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BRINGING BACK MILITARY MOBILITY



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Abstract

The conflict in Ukraine has reignited concerns within Europe regarding military mobility. With bureaucratic delays in border crossings and much of Europe's infrastructure not prepared for military use, significant work needs to be done to ensure seamless military movement across Europe's many borders. Fortunately, the European Union already has large infrastructure projects which can be updated to incorporate military requirements. NATO involvement has been and continues to be an important and beneficial factor by hosting training exercises and setting goals. Finally, it is hoped that the EU will allocate more funding for this continental project, while also focusing on cyber defence threats.

Introduction

Military mobility is a concept regarding the capacity to move military personnel and equipment across distances, including through borders. It is a logistical and infrastructural challenge to deploy forces through the continent in a quick and effective manner, especially in Europe, where the EU and NATO have many members (Cokelaere, 2022). The EU defines military mobility as “the movement of military personnel and assets from one place to another, including crossing borders by using different modes of transport” (EDA, 2019). Meanwhile, NATO “[sees] it less as a stand-alone project and more as an important force enabler of Alliance-wide activities and operations in support of its defense and deterrence mission” (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). Although quite similar, these definitions differ notably in terms of scope.

The challenge of military mobility is greater than it might seem. Transporting heavy equipment, such as 70+ tonne tanks, across bridges and onto railways can be problematic. The United States Army Europe’s data show military mobility obstacles regarding air and sea debarkation, diplomatic clearances, railways, roads and air mobility issues in terms of clearances, landings and over flights (Hicks et al., 2018). In many European countries, there are complications such as rail loading ramps and/or roads not being able to support the most recent M1 Abrams variants, having long diplomatic clearance wait times and long wait times for air mobility permissions, among other problems (Hicks et al., 2018). Much infrastructure is primarily designed with civilian purposes in mind, which creates a need for more dual-use transportation infrastructure (Hicks et al., 2018; Scaparrotti et al., 2020).

Thus, the topic of military mobility is critical for both the EU and NATO. With the expansion of the EU and NATO into Eastern Europe, the demand for dual-use infrastructure has also grown accordingly. The Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), among other projects, demonstrates that the EU has experience in infrastructure programmes, even if it is mainly a civilian network (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). The TEN-T[DAN1] was made “to close gaps, remove bottlenecks and technical barriers, as well as to strengthen social, economic and territorial cohesion in the EU” by focusing on a “Europe-wide network of railway lines, roads, inland waterways, maritime shipping routes, ports, airports and railroad terminals” (European Commission, n.d., para. 1). Cokelaere (2022) reports that “the network the military needs overlaps 93 percent with” TEN-T (Preparing for war section, para. 7). TEN-T could thus be a potential solution if it were to be expanded to include military needs, however, with the EU’s adoption of two Action Plans on Military Mobility it is increasingly unlikely (European Commission, 2018, 2022c).

Efforts on Military Mobility

With both the EU and NATO noticing the potential complications of deploying through Europe, the EU has adopted a new Military Mobility project through the binding Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) to be spearheaded by the Netherlands (Bessems, 2021; Mogherini, 2018). Simultaneously, the EU has also launched its joint Action Plan on Military Mobility in 2018, which set out to establish the military infrastructure requirements, identifying areas in existing infrastructure that can be utilised and/or upgraded for military use and identifying customs rules that can be simplified for cross-border military movement (European Commission, 2018). Overall, the intention was “the harmonization of procedures on customs and providing financial incentives to improve national infrastructure with the military requirements” (Bessems, 2021, p. 30). This action plan combines efforts from member states, EU institutions, and even third countries like Canada, Norway and the United States, with the latter contributing through the European Defence Initiative and the Three Seas Initiative (European Commission, 2022b; Scaparrotti et al., 2020). One misconception to note regarding the Military Mobility project is the concept of a ‘military Schengen’ (Lațici, 2019). While it is true that the term was originally used by former Commander of US Army Europe Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, the EU has clarified and emphasised national sovereignty, rejecting the idea of a ‘military Schengen’ (Lațici, 2019; Scaparrotti et al., 2020).

To help member states develop dual-use infrastructure projects, the European Commission contributes through financial investments. While infrastructure projects for military mobility are funded through the Connecting Europe Facility, which has its budget allocated through the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) (European Commission, 2022d). In 2019, the Commission proposed €6.5 billion to be co-funded by member states for a total of €13 billion in the period of 2021–2027 (Lațici, 2019; Mogherini, 2018; Scaparrotti et al., 2020). This funding is to be used for the infrastructure work under TEN-T, but with the focus on dual-use development, with the EU funding up to half of the costs of TEN-T projects (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). A key aspect to note is that the EU only funds projects for dual-use infrastructure; anything that is exclusively for military interests must be paid in full by the member states (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). This also implies that some of the military infrastructure work will be done outside of the TEN-T framework.

The European Defence Agency (EDA) also contributes to the project in several ways. The EDA has member states work together to improve border permission procedures and has developed arrangements to standardise cross-border transportation procedures (EDA, 2019). Additionally, military customs procedures are being standardised and harmonised, while the communication process is also being digitised for efficiency (EDA, 2019). Finally, the EDA has also been investigating other legal areas to be developed and improved (EDA, 2019).

NATO is also taking an active interest in military mobility developments and is assisting by engaging in military exercises that build strategic readiness and demand cross-border movement, setting goals and collaborating with the EU (Drent et al., 2019; Scaparrotti et al., 2020). Together, the EU and NATO are pushing for a faster border approval process, while also identifying areas for development and investment. The best area of collaboration is the drafting of military requirements, exemplified by the fact that “There are 129 military requirements agreed upon by the EU, eleven of which deviate from NATO’s requirements.

Overall, there are 118 which have overlap, which shows much success” (Scaparrotti et al., 2020, p. 21). Yet while there will continue to be challenges to EU-NATO cooperation, due to differing members, priorities and rules on document classifications, the topic of military mobility exemplifies the successful collaboration that the two organisations can achieve (Drent et al., 2019).

With the declaration of the EU Strategic Compass on strengthening security and defence, the EU also released an Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0 to continue the efforts that had begun in 2018 (European Commission, 2022b, 2022c; EEAS, 2021). Apart from similar considerations from the first Action Plan, a greater focus was put on digitalising administrative procedures, protecting against cyber-attacks on infrastructure, improving air and sea strategic lift access, improving energy efficiency and promoting cooperation with NATO and other partners (European Commission, 2022b, 2022c). Additionally there was an inclusion of new military requirements on fuel supply chains, air traffic management and navigation and surveillance systems (European Commission, 2022b).

Outside of the previously mentioned projects, the EU continues to commit to PESCO projects like Military Mobility, Strategic Air Transport for Outsized Cargo and the ‘Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations’ (European Commission, 2022b). With the latter PESCO project being intended “to use a network of existing logistic installations for MN business to prepare equipment for operations, to commonly use depot space for spare parts or ammunition and to harmonize transport and deployment activities” (PESCO, n.d., para. 1). Overall, the return of war within Europe seems to have reignited the EU’s attention and focus on the issues of military mobility, however, it will be interesting to observe what changes or additions will be brought up in the midterm review of the MFF, which determines the EU’s budget for the 2021–2027 period (CEUEC, 2022).

Causes for Concern

Despite the optimism surrounding these projects and action plans, there are significant challenges ahead, primarily regarding finances. As aforementioned, the original proposal to help develop dual-use infrastructure for the purpose of military mobility included €6.5 billion from the EU to assist member states. In an unfortunate demonstration of weak commitment, this sum was lowered to €2.5 billion, which in turn was almost entirely eliminated due to financial concerns following the COVID-19 pandemic (Brzozowski, 2020; Scaparrotti et al., 2020). Ultimately, the allotted budget was just €1.69 billion for this MFF period (Brzozowski, 2020, 2022; European Commission, 2022d). To put this figure into perspective, 2016 estimates of total annual EU infrastructure investment needs and expenditures had an €80 billion annual gap for transportation and logistics (Berndt et al., 2016). Of course, the EU cannot be expected to fund all of its members’ infrastructure needs, but the budget downgrade of almost €5 billion shows a lack of institutional commitment and a serious gap between policy and resources (Scaparrotti et al., 2020).

When the point of EU funding is to incentivise member states to invest more, budget cuts send the wrong message. Scaparrotti et al. (2020) also argue that “EU investments are now being proposed essentially on the basis of project maturity and cost-benefit analysis, not strategic location” (p. 24). The budget allotted by the MFF requires expansion to include more of the dozens of project proposals which request EU funding (European Commission, 2022d).

Similarly, NATO defence planning and common funding should also include mobility, while mobility-related investment goals should also be integrated into the NATO Readiness Initiative (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). Such an explicit alignment of goals and priorities between the EU and NATO would be a great benefit to European military mobility preparedness.

One other area of concern is EU and NATO resilience in the face of cyber-attacks. The ability to defend against cyber and hybrid warfare while also ensuring that civilian and military infrastructure remains functional, is a crucial concern in the modern era. Especially as attacks on infrastructure could severely limit military deployment and mobility (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). It is therefore a positive sign that the EU has made cyber resilience and preparedness a core principle of the latest action plan (European Commission, 2022b, 2022c). The EU's new instruments are the European Cybersecurity Competence Centre and the Network of National Coordination Centres, which manage funds and carry out initiatives relating to cybersecurity and cyber defence (European Commission, 2022a). So, while this is a relatively new frontier, it seems that the EU is acting attentively and constructively.

Conclusion

The conflict in Europe's eastern flank has forewarned the need for the militaries of the EU and NATO to be able to move to respond to a crisis in a timely manner. While much has been done, still more remains to be accomplished, including expanding the availability of dual-use infrastructure, reducing bureaucratic delays, increasing funds, improving inter-organisational cooperation, and developing greater resilience to new hybrid threats. Civilian-oriented infrastructure projects like TEN-T continue to interconnect the EU like never before, but it has become important to ensure that European infrastructure can be utilised for military means as well. Additionally, the EU needs to continue to streamline and remove the bureaucratic barriers that complicate cross-border mobility. Deeper EU-NATO collaboration and coordination is fundamental, and both ought to consider greater funds prioritisation for this cause. Finally, it is critical to continue taking precautionary steps regarding cyber warfare.

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