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**EU MILITARY MOBILITY: AN
OBSTACLE RACE TO TURN
LONG-STANDING PLEDGES INTO
A DEFENCE POLICY FLAGSHIP**

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Abstract

In the unstable world we live in, military mobility becomes a paramount condition for states to maintain domestic, regional and international security. In the European Union's case, it enables Member States' armed forces to respond to crises breaking out at the external borders or beyond; bolsters transport infrastructure's efficiency; avoids delays in cross-border military transits (displacement of personnel, materiel and assets) in and outside the EU territory; and ensures the alignment of efforts with partners like NATO by increasing inter-state policy synergies (EEAS, 2022a, p 1). After lying dormant during the first decade of the EU's existence, military mobility has experienced a steady increase in relevance and evolved into a flagship of bilateral cooperation with NATO. Nevertheless, due to intermittent political consensus and precarious military capabilities, EU Member States are still far from building a fully-fledged Common Security and Defence Policy and have stepped up their efforts only in response to large-scale events like Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

This Info Flash aims at drawing a timeline of the main legislative and regulatory steps taken by the EU to build a more solid and autonomous common defence policy in reaction to the main shifts in the European geopolitical and military landscape before Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (section I). It then tries to unpack the two action plans on military mobility put forward by the European Commission in 2018 and 2022, in order to find elements of change and continuity between their objectives and the legislative achievements they could stimulate (section II). The Info Flash delves into the loopholes in the implementation of such action plans by pointing out the main factors undermining inter-state cooperation (section III), as well as opportunities to overcome such difficulties, notably the enhancement of EU-NATO cooperation on the matter and the strengthening of multilateral efforts to face the prolonged Russo-Ukrainian war of attrition (section IV). The conclusion highlights the key takeaways from the analysis and lists some recommendations for EU institutions to reinforce the existing legislative frameworks or adopt more ambitious ones.

Background: An Increasingly Unpredictable Security Landscape Demanding Defence Policy Reform

After the Cold War, European states' defence budgets suffered severe cuts and the remaining military capabilities were diverted to crisis management (Chihai, 2023, p. 1). The first step to revert this trend was the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal, which outlined EU Member States' objective to deploy 60,000 troops within 60 days (Chihai, 2023, p. 1). However, the real watershed came with Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, which posed the first pressing challenge to European security since the end of the Cold War (Håkansson, 2023, pp. 5-6). This pushed Member States to, inter alia, coordinate military movements through the European Defence Agency (EDA), which convened a work session about an EU Multimodal Transport Hub (Baudoin & Giuglietti, 2019). However, it was not until the 2016 Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy that the EU formally acknowledged to be under times of 'existential crisis' (EEAS, 2016, p. 13), pointed out the ambition of safeguarding Europe (Håkansson, 2023, p. 6) and defined this ambition in the domain of defence preparations (Usecicz, Czekaj & Bartoszek, 2022, p. 18).

In 2017, the EDA created an Expert Group to foster capabilities and coordination on cross-border movement of military personnel and materials, as well as to conceptualise an Action Plan on Military Mobility by involving all the relevant stakeholders (Baudoin & Giuglietti, 2019). On 10 November, the European Commission urged to step up military mobility along three key lines of action: a shared understanding of requirements, a common view of the infrastructure to be used, and tackling procedural issues like customs, transport of hazardous goods and legal barriers (European Commission, 2017).

One month later, 25 Member States agreed to include military mobility among the commitments in the Plan establishing the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) through Council Decision 2017/2315 (Council of the EU, 2017). They acknowledged that smoother armed forces' mobility would enhance security both during joint missions and as part of (multi)national defence policies (Gheondea & Pleşanu, 2022, p. 48). Among the relevant PESCO projects, the Military Mobility one would support participating states' commitment to harmonise cross-border transport procedures (PESCO, n.d.a), while 'NetLogHubs' would build a multinational network of logistical installations to prepare military equipment for operations, use depot space for spare ammunition and harmonise deployment activities (PESCO, n.d.b).

2018 saw the Council adopt a roadmap on Cross-Border Military Transportation (Baudoin & Giuglietti, 2019), while the EDA launched the 'Optimising cross-border movement permission procedures in Europe' programme to standardise administrative procedures for inter-state displacement of EU military staff and equipment (EDA, n.d.). On 14 May 2019, 23 Member States joined this programme (EU Monitor, 2019) and pledged to devise a framework for common administrative and diplomatic clearance procedures (Baudoin & Giuglietti, 2019).

Two Milestones Compared: the 2018 and 2022 Action Plans

On 28 March 2018, EU's High Representative Federica Mogherini presented the Action Plan on Military Mobility for 2017-2021 (European Commission, 2018). Its objectives include military requirements, transport of dangerous goods, customs and cross-border movement permission (Usecicz et al., 2022, pp. 18-19). The EU Military Staff and the European External Action Service were tasked with developing the military requirements (Håkansson, 2023, p. 10) for a Union-wide approach to act in the other fields (Gheondea & Pleşanu, 2022, p. 49). As for transport infrastructure, the Action Plan incentivised investments to create convergence opportunities between civilian and military needs (Gheondea & Pleşanu, 2022, p. 49). Parallel to the Commission's work to streamline customs formalities for military operations and the transport of dangerous goods, the EDA supported Member States' actions on cross-border movement permissions (European Commission, n.d.).

One year after the 2019 proposal to co-fund military mobility projects with €6.5 billion within the 2021-2027 financial framework (Latici, 2019), the Commission reported a steady increase of nodes within the transport network (Usecicz et al., 2022, p. 19) while acknowledging the military requirements' updates by the Council on 15 July 2019 to enhance civil-military cooperation in dual-use transport infrastructure (Usecicz et al., 2022, p. 19). As for dangerous goods' displacement, the Commission and the EDA set up an information-sharing platform to build cooperation and trust among civilian and military stakeholders (Usecicz et al., 2022, p. 20). The Action Plan's commitments in the customs domain led to legislation such as Delegated Regulation 2015/2446 about the declaration for cross-border movements (European Commission, 2015a), Implementing Regulation 2015/2447 containing procedural provisions to use such declaration (European Commission, 2015b), and Council Directive 2019/2235 exempting supplies to armed forces committed to external CSDP activities from excise duties (Council of the EU, 2019).

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered the adoption of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (EEAS, 2022b) and encouraged EU Member States to leverage this momentum (Sus, 2023, p. 105). For instance, they welcomed the UK in PESCO's Military Mobility project (Gallardo, 2022), thus demonstrating a common willingness to embrace pragmatic solutions and intensify cooperation in the field (Sus, 2023, p. 106). On 10 November, High Representative Borrell presented Action Plan 2.0 for 2022-2026, which aims at enabling unimpeded movement of large-scale personnel and equipment within the CSDP's and NATO's frameworks while establishing an interconnected network through multi-modal transport corridors and sustainable logistical centres facilitating troops' deployment (EU High Representative, 2022, pp. 2-3).

To enhance infrastructure's preparedness and resilience, Action Plan 2.0 calls for Member States to strengthen strategic lift capabilities in line with the 2020 Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, step up exercises to test their improvements and employ space-based navigation and communication (EEAS, 2022a). The plan also builds on its predecessor's pledge to harmonise customs procedures and provide 'financial incentives to improve national infrastructure with the military requirements' (Bessems, 2021, p. 30). More relevantly, it encourages transfers of NATO standards to the EU by, inter alia, aligning EU's 'military pledges' with NATO's operational planning standards (Håkansson, 2023, p. 13). Lastly, to ensure a well-connected and secure mobility network, the Commission relies on funding instruments like the Connecting Europe Facility (for dual-use transport infrastructure) and the European Defence Fund (for interoperable logistical and digital systems) (European Commission, 2022).

Implementation Drawbacks of an Ambitious Agenda

A major restraint for implementation at supranational level is the EU's limited competence in common defence matters, as it only sets guidelines for states to achieve the relevant objectives (Chihai, 2023, p. 2). Equally unhelpful was the slashed amount of overall funds available for military mobility projects, going from €6.5 to €1.69 billion (Brzozowski, 2022), displaying a lack of institutional commitment and a divergence between policy and financial resources (Scaparrotti et al., 2020). The Action Plan 2.0 stipulates that EU Member States need to meet a 'five working days' goal for border crossing procedures and consider a 'three-day' one for rapid reaction units by the end of 2023; however, there has been no significant progress since the Council agreed to those pledges in 2018 (Chinaia, 2023, p. 4). Notwithstanding the compelling requirement to advance military mobility commitments vis-à-vis the invasion of Ukraine, member States lack the political will to embrace a whole-of-government approach to the issue and more robust funding to develop infrastructure (Chinaia, 2023, p. 4).

Moreover, the scope of military requirements is too narrow to cover a Fuel Supply chain Infrastructure: doing so would align standards of the trans-European transport network and the EU military transport one, which is fundamental to move large-scale forces over long distances (EU High Representative, 2022, p. 7). Issues concerning customs duties and VAT regulation require timely solutions within the legislative framework on the import/export of military equipment, fuels, food and training materials (Gheondea & Pleşanu, 2022, p. 51).

Lastly, despite the wide range of actors involved in military mobility's enforcement, the EU still lacks a coordinating body to avoid recurring to informal staff-to-staff relations which, besides not ensuring equal representation, duplicate efforts (Drent et al., 2019, p. 10). Existing multilateral fora like the PESCO's military mobility one and 'Friends of Military Mobility Group' (including non-PESCO states) should encourage the EU to set up an entity capable of coordinating military mobility and raising awareness through a whole-of-society approach (Drent et al., 2019, p. 11).

Strengthening EU-NATO Cooperation to Step up Military Mobility Efforts

Military mobility first appeared on the joint list of proposals to implement the 2016 EU-NATO Joint Declaration, starting from cross-staff consultations to build synergies to tackle the challenge (Chihai, 2023, p. 2). Since then, the two organisations have shared an interest in ensuring swift military personnel displacement by exchanging information through the Structured Dialogue on Military Mobility (EU High Representative, 2022, p. 16). To date, this remains the main forum to coherently address legal, procedural and infrastructure obstacles to cross-border movement of military staff and material while encouraging cross-participation in exercises: thanks to such cooperation, NATO's and EU's military mobility requirements have reached an overlap of 95% (EU High Representative, 2022, p. 17).

In times of war and uncertainty, EU-NATO cooperation stands as a guiding light to counter international and regional security threats (Gheondea & Pleşanu, 2022, p. 46). This is exemplified by the Strategic Compass, which outlines the EU's pledge to strengthen dual-use transport infrastructure across the trans-European transport network to promote seamless movement of military personnel and equipment in close cooperation with NATO (EEAS, 2022b, p. 29). Meanwhile, the latest EU-NATO cooperation progress report acknowledges the Structured Dialogue on Military Mobility's work as a 'format for focused staff discussions' on customs, cross-border movement permissions, exercises and transport of dangerous goods (NATO & the EU, 2023, p. 8). The report also underlined NATO staff's invitation to PESCO's military mobility project and its contribution to updating the EU's Military Requirements for the fuel supply chain, surveillance infrastructure, air traffic management and communication navigation (NATO & the EU, 2023, p. 8).

The Structured Dialogue and the PESCO military mobility project can obviate the absence of a formal structure where NATO and the EU meet without recurring to a piecemeal scheme of informal and time-consuming cross-staff exchanges (Drent et al., 2019, p. 10). The diverging cultures on information classification is a slightly major concern, and will require revising the 2003 bilateral security agreement to find convergence between EU's lenient approach and NATO's orientation towards confidentiality (Drent et al., 2019, p. 10), thus avoiding scenarios where political issues prevent the sharing of technical standards for military requirements, as once occurred between Türkiye, Greece and Cyprus (Håkansson, 2023, p. 10).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The war in Ukraine has dramatically changed Europe's security environment: to cope with such an unprecedented crisis, the EU needs to ensure swift movement of member states' armed forces (Cokelaere, 2022). The EU has the necessary instruments to act as the *spiritus movens* in military mobility (Usewicz et al., 2022, p. 18); yet, it still has to cope with significant weaknesses like limited availability of funds, intermittent political will and states' slow progress on pledges (Chihaia, 2023, p. 5).

Military mobility may be enhanced by strengthened dialogue with regional (Ukraine and Moldova) and international partners (United States, Canada, Norway), as well as by PESCO Military Mobility's 'enlargement', as the UK's example shows (Chihaia, 2023, p. 5). The strong EU-NATO partnership can generate best practices to streamline decision-making or establish a joint Centre of Excellence to facilitate capacity building, strategic discussions, and joint exercises while acting as a clearing house for information-sharing on military mobility initiatives (Drent et al., 2019, pp. 13-14).

Additionally, NATO's recent adoption of the New Force Model at the Vilnius Summit can stimulate decision-making at EU level in the following areas: complementing military mobility with a civilian dimension by aligning civilian and military standards for roads infrastructure to bolster societal support (Chihaia, 2023, p. 4); adopting emergency measures to ensure that armed forces get priority access to transport infrastructure in times of crisis, including through framework contracts with civilian providers (EU High Representative, 2022, p. 12); and revamping resilience of the transport sector against natural or man-made threats, notably by implementing the Directive on the resilience of critical entities (EU High Representative, 2022, p. 13).

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