



European Battlegroups v. NATO Response Forces

Discussing
the relevance
of EUBGs

AN EXPERTISE FORUM CONTRIBUTING TO EUROPEAN
ARMIES INTEROPERABILITY SINCE 1953

INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s, in the context of the European Security Strategy (2003) and in line with the Helsinki headline goals, the EU member states have agreed to create a European special rapid reaction force, able to undertake a large spectrum of tasks (the Petersberg tasks listed in article 43.1 of the TEU) to prevent and manage crises abroad: the EU Battlegroups (EUBG). As a result, the EU now disposes within its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) toolbox of eighteen EUBGs, each of them comprising either about 1,500 or about 2,500 men of different nationalities, quickly deployable (between 5 and 10 days) and self-sustainable for at least 30 days (even 120 days if correctly sustained). Although this force may seem insufficient to deal with contemporary crises, EUBGs are to be used as stand-alone forces in small-scale and low-intensity conflicts, or as spearheads providing extra time for setting up more appropriate interventions. Today, two EUBGs are permanently on standby and ready to be deployed – simultaneously – if needed.

In practice, however, even though the EUBG have reached their fully operational capability (FOC) in 2007, none of them has ever been deployed. Partly because of the creation during the same period of the NATO Response Force (NRF) – a rapid reaction force of nearly 60,000 troops to be deployed under the same circumstances as the EUBG –, partly because of flaws in its funding mechanism and the decision-making process and partly because of numerical insufficiency narrowing their scope of action.

Are the EUBG still relevant today? If yes, how to exploit them? If not, why and what should be adapted? This short food for thought paper aims to discuss the shortfalls of the EUBGs and to put forward a few recommendations to tackle immobilism and criticisms.

PROBLEMS

First of all, involvement within the EUBGs remains subject to the will of governments, which means that the European member states are not obliged to participate and provide soldiers to create a EUBG. Then the member states are not involved in the same way and at the same frequency in EUBGs. When we look back at the EUBGs created since 2005, we can see that some countries such as France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, UK and Finland have been integrated in more coalitions than others.

The voluntary basis of the EUBGs operating also appears on the preparation of the soldiers. When a State commits to a EUBG, it is responsible for the training of its own troops and it has no obligation on providing

materials and resources. There is no binding provision on a cooperation on common trainings between States within the same EUBG. Nevertheless, such interoperability is foreseeable; one great example is the Vysegrad EUBG. The condition is the will of the States which does not insure collaboration.

The main critics made to the EUBGs are their redundancy with NATO's Response Force, more specifically the Very-High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) and the Readiness Action Plan. Indeed, EUBGs are built on the same pattern than NATO's reaction forces, but are quantitatively inferior. With only 1,500 troops involved in each EUBG, compared to the 20,000 of the VJTF, EUBGs are not only smaller than their Atlantic counterpart, they are also less likely to be deployed in case of serious need. As a matter of fact, 1,500 troops appear to be of a doubtful significance for missions such as conflict prevention, initial stabilisation, crisis management or peacekeeping. This observation might serve as a starting point to redefine the scope of actions of the battle groups and to find a niche in which they can bring an added value.

As the deployment of EUBGs is subject to a unanimous decision of the Council and would generally require an authorising UN Security Council resolution, it is very unlikely that the EUBGs might be deployed quickly. Thus, the EUBGs cannot be considered as an immediate response to a direct threat. Its military readiness and rapidity is then eroded by political inefficiency.

The political will of member states to deploy EUBGs is yet again questionable, as no European country showed a particular motivation in using EUBG as a response force to a crisis. This lack of enthusiasm might probably be explained by the funding pattern of the EUBGs, justifiably considered as inequitable or even unfair.

Through the so-called 'Athena mechanism' operating countries financially support the costs of the formation, materials providing and soldiers training if any. Also the costs of the deployment are borne by the same States if the operation is voted unanimously by all the members. Because of this disparity, it is unlikely that the EUBGs are seen as a common effort.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE EUBG'S EFFECTIVE CAPABILITIES AND COMPLEMENTARITY WITH NRF

In order to address these shortfalls, the European Union should at first adopt a better financing system, with more fair contributions for the EUBGs. Currently, participating countries pay the costs of training and de-

ployment themselves while the European Union only contributes 10% of the military deployment. Different solutions are foreseeable: the EU could reward member states for their participation, set up a common budget for operating costs (covering at least the transport costs to and from the area of operations in the first instance) or also reduce costs by making equipment available at the European level. For the latter, the European Defence Fund (EDF), which will generate 5,5 billions per year to enhance military capabilities, could be mobilised.

Second, it could be beneficial to develop the EUBG's field of action, for instance by increasing BG's size and enhancing their modularity. In the same way as NATO deploys mission-tailored response forces, EU should be able to group different BG's to take part in medium and large-scale missions. For such arrangement, the Framework Nation (FN) would be responsible of the EUBG's command and control center.

As mentioned above, member states' commitment to EUBGs is voluntary. This implies their training, equipment, evaluation and certification are national responsibilities as well. To be more effective, the EUBGs concept needs a more binding criterion regarding member states. For instance, the European Union could make the collaboration, in terms of training and providing materials, mandatory for all members. On this matter, Finabel has already produced a paper, *EUBG manual for operational preparation and tactical use*. Another initiative making the EUBG more stable and efficient would be the exclusive use of permanent military partnerships like the Visegrad Group, the UK Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) or the Weimar Triangle. The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) constitutes a new source of more permanent partnership, which would allow participating countries to consistently use the same units. Moreover, the EUBGs would be better off – in terms of combat power and credibility – if deployed together with military units from the most experienced countries, as mentioned above.

Concerning the decision-making procedure, shorten the time for reaction, by breaking away from the UN mandate, is the priority. Moreover, continue to strengthen the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and in the long run, establish a European headquarters would harmonise the member states' different views on the use of the Battlegroups and certainly make them more effective. Another key change to ensure the EUBG's persistence would be to continue promoting them as driving forces for closer and expanded cooperation, such as pooling and sharing initiatives, among the participating states.

Finally, to avoid redundancy with NATO's Response Force, a document establishing a strict distribution of roles or areas of intervention might be agreed on by

NATO and the EU. It would force the EU to carry the burden and allow the use of EUBGs when an Atlantic intervention is not an option. Furthermore, regular meetings between EU and NATO defence ministers should be conducted to set benchmarks and test decision-making procedures.

CONCLUSION

EUBGs definitely demonstrate the potential for cooperation and interoperability among European armies. Despite their shortfalls and the institutional or political barriers for their deployment, EUBGs are not doomed to lethargy and can still become a relevant tool for the EU security crisis management, if changes are put in motion. In the context of recent debates and developments in European defence and security, the time has come for a new pondering on EUBGs' role, funding, composition and more importantly on political commitment. In this regard, the PESCO and the EDF constitute new opportunities to enhance the EUBGs efficiency.

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Tel: +32 (0)2 441 79 38
GSM: +32 (0)483 712 193
E-mail: info@finabel.org

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