

The Role of Conventional Forces in Modern Warfare and the European need of Innovation and Harmonisation

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Conventional Warfare has not disappeared

In recent years hybrid and cyber warfare have become the main focus in the defence sector. New technologies mean new threats, adapting defence capabilities to innovation is critical to maintain high-efficiency levels. During the NATO Madrid summit, which took place on 29th-30th, the issue of cybersecurity and disinformation was on the agenda, and necessary steps were included in the final declaration and in the new Strategic Concept. NATO announced a new defence and deterrence posture across the cyber domain to fight against new threats and challenges and stressed the necessity to increase resilience. However, the last events that occurred in our continent seem to be highlighting an unavoidable fact: conventional forces still play a fundamental role.

Why have investments in conventional armaments dropped?

Following the end of the Cold War, most European countries' ground forces have substantially declined in size and shifted focus away from high-intensity conventional combat.

On 19 November 1990 the CFE Treaty- Conventional Armed Forces in Europe – was signed between former Warsaw Pact's members, European Countries, and the US. The main objective of the Treaty was to reduce the possibility of a surprise armed attack and the triggering of major offensive operations in Europe by eliminating the former Soviet Union's quantitative advantage in conventional weapons in Europe. This was done by setting equal limits on the amounts of tanks, armoured combat vehicles (ACVs), heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters that member states could deploy between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains. The treaty established, among other things, Equipment Limitations (Treaty Limited Equipment): NATO and former Warsaw Pact states were each obliged to respect the limit of 20.000 tanks, 30.000 ACVs, 20,000 heavy artillery pieces, 6,800 combat aircraft, and 2,000 attack helicopters for the treaty's area of application. (Kimball, Kingstone, 2017). Member states of each alliance then divided their respective limit among themselves, creating national boundaries. The treaty prohibited a single state from possessing more than a third of the TLE total to prevent any country from amassing a significant asymmetrical stockpile of weapons.

Consequently, from the mid-Nineties European defence spending plummeted, and a significant proportion of these limited resources were directed toward out-of-area operations; the "End of History" Era came. The first decade of the 21st Century was dominated by the appearance of asymmetric threats and the shift of warfare towards new dimensions. The growing power of non-state actors and the emergence of the cyber dimension and new technologies made it easier to believe that conventional capabilities were less significant. Investments dropped, and so did the number of conventional resources. Data from the IISS Military Balance for the 1990–2020 period on three core military systems for conventional warfare: main battle tanks (MBTs), armoured personnel carriers (APCs), and artillery shows that the combined European total number of MBTs plunged by 85%, APCs fell by 64% and artillery declined by 56 %. (Brooks, Meijer, 2021)

For example, Germany's active tank fleet had been reduced to 244 by 2017, and fewer than 100 could be operationally ready for duty. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania manage some light-armoured vehicles but lack main battle tanks. Poland's tank fleet has dropped from about 1,700 at the time of its accession into NATO in 1999 to just under 1,000 by 2016, of which about three-quarters are obsolete T-72M variants. (Boston, Johnson, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Crave, 2018) Considering Main Battle Tanks (MBTs)- along with Armored Personnel Carriers and Artillery- one of the three core military systems for conventional warfare, European resources seem to be outdated; also, the percentage of vehicles concretely ready to operate at concise notice does not represent the overall number of means. Additionally, there are 14 models operating in Europe; this data reflects the fragmentation of the European defence industrial land sector. Almost half of the in-service platforms (47%) are represented by the German-made Leopard family, and by 2025 the total number of platforms to be phased out is about 2,115 (52% of the currently in-service platforms) (Marrone, Sabatino, 2020).

European Initiatives for innovation and harmonisation: where do we stand?

European countries would need to allocate properly more resources to reverse shortfalls in conventional capabilities. Investments should focus as well on a common defence industry. The actual fragmentation of the European Defense Industry is caused by member states' tendency to privilege domestically procured defence equipment over European Arms Cooperation. (Brooks, Meijer, 2021) According to data from the European Defense Agency, from 2006 to 2015, collaborative defence procurement in Europe accounted for less than one-quarter of total procurement. (EDA Defence Data 2006-2016) Fragmentation in this sector leads to high costs and inefficiency, both from the economic and operational points of view.

For this reason, some initiatives have already been taken to rationalise European conventional resources and boost cooperation. In 2017 the European Defence Agency launched the project "Optimisation of the Main Battle Tank Capability in Europe"(OMBT-Leo2). The project planned the upgrade of Leopard 2A4 platforms to the latest Leopard configuration (2A7) as a first step. The initiative tests a new Pooling & Sharing concept that can be potentially apply to other areas. The system is fundamentally based on using of surplus Leopard Platforms, available in certain member states. These platforms are leased/rented for a defined period, at the end of which they can be returned to the providers or purchased by the receivers. The idea behind this project is to overcome the complexity caused by the high number of different types of fighting vehicles currently in operation in anticipation of a future European generation of MBT. This system helps both the providers by generating revenue and cutting down maintenance costs for surplus assets and equipment, and the receivers, who get easy and rapid access to additional and modern tank capabilities. (European Defence Matters, 2017)

Within the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) framework, several projects involving cooperation around conventional armaments have been inaugurated. The Integrated Unmanned Ground System (UGS), for example, recently launched and coordinated by Estonia with other ten countries, has the objective of developing an unmanned ground system capable of manned-unmanned and unmanned-unmanned teaming with other robotic unmanned platforms and manned vehicles to provide combat support (CS) and combat service support (CSS) to ground forces. The European Defence Industrial Development Programme (EDIDP) founded the program.

At the same time, Italy is leading with the support of Greece and Slovakia, another project (Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle / Amphibious Assault Vehicle / Light Armoured Vehicle) aimed at developing and building a prototype European Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicle / Amphibious Assault Vehicle / Light Armoured Vehicle. The project envisages a family of armoured infantry fighting vehicles weighing 35-50 tons, depending on the configuration, capable of carrying a crew of three plus a standard infantry team, and featuring a gun ranging from 25mm to more than 30mm (Kington, 2022). As the project description says, the vehicles would be based on a common platform and would support fast deployment manoeuvre, reconnaissance, combat support, logistics support, command and control, and medical support. These new vehicles will also strengthen the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSPD), ensuring at the same time interoperability among European armies. There are also bilateral cooperation initiatives, like the French-German Main Ground Combat System (MGCS). The project, launched in 2012, aims to design and develop a future land warfare system to replace the German Army's Leopard 2s and the French Army's Leclerc main battle tanks.

Conventional forces are not only essential in response activities, which might have been a far-fetched hypothesis after the end of the Cold War in Europe, but also for deterrence purposes. Deterrence tends to be associated with nuclear threats but mainly revolves around conventional capabilities. Technological progress has changed the warfare landscape. The changing international environment and the emergence of new threats caused a shift of focus from "traditional" warfare to non-conventional or hybrid ones. However, conventional forces still play a decisive role. For this reason, technological achievements should not phase out investments in conventional armaments but should be applied to them to make them cutting-edge systems. European countries should regain qualitative and quantitative edge by making new investments and boosting cooperation. This is also an essential step for an autonomous European defence strategy.

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