

JULY 2023



**THE EU'S RAPID DEPLOYMENT
CAPACITY INITIATIVE:
DEVELOPMENTS, PROSPECTS, AND
CHALLENGES – TRUE MARKER OF A
STRATEGIC SHIFT OR SPECTRE OF
THE PAST?**

WRITTEN BY: FRANCOIS BARBIEUX



WRITTEN BY

FRANCOIS BARBIEUX

EDITED BY

STEF CLEMENT

SUPERVISED BY

PAUL DYBJER

Introduction

Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called for Europe's 'geopolitical awakening' in the foreword of the Strategic Compass, published in March 2022. The document, which marked a strategic shift in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), aimed to make the 'EU a stronger and more capable security provider' (EEAS, 2022). The Strategic Compass embodies this geostrategic urgency, proposing tangible deliverables to bolster the EU's capacity to defend itself and act decisively.

Among the more ambitious proposals is the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (EU RDC). The EU RDC is a direct evolution of the EU Battlegroups, aiming to establish an efficient and swift military capacity to help the EU respond to unexpected crises (EEAS, 2022). The EU RDC presents considerable opportunities in strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy and advancing the EU's trend of ownership towards its own security and defence. The EU's ability to navigate political and technical issues, including decision-making processes, cost-sharing and operational capacity, will determine whether the EU RDC initiative will meet the expectations.

Rapid Deployment Capacity

The EU RDC is an evolution of the EU Battlegroups, developed within the CSDP framework. The Battlegroups coordinated multinational military units, consisting of approximately 1,500 personnel per group (and 3,000 in total), among EU Member States (EEAS, 2022). The objective of the Battlegroups was to improve the EU's capacity to react rapidly to crises by being readily deployable and having the ability to respond swiftly and efficiently when necessary. Nevertheless, while these Battlegroups have been operational since 2007, they have never been deployed, hampered by a lack of political will, financial solidarity and usability shortfalls (Eurocorps, 2023).

Conversely, the EU RDC is a framework – as opposed to the Battlegroups which were a mere force – designed to enhance the swift and efficient responsive means of the EU when faced with unexpected crises (EEAS, 2022). The Battlegroups are now integrated within the EU RDC which builds on its structure to establish its own forces. The EU RDC goes further than the Battlegroups in that its military doctrine is more flexible and efficient. It also encompasses more than just a military force, setting a framework upon which to develop responsive means at an EU level.

The EU RDC seeks to deploy up to 5,000 troops in a modular capacity – that is, a brigade-based force instead of division-based – encompassing land, maritime, air, space, and cyber elements. The initiative remains in development and is scheduled to undergo its first live exercise in autumn 2023, with the goal of achieving full operational capability by 2025. It is meant to be a 'robust and flexible instrument', thereby increasing 'the readiness and availability' of a military response at a European level (EEAS, 2022, p. 25).

Specifically, the EU RDC consists of EU Member States' military capacities that are readily available for the establishment of the framework (EEAS, 2022). It is designed to adapt and accommodate various intervention modalities, whether at the outset or conclusion of an operation and regardless of whether the intervention takes place in permissive or non-permissive environments. An integral aspect of the EU RDC is its commitment to flexibility, showcased by its strategy of tailoring its capacity to specific missions (Clapp, 2023). Another core component is its dedication to efficiency, demonstrated by strategies of increasing the duration of standbys from six to twelve months, multiplying levels of operational readiness and encompassing various levels of strategic elements such as cyber and space (Clapp, 2023). The Strategic Compass also commits to providing the required strategic enablers such as transport, satellite communication, and cyber defence to ensure deployment effectiveness (EEAS, 2022).

The EU is dedicated to learning from past failures, notably those of the Battlegroups. As such, the Strategic Compass outlines a strong will to overcome issues with funding and decision-making, along with challenges of interoperability and readiness. These last points will be crucial for the success or failure of the EU's initiative, especially the capacity to address and overcome these shortcomings within the agreed upon timeline (Meyer et al., 2022). The degree to which they are accounted for shall determine if the RDC will resemble its predecessor or mark a true evolution in the EU's security and defence.

The main points of contention around the EU RDC are both political and technical. The political question relates to inefficient decision-making processes and unfair cost-sharing procedures, resulting in low political will to advance the EU RDC framework. The technical question refers to issues of capacity, operational challenges and capability shortfalls, as well as uncertainties around command and control. Both political and technical issues have notably blocked the EU's previous Battlegroups and are therefore crucial points to be addressed should the initiative be more successful than its predecessor.

The Political Question: Decision-Making, Political Will, and Cost-Sharing

The EU Battlegroups initiative was put on hold due to insufficient political will and the requirement for unanimity within the Council for its activation (Clapp, 2023). The Strategic Compass addresses these issues by proposing new ways of taking decisions and sharing costs. To emphasise flexible decision-making, EU officials aim to probe Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) (Clapp, 2023). This article empowers groups of willing and capable EU Member States to implement a specific task (Council of the European Union, 2015). Though a unanimous decision from the Council is still required to empower the groups of Member States in question, Article 44 is believed to be an opportunity to overcome the Battlegroups' unanimity issue for the implementation of the EU RDC, should political will be a hindrance once again (Meyer et al., 2022). This approach may assist in avoiding political inertia slowing down or blocking the process.

The EU is also considering the use of ‘constructive abstentions’, which would allow Member States to disapprove of a particular EU operation while not blocking the project altogether (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). Countries could voice their concerns and opt out from participating in an operation but allow the others to move on. Should none of these solutions materialise, a last resort could be to bypass the unanimity rule by operating with what is called an ‘EU blessing’ (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). This informal endorsement allows coalitions to act in some regards without the unanimous consent of the Council. While its scope of action would be limited, a coalition could initiate progress in some aspects of the EU RDC, thereby still kickstarting the project even if it is obstructed by some Member States. This scenario already occurred once in relation to anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Guinea, setting a precedent for future cases. EU officials could potentially mirror that example as a last resort to ensure that progress is achieved.

Apart from these scenarios, experts have recommended other ways to improve the EU RDC’s rapidity and efficiency of decision-making. A study solicited by the European Parliament’s Security and Defence sub-committee advised allocating more freedom of action to Member States, invoking Article 44 while expanding the common budget supporting the EU RDC initiative (Meyer et al., 2022). Furthermore, they called for greater clarity regarding the modalities of Article 44, suggesting conducting simulations of potential scenarios to determine how it can be employed and to what extent (Meyer et al., 2022).

Regarding the issue of cost-sharing, the EU RDC is designed to be commonly funded for greater solidarity. One of the main issues with the Battlegroups was that the states that deployed their military forces carried the financial burden. Therefore, they would tend to veto deployments in order to avoid bearing the costs. To account for this issue, the funding of the EU RDC is anticipated to be shared fairly across EU Member States. However, no agreement has yet been found on defining the specific modalities of the cost-sharing process. Experts have suggested using the framework of the European Peace Facility, accounting for national economic capacities and individual costs for those involved in the development and deployment of the EU RDC (Meyer et al., 2022). Reaching an agreement on this point will be crucial for the development of the capacity and a determinant for its viability.

The Technical Question: Size, Strategic Enablers, Command, Control, and Interoperability

A major technical concern is size. Experts argue that the increase to 5,000 troops is ‘hardly an improvement’ from the 3,000 of the Battlegroups, suggesting that a number between 7,000 and 10,000 would be more realistic to fulfil the ambitions outlined in the Strategic Compass (Meyer et al., 2022). Moreover, they advocate for a higher degree of modularity within the EU RDC, structuring flexible modules of around 120 to 250 troops (Meyer et al., 2022). This would allow tailoring forces to specific missions and establish different levels of readiness, which means that some troops would be on stand-by for only a few months, while others for up to a year. This would help assign specific objectives to specific troops, thereby developing greater expertise in a specific capacity and thus foster efficiency and rapidity in responding to crises (Meyer et al., 2022). It would also allow troops to be active at different times instead of having the entire capacity follow the same agenda, which would help decrease costs.

There are also questions surrounding the EU's ability to provide sufficient strategic enablers without overly depending on third countries. Military enablers are vital for the EU RDC to function efficiently and rapidly since they support the main force leading a mission (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). If the EU intends to strengthen its strategic autonomy and coordinate the RDC while minimising reliance on allies for support, scholars suggest significant investments in military enablers (Meyer et al., 2022). To bear the additional costs, experts suggest developing enablers under the European Defence Fund's framework with the assistance of the European Defence Agency (Meyer et al., 2022). Another alternative would be to coordinate the funding through Article 44 of the TEU (Meyer et al., 2022). In any case, regardless of how the funding is found, experts agree that strategic enablers are crucial for the EU RDC's success and should be a high priority (Clapp, 2023).

Another point of contention is command and control. Should the EU RDC be operational by 2025, experts argue that the capacity's command and control should be scaled up from national headquarters to a 'full-fledged EU Military Operation Headquarters' based in Brussels (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). The point is to centralise command and control to help with the efficiency of the capacity and reduce interoperability issues like information sharing, language barriers, or technological discrepancies. Nevertheless, such developments also imply challenges. Scaling up the capacity requires more people with greater expertise, which increases costs and strains the workforce. Yet this development is essential for rapidity and efficiency, as multiplying command and control over various and dispersedly located national headquarters will continue to hinder the EU RDC, as it did for the EU Battlegroups (Meyer et al., 2022).

Second, coordinating and converging multiple national military doctrines and structures to that of the EU RDC will pose challenges to efficiency and rapidity. To ensure efficiency, experts emphasise the need to address the issues of lacking interoperable communication systems, logistical tails, and language barriers between soldiers (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). They argue that one of the EU Member States will have to provide the main nucleus of the EU RDC troops (e.g., land forces). At the same time, other states would primarily focus on supporting capabilities (e.g., air defence) and strategic enablers (e.g., cyber defence). While the EU RDC is meant to be a multinational military capacity, efforts must be made to improve interoperability and converge military doctrines for the EU RDC to become truly operational by 2025.

Conclusion

Does the EU RDC mark a true strategic shift in the EU's security and defence? While the answer to this question will have to wait until 2025, the ambitions are promising: to build on the EU Battlegroups' successes while ensuring to account for their failures. EU officials are aware of the challenges ahead and eager to demonstrate their commitment to overcome them. The first annual progress report of the Strategic Compass published in March 2023 noted the advancements of the EU RDC's operational and conceptual development. The European Parliament has also endorsed the EU RDC.

Furthermore, concrete operational scenarios have already been adopted, defining the current scope of the EU RDC, ranging from rescue and evacuation operations to the initial phases of stabilising missions. These achievements, which the EU Battlegroups never reached, serve as tokens of hope, indicating that the EU RDC may overcome the challenges that blocked its predecessor. It will nonetheless face its fair share of obstacles, which European authorities must address for the EU RDC to have a chance to succeed. The developments of the upcoming months, starting with the first live exercise in autumn 2023, will provide indications of whether the EU RDC will live up to the expectations.

Bibliography

Clapp, S. (2023, April). Establishing an EU rapid deployment capacity. European Parliamentary Research Service. <https://epthinktank.eu/2023/04/12/establishing-an-eu-rapid-deployment-capacity/>.

Council of the European Union. (2015). Legal Service contribution on the conditions and modalities of recourse to Article 44 TEU (5225/15). <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-5225-2015-INIT/en/pdf>.

Eurocorps. (2023, April). European Battle Group. Eurocorps. <https://www.eurocorps.org/readiness/european-battle-group/>.

EEAS. (2022). A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

EEAS. (2023). Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2023/StrategicCompass_1stYear_Report.pdf.

European Union. (1992). Treaty on European Union. Official Journal of the European Communities C 325/5; 24 December 2002. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b39218.html>.

Meyer, C., Ton, V. A. N., & Reykers, Y. (2022). The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: This time, it's for real?.

Zandee, D., & Stoetman, A. (2022). Realising the EU Rapid Deployment Policy Brief Capacity: opportunities and pitfalls. Clingendael Institute.