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Upgrading Europe's Militaries

The EU proposes pooling and sharing to improve security in a cost-cutting age

By per Concordiam Staff

The 27 militaries of the European Union spent 210 billion euros in 2009, more than the combined annual defense budgets of Russia, China, India, Japan and Saudi Arabia. But this seemingly lavish level of military spending hasn't translated into a degree of military readiness acceptable to EU and NATO leadership.

European helicopter crews take part in Italian Call 11, a 2011 exercise involving more than 50 multinational practice missions. Helicopter training is an area in which European militaries pool and share equipment and expertise.

Consider the evidence of shortfalls and limitations cited by EU military officials in the past year alone:

- NATO members based in the EU felt compelled to withdraw warships from vital naval missions off the coasts of Somalia and Libya. The cited reason: Lack of money.
- The European-led Libyan operation to protect civilians could not have occurred without aerial surveillance and air refueling technology supplied by its North Atlantic partners in the United States.
- EU militaries maintain about 1.7 million personnel in uniform, but are immediately prepared to deploy no more than 100,000 of those Soldiers and Sailors.
- Out of 2,500 combat aircraft available in the EU, only 5 to 10 percent are available to fulfill overseas missions.
- For a recent training mission in Somalia, the EU couldn't find an available military doctor and needed nonmember Serbia to supply one.

For Gen. Håkan Syrén, the Swedish chairman of the EU Military Committee, these examples represent a “hollowing out” of European defense that could become dangerous in a world beset by security challenges old and new. Military missions abroad, combined with transnational challenges like ballistic missile defense and cybersecurity, will continue to call on the resources of Europe. But those resources are being depleted as the eurozone struggles to balance its budgets. “The conclusion is inescapable although politically inconvenient,” Syrén noted during a presentation to the 10th annual Berlin Security Conference in November 2011.

Fiscal constraints have demanded new approaches. Among the most popular watchwords are “pooling and sharing” – the idea that the 27 militaries of the EU group their resources and coordinate training with one another. Known in NATO circles as “smart defense,” this money-saving policy has achieved a number of recent successes. The establishment of joint NATO strategic airlift air base in Hungary able to accommodate C-17 military transport planes is one example of pooling. So is the British-French proposal to share aircraft carriers, joint French-Belgian pilot training and the decision by Nordic countries to pool intelligence collection in Bosnia.

Along the same lines, NATO has modified former Soviet helicopters for use among its members, replacing some of the 23 different types of not-always-compatible helicopters used in Europe. Revolutionizing its capabilities in intelligence gathering, Germany is equipping its military

with Euro Hawk high-altitude reconnaissance planes, technology originally developed for the U.S. military.

Despite these accomplishments, EU military leaders warn that pooling and sharing can't succeed if nations cut their military budgets too deeply. Between 1999 and 2009, military spending among the 27 members of the EU increased nearly 30 percent, from 163 billion euros to 210 billion euros. But measured as a percentage of the EU's total economic output, spending plunged nearly 20 percent, far below levels deemed sufficient by NATO. And austerity programs introduced since 2009 promise even deeper cuts. “Pooling and sharing certainly needs to be explored, but that will not compensate for the huge decline in our defence budgets,” Lt. Gen. Ton Van Osch, director general of the EU Military Staff, announced at a defense conference in late 2011.

The case of Slovakia is illustrative. In a press conference in 2011, former Slovak Defense Minister Lubomir Galko pointed out that 86 percent of the country's already lean defense budget covered obligatory expenses like payroll, taxes and fuel. A scant 4 to 5 percent of military allocations financed expeditions abroad in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Cyprus, and much of the country's military equipment, some from the Soviet era, was considered outdated. Slovakia joined NATO on the assumption it would spend 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense, but in 2011 spent an estimated 1 percent of GDP. Galko warned that further military cuts in Slovakia could mean nothing less than the “liquidation” of the country's military.

To focus defense budgets on the essentials, EU militaries like Slovakia's have phased out conscription on the theory that a solid core of professional Soldiers is preferable to half-trained units of short-timers. Germany is consolidating the commands of its Army, Air Force and Navy in the city of Koblenz. Although such moves save money, they are not enough to protect militaries from depletion.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has made “smart defense” a top subject for discussion, going as far as to appoint two special ambassadors to spread the message of pooling and sharing to European capitals. Such cooperation isn't always easy. Defense procurement is fragmented and vulnerable to national rivalries and deliberate duplication. Overhauling how a particular military equips itself threatens not just national military autonomy, but national economies that rely on defense industry jobs. For example, Europeans are equipping their Air Forces with jet fighters manufactured by four competing companies. Duplication is even more extreme when it comes to ground forces.

“Of 41 large procurement programmes in Europe – those worth more than 1 billion euros – only 11 projects are multinational. There is tremendous waste in European



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defence spending; for instance, there are 23 separate armoured-fighting-vehicle programmes for essentially the same type of equipment,” said a 2009 study from the EU Institute for Security Studies titled “European Security and Defence Policy: The First 10 Years.”

Van Osch elaborated further. Of 300 recent pooling and sharing proposals submitted to Brussels, only nine turned out to be workable, he said. And of those nine, more than a third had to do with training and education. In other words, national governments have been reluctant to tackle the issue of duplication of equipment if it means loss of jobs domestically. The European Defence Agency, the EU-wide body created in 2004 to improve military effectiveness, cannot compel member governments to make or cancel purchases of military equipment.

The financial crisis has also put a crimp in the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, part of the Lisbon Treaty that raised the possibility of a European military force that could act independently of NATO. In reality, not least because of budget constraints, the EU has avoided duplicating NATO’s functions and structure.

At the Berlin Security Conference in November 2011, EU military and civilian leaders reiterated their desire to remain part of the North Atlantic Alliance, but stressed the need for the EU to proceed with forming multinational “battlegroups” each consisting of at least 1,500 Soldiers. Germany, Poland and France, as part of their “Weimar Triangle” agreement, are moving forward with creation of a battlegroup by 2013. An “EU battlegroup” of 2,800 troops from six countries should be ready for deployment by the end of 2012 for humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, *The European* reported in late

EUROPEAN MILITARY POOLING INITIATIVES (active and proposed)

27 EU militaries share resources in various areas

- Helicopter and jet pilot training
- Military transport hubs
- Maritime surveillance
- Satellite surveillance
- Military field hospitals
- Air-to-air refueling
- Smart munitions

2011. The formation of these battlegroups corresponds with NATO’s long-standing desire for more European rapid reaction forces.

The EU envisions each of these battlegroups having a civilian component to solidify Europe’s commitment to “soft power” and humanitarian missions. While supporting civilian-military cooperation, NATO Secretary-General Rasmussen warned Europe against skimping on the military hardware necessary to sustain even soft power. “As a committed European – and a staunch Atlanticist – I find this suggestion at best naïve, and, at worst, dangerous,” Rasmussen said in a 2011 speech. “It is completely out of touch with today’s increasingly complex security environment.”

His concerns were echoed by Jiří Šedivý, the Czech Republic’s first deputy minister of defense. Speaking



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to European security officials in late 2011, Šedivý urged EU militaries to prepare for an “unprecedented confluence of negative trends” that includes cyber network assaults, missile proliferation and turmoil in the Middle East. Either Europe improves security jointly or it risks returning to a 19th century system of unstable alliances that led to destructive wars in the early 20th century, Šedivý said. For Ioan Mircea Pascu, a Romanian member of the European Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee, shortages of equipment and personnel have led to the troublesome use of “improvised toolkits” to address crises abroad.

Recent news from Europe has given cause for encouragement. After neglecting airlift capacity for decades, European militaries have begun investing in hundreds of A440M aircraft, a smaller continental cousin of the

C-17. Many of the A440Ms will be based at the European Air Transport Command in the Netherlands, one of the EU’s major pooling and sharing initiatives. The continent-wide Galileo satellite navigation system, produced by the same consortium that makes civilian Airbus jets, will provide the EU with a sophisticated system for guiding its forces in the field. The formation of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn, Estonia, was among the first joint steps taken to address threats in cyberspace.

“The time has come for a change of mindset regarding cooperation on defense capabilities,” European Defence Agency Chief Executive Claude-France Arnould said at a meeting of EU defense ministers in late 2011. “The question is no longer whether we should cooperate or not. It is now whether we want certain capabilities or not.” □

Above: Soldiers and EU police take part in crowd control exercises in Kosovo, the type of mission threatened if Europeans cut defense budgets too deeply.

Left: An Airbus A400M transport plane is displayed at an airport in Hamburg, Germany. The military transport plane will form the backbone of the European Air Transport Command, boosting the EU’s and NATO’s strategic airlift capability.