

Michael Gahler, the German representative of the Christian Democratic Union in the European Parliament and security spokesperson of the EVP parliamentary group, also agrees that «[a]t some point you have to wonder whether another way to do this isn’t better (...) or at some point, no one will believe in this option anymore». In practice, French soldiers, not the EU Battlegroups, are now deployed in Mali.

Mali is, indeed, one of the most recent international crises that show in practice the dilemmas of this tactical force, considered the most versatile military unit for responding quickly to the crisis once and where they occur. The Battlegroup is the smallest self-sufficient military unit that can be deployed and sustained on an operation field. Moreover, the flexibility of the Battlegroup “package” and its capacity to be tailored to the mission is one of the key elements of success since the different combinations allows the ability to perform a wide range of tasks. That was why, besides the offer to train the Mali Army, the European Parliament’s security and defence subcommittee recommended

the deployment of tactical Battlegroups in Mali.

Additionally, seems quite evident that the 28 member states have very different military capabilities and strategic cultures. Moreover, they only contribute when and how they really want, in the exact measure of their will, capability and strategic interests. Therefore, the European security and defence policy remains open to its biggest founding mission: offer a common response in line with the interests and resources of each country and honour the missions carried out in the name of a common security and defence policy.

Bearing this in mind, should the EU keep up the tactical units, broaden the scope or abolish them for good? There seems to be a wide consensus in Europe that the Battlegroups must succeed somehow, since they represent Europe’s ambitions in the world’s stability, democracy and development. In fact, if Europe wants to be credible in contributing to assure peace and security and to take the lead in security and defence issues, at least within its strategic neighbourhood, the Battlegroups must add to its original military mission - prepare the ground for long-term missions – other civilian tasks such as training missions or „observe, advice and assist“ (as UN assigns). The future trend seems, therefore, complimentary, in order to enhance the European Union’s role as a crisis management global player. In fact, there are plans to extend the concept to air and naval forces, although not to the extent of having a single standing force on standby, but scattered forces which could be rapidly assembled.

What is certain is that the EU must indeed “keep the boots on the ground”, because in the present «Europeans are already losing sovereignty by not consolidating, not optimising, not innovating, not regionalising and not integrating their military capabilities» (Missiroli, 2013: 7). Moreover, the future perspectives are not EU’s friend-

ly as in 8-12 years from now, «decreasing R[esearch] & T[echnology] funds will impact negatively on Europe’s current relative technological edge, rendering the required minimum of ‘strategic autonomy’ a pipedream. In prospect, this could lead to a *de facto* ‘de-industrialisation’ of European defence» (Missiroli, 2013: 12). Moreover, according to Hamelink «[t]he BG Concept provides the EU with a specific tool in a whole range of rapid response capabilities, which contribute to making the EU more coherent, more active and more capable» (2005: 10).²

That’s one of the reasons why the 10 years celebration of the Solana’s European Security Strategy would surely be helpful to recall the need for a security and defence agenda that truly promotes European contribution to multinational operations for ensuring global peace and security. A clear sign of the willingness to give some steps further is the paragraph 8 of the last European Council as emphasises the “need to improve the EU rapid response capabilities, including through more flexible and deployable EU Battle groups as Member States so decide”. We then hope that the decisions on the Battlegroups, the robustness of the missions and the role that this tactical task force may play in the international arena will not be forgotten in the head of states in 2014 as the political agenda will surely be focus on the 2020 Strategy goals and European Parliament elections next May.

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Notes

1) Please check the interview in <http://www.dw.de/debate-surrounds-future-of-eu-battle-groups/a-16852649> (accessed in December 20, 2013).

2) The three objectives addressed by Solana in 2003 in his European Security Strategy, <http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/78367.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2013).

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