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**THE EU MILITARY COMMITTEE:
DISSECTING THE REFERENCE BODY FOR
INTER-STATE MILITARY CONSULTATION
AND COOPERATION ON CONFLICT
PREVENTION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT.**

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Abstract

This Info Flash overviews the European Union Military Committee (EUMC). It has become the most relevant body through which Member States' defence ministers consult and cooperate on conflict prevention and crisis management. After outlining the legal basis and the rationale behind its establishment within the Council of the European Union's framework in 2001 (section I), I analyse the Committee's institutional set-up and how it places itself within the framework of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (section II). Section III dissects the Committee's tasks and how these play out in its modus operandi, while section IV contextualises the Committee's mission within the four strands of activity of the EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: act, secure, invest and partner. This aims to highlight its role in advancing crisis management capabilities and further developing a comprehensive EU defence policy. The Info Flash will conclude with remarks underlining that, despite the concrete risk of political standstill arising from states drawing 'red lines' that undermine consensus, the Committee remains relevant in assisting the EU in building a robust CSDP. Its contribution is particularly vital in preserving international and Euro-Atlantic peace and security.

I. The Path Towards the EUMC's Establishment and the Rationale Behind It

At the Helsinki European Council on 10 and 11 December 1999, EU heads of state and government laid the foundations for various permanent political and military bodies: the Political and Security Committee (PSC), the EU Military Committee and Committee for Civilian Crisis Management (European Council, 1999; Davis Cross, 2010, p. 11). In the short and medium term, these actors would enable the EU to enforce its responsibilities in conflict prevention and crisis management (Council of the EU, 2001). The Council of Ministers of the then-existing Western European Union outlined such responsibilities in the June 1992 Petersberg Declaration (Pagani, 1998, p. 738). It included humanitarian and rescue tasks, peace-keeping tasks and tasks of combat forces in crisis management (WEU Council of Ministers, 1992, p. 6).

One year later, from 7 to 11 December 2000, EU leaders met in Nice to give the green light to the establishment of the EUMC within the framework of a common European policy on security and defence (European Parliament, 2000; EEAS, 2022). The EU ministers elevated the EUMC to the highest military body within the Council's institutional framework through Decision 2001/79/CFSP (Council of the EU, 2001). Its tasks include planning and executing military missions and operations under the Union's CSDP while promoting military capability development (Austrian Defence Ministry, 2021, p. 51).

II. The Committee's Functioning and Position under the Council's Institutional Structure

The EUMC reunites Member States' Chiefs of Defence (CHODs) (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 11). Their permanent military delegates represent them during the body's working routine (Council of the EU, 2022). It liaises with the Council's presidency and participates in all the meetings where decisions related to defence are made (EEAS, 2022). The EUMC's most significant role involves providing the PSC with unanimously agreed-upon military advice and recommendations parallel to military directions for the EU Military Staff (Council of the EU, 2001). Special attention is hereby devoted to military aspects of crisis management concepts and operations, risks associated with potential crises, review of capability objectives, relations with European non-EU NATO members and financial estimates for exercises (EEAS, 2022). EUMC meetings are always attended by a Council Secretariat and European Commission representative and sometimes by the heads of the EU Military Staff and European Defence Agency (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 11).

The EUMC is chaired by a four-star flag officer, preferably a former Defence Chief from any EU Member State. The CHODs select candidates, and the Council subsequently appoints one among them for three years (Council of the EU, 2001; EEAS, 2022). The Chair, currently held by Austrian General Robert Brieger, has various responsibilities, among which are representing the Committee at the Council and PSC level on defence-related matters, acting as the primary contact point with the Operation Commander during EU military operations, issuing guidelines to the EU Military Staff, and bolstering mil-to-mil relations with relevant stakeholders (EEAS, 2022). While carrying out such tasks, the EUMC chairman is assisted by his personnel and the EU Military Staff (EEAS, 2022). All the CHODs should be three-star Generals or Admirals (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 11).

The EUMC Working Group supports the CHODs in their daily duties, especially when drafting military advice and concepts, which are thoroughly examined and discussed to reach consensus (EU Monitor, n.d.; Council of the EU, n.d.). The Working Group of lieutenant colonels has a permanent chair chosen by the Member States' military representatives and eventually appointed by the Council's Coreper for a three-year term (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 11; Austrian Defence Ministry, 2021, p. 52). The chair is usually a one-star flag officer who acts as the spokesperson at EUMC meetings, conducts the group's work impartially to build consensus, and liaises with the EUMC chair to devise and implement the Committee's agenda (Council of the EU, n.d.). The Working Group has a 'Headline Goal Task Force' sub-group, which gathers experts on military capability development. They are responsible for various capability-related issues and preparing EUMC decisions (EU Monitor, n.d.). The task force's chair is permanent and appointed by the EUMC at the military representatives' level (Austrian Defence Ministry, 2021, p. 52).

III. Decision-making Dynamics: How the EUMC Delegates Interact to Carry Out Their Mission

The 2001 Council Decision entrusted the EUMC with the ambitious task of steering all military activities within the EU framework (Council of the EU, 2001). The Committee is crucial in planning and executing missions and operations under the CSDP and military capability development (EEAS, 2022). The Committee formally meets once a week, whereby the CHODs will reconvene more frequently when needed (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 19). Regardless of such schedule, military representatives and diplomats get together in more informal contexts, such as working dinners held multiple times per week, biannually presidency receptions, visits to EU military operations and occasional conferences or seminars (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 19).

The formal-informal divide is reflected in the way military officials interact during meetings. Within formal meetings, or 'flag-ups', they act as 'transmission belts' by expressing their states' positions (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 20). Conversely, delegates openly and honestly exchange views as professionals during 'flag-down' meetings where debates do not become official papers. They achieve consensus by purely relying on their career expertise (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 20) on matters like military operations leadership, defence policy planning, advising on security policy research (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 15). The sharing of professional experiences in and outside EU institutions and territory (notably in the United States, for the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) among EUMC members proves advantageous for decision-making dynamics, as it enables military officials to avoid being caught in prolonged debates and facilitates agreement on recommendations for the PSC and military directives to the EU Military Staff (Davis Cross, 2010, pp. 15-16).

However, Member States' demands for changes in the document's wording may cause stalemates, especially during the drafting process (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 21). National capitals occasionally take their right to be heard as an opportunity to draw 'red lines' in the debate, making it more challenging to reach consensus (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 16). Nevertheless, this dynamic has a minimal influence on the Committee's decision-making because the Member States lack the same first-hand understanding as their military representatives regarding the issues to be deliberated on (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 21).

IV. Enhancing EU's Capabilities in Crisis Management to Implement the Strategic Compass

In Europe's currently hostile security environment, the EUMC may help the EU take a 'quantum leap forward' regarding its ability to act, strengthen resilience and make more strategic and effective investments in defence capabilities (EEAS, n.d.). The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, adopted on 21 March 2022, delivered a shared assessment of the EU's strategic environment and associated challenges. Based on this evaluation, the document presented actionable proposals to improve the Union's capacity to respond to crises and safeguard its institutions and citizens (EEAS, n.d.).

To structure and coordinate these efforts, the Strategic Compass distinguished between four strands of activity: act, secure, invest and partner (Cyber Risk, n.d.). 'Act' foresees the EU's capability to act rapidly and robustly in times of crisis (Cyber Risk, n.d.). To this end, the EU plans to establish a 5,000-troop Rapid Deployment Capacity by 2025. Other elements include deploying 200 fully-equipped mission experts within thirty days, conducting land and sea exercises and promoting the use of the European Peace Facility to support EU partners (EEAS, n.d.). 'Secure' requires anticipating threats, guaranteeing secure access to strategic domains and protecting citizens by developing, inter alia, an EU Cyber Defence Policy, a Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference toolbox and a Space Strategy for Security and Defence (Cyber Risk, n.d.; EEAS, n.d.). 'Invest' aims to fill strategic gaps and reduce technological and industrial dependencies (Cyber Risk, n.d.). This will be accomplished by financing strategic enablers and next-generation capabilities while boosting defence technological innovation (EEAS, n.d.). 'Partner' involves strengthening cooperation through tailored partnerships with international or regional organisations and like-minded countries around the globe to address common threats (EEAS, n.d.).

Due to its comprehensive approach to security, the EUMC can contribute to successfully implementing this multi-faceted agenda (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 18). This can already be seen through the EUNAVFOR Atalanta Operation to counter piracy off the Somali coast, where delegates agreed that the EU could engage in civil dimensions (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 18). The EUMC's extensive understanding helps it issue Initiating Directives with crisis management scenarios to its Director General to provide strategic military options. These are then forwarded to the PSC (Council of the EU, 2001). After the Council selects the appropriate military option, the EUMC authorises an Initial Planning Directive for the Operation Commander, who develops operational concepts and draft plans on which the Committee advises (EEAS, 2022). Within the 'act' pillar, the EUMC also plays a fundamental role in military mobility by monitoring operations' execution (Council of the EU, 2001).

Furthermore, the EUMC assumes a pivotal role under the 'secure' and 'invest' pillars, contributing to developing long-term military capabilities to enhance security integration at the EU level (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 23). In this regard, Member States' CHODs have been closely interacting with the European Defence Agency on its 'Long-Term Vision for European Defence and Capability Needs.' According to this vision, operations should have an expeditionary, multinational, and multi-instrumental nature if they want to achieve security and stability in the context at issue (EDA, 2006, p. 6).

Conclusion

At a time when armed conflict has returned to Europe with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU must fulfil its mission to protect its citizens and contribute to international peace and security (EEAS, n.d.). The Strategic Compass' objective to make the EU a stronger and more capable security and defence provider goes in this direction, complementing NATO and the UN in their efforts to ensure collective defence and safeguard a rules-based international order (EEAS, n.d.). Because of the Committee's understanding of security, the diverse military expertise of its military delegates and their potential capability of building consensus beyond state 'red lines', the EU Military Committee can become a more prominent relevant actor in conflict prevention and crisis management. Its recommendations to the Council's political figures and directives to the military staff can generate added value to the planning and procurement of current and future operations or exercises (Davis Cross, 2010, p. 23).

The Committee's ability to establish common ground for decision-making among the 27 Member States may trigger progress towards a fully-fledged defence policy, an area where they have been historically reluctant to coordinate supranationally (Egmont Institute, 2021). In this sense, EU-wide initiatives like the 5,000-staff Rapid Deployment Capacity and the European Peace Facility can lay the groundwork for further cross-border cooperation (EEAS, 2023; Genovese, 2023). Their implementation, however, will require governments to revisit their approach to defence and planning at the (supra)national level in light of the Ukrainian armed forces' on-field experience (Grand, 2023).

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