

NOVEMBER 2024



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Introduction

In an era of growing security threats at its borders, the European Union (EU) has constantly tried to improve its autonomous rapid crisis-response capacity. The operational aspect of its foreign policy has indeed been embodied in crisis management missions in its neighbourhood (Sousa, 2023). Under some circumstances, when escalation seems imminent and an outbreak of violence likely forthcoming, reacting swiftly with military means is the only way to save lives and prevent protracted conflicts (Reykers, 2024). Member States know that individual action alone can no longer tackle today's multiple threats, including the return of war in Europe, the destabilisation of Sahel countries, and new hybrid threats from both states and non-state actors, and that benefiting from each other's strengths will be crucial for success (EEAS, 2017). Consequently, the EU has tried to drive cooperation and incentivise the pooling of civilian and military assets to conduct crisis management operations effectively. Since 2003, the EU has acquired extensive experience in the deployment of military operations and civilian missions to promote peace, security, and stability (López, 2023). The numerous crises it has faced have made the Union implement policy and institutional changes to enhance its ability to deal with future emergencies (Council of the European Union, 2024b). Member States agreed they must collectively be able to respond to imminent threats or react rapidly to a crisis outside the EU territory (Major & Mölling, 2011). Although the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has led many Member States, especially those on the eastern border, to prioritise territorial defence, NATO's renewed focus toward defence and deterrence, *vis-à-vis* the Russian Federation, has left space for the EU to act autonomously as the first crisis responder in other scenarios (Fiott & Simón, 2023). Primarily, it should assume responsibility for projecting stability on its southern flank, which will likely remain in a state of general crisis due to great-power competition and the proliferation of non-state actors eroding state sovereignty (IIEA, 2024). In addition, US disengagement from crisis management operations and its strategic shift toward Asia, as a response to China's rise, could give the EU larger room for manoeuvre to strengthen its long-sought strategic autonomy and increase the incentives to intervene and restore stability during crises.

The 2022 Strategic Compass acknowledged this reality and proposed the establishment of a fully operational EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) by 2025 (Members' Research Service, 2023). The ambitious schedule of the project reflects the priority that EU decision-makers and planners have attributed to developing a multilateral force capable of quickly intervening in case an external crisis jeopardises European interests (Maślanka, 2024). The availability of a deployable military rapid response force should thus strengthen the European Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and signal to partners and opponents that the Union, besides economic, political, civilian, and diplomatic means, is equipped with the necessary military instruments to act swiftly outside its borders (Hintermayer, 2024). However, this is

not the first European initiative to develop a common rapid response force. EU Battlegroups are multinational battalion-sized forces of 1,500 troops with combat support elements, generated by Member States and overseen by the Council of the European Union (EEAS, 2017). The initial idea dates back to the European Council Summit in Helsinki in 1999 and stemmed from the need for a small rapid response force at high readiness (Sousa, 2023). Such a project was one of the first and most important examples of the willingness of Member States to seek closer defence cooperation. Nevertheless, since 2007, when they reached full operability, the Battlegroups have never been deployed due to political, financial, and design obstacles, despite a few opportunities to do so (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). Member States often preferred to act alone or build coalitions outside the EU framework. EU Battlegroups have thus become emblematic of the capability *vis-à-vis* expectations gap in European security and defence (Meyer et al., 2024).

This article will begin by considering the forerunning role of the EU Battlegroups and delve into the obstacles that prevented their deployment. It will then analyse the new EU Rapid Deployment Capacity in its expected composition and the operational scenarios that have been agreed upon, explaining why it constitutes a qualitative leap compared to the Battlegroups. After the comparative analysis, it will explore the challenges the new project will likely face, which Member States must urgently address to enhance the European crisis response and achieve the Strategic Compass' goals.

1. The EU Battlegroups: A Missed Opportunity

The EU Battlegroups project was a profound initiative which found success in an environment of synergies following the positive results of the first EU's autonomous military operation, the 2003 short-term Operation Artemis, which allowed the United Nations (UN) to gain time to reconfigure its contingent and mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Major & Mölling, 2011). Therefore, the shared political willingness to create a permanent rapid reaction capability led the EU Defence Ministers to approve the creation of the Battlegroups in 2004. The Battlegroups formed an integral part of the EU's military capacity to respond to emerging crises and conflicts (IIEA, 2024). They were conceived to be employable in conflict prevention, initial stabilisation, humanitarian interventions and rescue tasks, crisis management, and peacekeeping in support of the Petersberg Tasks (Reykers, 2017). They were intended for small-scale rapid missions, lasting at most four months if adequately resupplied, with two Battlegroups always on standby for six months. With up to 1,500 troops and ready for action within fifteen days after a Council decision, they were the minimum size rapidly deployable force capable of a stand-alone operation (EEAS, 2017). The operational focus was on early intervention to prevent the escalation of a crisis, but they were not suited for high-intensity warfighting. The Battlegroups could be tailored for specific

missions by attaching maritime, air, logistical, or other strategic enablers, and they could be helpful when the standard force generation procedure is too long (Major & Mölling, 2011).

Although the premises were encouraging, several factors have prevented the deployment of Battlegroups since their foundation. The first category of obstacles directly concerns the Battlegroups' design and technical issues, while the second category relates to political stalemate and flawed funding principles.

Design and Procedural Hurdles

One of the fundamental issues was strictly connected with interoperability. Despite recent improvements, persistently different command, control, and communications approaches could cause credibility concerns among Member States, which are wary of changing national procedures and sharing information (Lindstrom, 2007). A second obstacle was the risk of a deadlock in the decision-making process, which would clash with the need to deploy a Battlegroup rapidly (Maślanka, 2024). While policymakers could be flexible when needed, national procedures, such as the need for a parliamentary decision, could delay the deployment due to the lack of command process coordination between the EU and the national levels (Meyer et al., 2024). This aspect is correlated with the high degree of fragmentation in planning and command arrangements. In the last decade, the absence of a permanent EU strategic command structure hindered the deployment of military missions. Another set of obstacles concerns the deployability of the Battlegroups, which relates to the transport of a Battlegroup to the theatre of operations and requires advanced logistics planning and capabilities. EU Member States have long lacked sufficient transport capacity within a narrow time frame. While sealift is more cost-effective than airlift, it is significantly slower over long distances and cannot reach landlocked areas of operations in contexts often characterised by inadequate infrastructure (Lindstrom, 2007). The last issues were diverging conceptions of the prescribed operational scenarios and the lack of clarity concerning the reserve force on standby responsible for providing them with backup (Meyer et al., 2024).

Political and Strategic Hurdles

Political and strategic obstacles were even more determinant in explaining why the Battlegroups failed their primary purpose. One of the first problems highlighted by Member States was the membership overlap between NATO and the EU (Helwig, 2023). The NATO Response Force (NRF) presented similar requirements, such as high readiness, thus involving the same force packages as the Battlegroups for many contributors. Questions of prioritisation emerged when one state simultaneously put troops on standby for both forces

(Meyer et al., 2022). The planners' initial project conceived the Battlegroups as the military departure point for a European Army, which, despite having gathered consensus among European citizens, is still far from existence (McCarthy & Richter, 2019). Besides, they could not rectify crucial deficits in equipment and vehicles among European armies and only partially harmonised decision-making processes and military laws. The EU struggled for many years to identify the root causes behind their failure. Still, progress in this direction seems to have been made recently by the EU Military Staff, especially considering the EU RDC (Meyer et al., 2024).

2. The European Rapid Deployment Capacity: A Step Forward?

As one of the flagship proposals of the 2022 Strategic Compass, Member States decided to create the EU RDC to act quickly with military means when a crisis erupts (Members' Research Service, 2023). This brigade-based force consists of 5,000 troops supported by strategic enablers tailored to the situation, such as strategic transport, air-to-air refuelling, force protection, medical assets, cyber defence, satellite communication, autonomous intelligence, and surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities (Barbieux, 2023; IIEA, 2024). More than a single force, the EU RDC is a modular toolbox of interoperable land, air, and maritime forces packages, whose costs and modules will be determined by the readiness concept (Meyer et al., 2022). This initiative will be an essential component of the EU's strategic autonomy, allowing the EU to enhance its presence and bolster autonomous rapid crisis response (López, 2023). In 2023, the European Parliament called for it to be "implemented as soon as possible and by 2025 at the latest" (Mikser, 2023). The EU RDC is initially expected to operate in two potential scenarios: rescue and evacuation and the initial phase of stabilisation operations in a non-permissive environment (Meyer et al., 2024). Rescue and evacuation operations demand specific equipment and high-readiness units, mainly Special Operation Forces, under a flexible command structure. Based on the recent experiences in Afghanistan and Sudan, the objective would be to rescue EU citizens from a crisis area using military means, create secure evacuation areas, and transport them by land, air, or sea (IIEA, 2024).

In contrast, the initial phase of stabilisation operations would involve land forces and strategic enablers under a Brigade Headquarters and a Forces Headquarters to coordinate the joint effort. These operations require military tools such as suppression of enemy air defence and electronic warfare. They would be useful if the short engagement was followed by a long-term stabilisation operation under the EU, UN, or other regional organisations (Fiott & Simón, 2023). Moreover, scenarios of military support for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief have been recently added (EEAS, 2024). For this reason, regular exercises have been planned to enhance the RDC's combat readiness and secure operational

preparedness: the first-ever EU live military exercise was conducted in Cadiz, Spain, in 2023, and around 2,800 soldiers from nineteen Member States participated and some states considered Battlegroups to be a further constraint on their circumscribed defence capabilities (Reykers, 2017). Their limited size and sustainability also reduced the likelihood of being employed in hostile environments where they risked being overpowered by enemy forces or engulfed in operations for extended periods (Meyer et al., 2022). Even more important were the political pressures to avoid actual deployment. Six-month rotations drove governments to delay their decision-making process close to a rotation period, trying to minimise the chances for their Battlegroup to be deployed and to prevent potential blame for putting national troops at risk in distant conflicts (Lindstrom, 2007). Another root cause for the lack of deployment was the financial costs falling on Member States. Since the troop contributors were expected to carry nearly all costs—except for a 10% covered by the EU’s financing arrangement, the Athena mechanism—, they avoided engaging in expensive operations due to cost-benefit considerations (Reykers, 2017). Despite recognising this reality since the Battlegroups’ foundation, Member States never abandoned the ‘costs lie where they fall’ principle, which remained a highly politicised and sensitive issue for a long time (Barcikowska, 2013).

Additionally, Member States had different views concerning the strategic priorities of the Union. For instance, France prioritised military effectiveness and advocated the establishment of national Battlegroups, relying on national military capacities and preventing potential interoperability issues; at the same time, Germany preferred the option of multinational Battlegroups led by one big framework nation (Major & Mölling, 2011). Although Battlegroup contributor nations on standby were supposed to act in the interest of the EU, individual Member States, namely France, decided to act outside the EU framework due to such obstacles, hindering the aspiration for an “integrated approach to external conflicts and crises” (Meyer et al., 2022, p.10).

Limited Impact and Fundamental Shortcomings

The EU Battlegroups had a secondary positive impact on some issues. First, they helped Member States drive force modernisation towards high readiness for international crisis management and pool assets. They also contributed to developing commonly agreed doctrines and procedures and offered a forum for multilateral defence cooperation and problem-solving strategies. In addition, coalitions of Member States formed force packages for several years and pledged them to the EU (Major & Mölling, 2011). However, the project did not fulfil its main purpose since no Battlegroup was ever deployed, not even when quick and risky military action seemed necessary, as in Libya in 2011, Mali in 2013, or Afghanistan in 2021 (Scazzieri, 2022). The non-use of this asset over such a long time generated political

embarrassment: the absence of sufficient political will established a vicious cycle of delaying tactics and national vetoes instead of a virtuous cycle of successful deployments (Maślanka, 2024).

In addition, there will be potential to extend the use of the EU RDC to other scenarios in the future, such as the protection of a small city, port or airport, peacekeeping and bridging operations or preventing the concentration of adversary military forces (Major & Mölling, 2011). While the path is still long and priority should be accorded to the comparatively easier operational scenarios agreed upon, it would be unwise to adopt strict criteria since the aspiration behind creating such a force seems broader (Major & Mölling, 2011). The expected deployment time threshold is one year in areas up to 6,000 kilometres measured from Brussels. The EU RDC could potentially prevent state-backed paramilitary groups, which have already suppressed European influence in the Sahel region, from gaining a political foothold in the Union's broader neighbourhood. It could also help manage the adverse effects of crises and threats to the Union's free access to strategic domains and support host countries requiring assistance to react to the proliferation of other menacing non-state actors in contexts of power vacuums (Fiott & Simón, 2023). While a mandate received from the UN Security Council (UNSC) would be the preferable option, the current geopolitical context makes it very unlikely to happen (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). Therefore, the most probable situation in the near short term appears to be the Council deciding to deploy the force following a formal request of assistance in a crisis-affected area from a third state's legitimate government (Sousa, 2023).

EU Battlegroups and EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: A Comparative Analysis

The EU RDC project solves various Battlegroups' shortfalls. Besides being an improvement in size, the RDC extends beyond the land component, encompassing air and maritime forces to constitute a joint capacity with strategic enablers at the same level of readiness, fit for longer and higher-intensity tasks. Acting in the non-permissive environments typical of agreed operational scenarios would often require multi-domain capabilities. Moreover, increased modularity would make deployment more flexible and tailored to specific operations and crises that differ by geography, conflicting parties, and other factors (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). The EU RDC will also benefit from available forces on one-year standby periods, twice as long as the Battlegroups, and various levels of operational readiness. EU Member States have also tried to address the funding problem, which the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Council of the EU recognised as "the most significant obstacle" (Meyer et al., 2022, p.9). The establishment of the European Peace Facility (EPF) replaced the Athena mechanism, slightly increasing the financing of common costs (see Table 1). However, considering the high pressure to reach NATO's defence spending commitments, those

improvements may not be permanent. Another potential advantage for the EU RDC is standing EU headquarters (HQ) to provide the Union with a permanent planning and command capability at the politico-strategic level. The Battlegroups' lack of a framework to coordinate the interaction of forces and modules led to complicated political decision-making and fragmented command arrangements, preventing Member States from respecting timelines for the deployment (Major & Mölling, 2011). The MPCC could collaborate with other EU institutions and national representatives in Brussels, ensuring the synchronisation of military and civilian actions and eventually command the mission strategically. This would also entail a reduction of planning costs and efforts.

A fundamental political obstacle to the Battlegroups' deployment, the unanimity requirement at the Council of the European Union level, is likely to remain, especially when the operations entail the risk of large-scale combat (Scazzieri, 2022). However, the EU is striving to find ways to prevent such an impasse. First, it has been exploring the instrument of constructive abstention, by which a member state can abstain, showing that it does not necessarily agree on a specific decision without recurring to its veto power. Second, new interpretations of Article 44 of the Treaty on the European Union could allow coalitions of willing and able Member States some more autonomy to plan or conduct missions on behalf of the EU within the EU institutional framework (European Union, 1992; Zandee & Stoetman, 2022). Even though this provision needs to be activated by a unanimous Council decision, recurring to it would offer significant benefits, such as greater political legitimacy, a reduction of costs via the EPF, and closer coordination with other activities in the same geographical areas (Scazzieri, 2022). Clarifying how Member States would implement it and offering more financial support could increase the appeal of EU-endorsed coalitions for crisis management. Conversely, if the unanimity principle remains frequently invoked by countries jealous of their veto power, Member States that need to act quickly will continue to have strong incentives to resort to *ad-hoc* coalitions outside the EU framework.

	EU Battlegroups	EU RDC
Size	1,500 (battalion-sized)	5,000 (brigade-sized)
Components	Land Forces	Land, Air, Maritime, Space, and Cyberspace Capabilities
Goal	Crisis Management and Response	Crisis Management and Response
Operational Scenarios	All Petersberg Tasks	Rescue and Evacuation, Initial Phase of Stabilisation, Disaster Relief
Standby Duration	6 months	12 months
Deployment Time	1 month, extendable to 4	1 year
Common Financing	Athena Mechanism (5-10% of total costs)	European Peace Facility (10-15% of total costs)
Command and Control (C2) Structures	National <i>ad-hoc</i> Operational Headquarters (HQ)	Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) in Brussels
Level of Readiness	Within 15 days after an EU Council decision	Within 15 days after an EU Council decision
Full Operability	2007	2025 (expected)

Table 1. A Comparison Between EU Battlegroups and the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.

Persisting Challenges

Design changes were drawn from lessons learned from the Battlegroups' experience. However, some persisting and new challenges have yet to be addressed to ensure that the EU RDC will be an essential tool for enhancing European security. Future hurdles include funding, political, and strategic issues.

The clear improvement in size should avoid the mistake made with the Battlegroups. Considering the new force is composed of multi-domain packages, the number of 5,000 should not be conceived as a maximum threshold not to be crossed but rather as a starting point, eventually not including enablers or supporting units, which will not deploy into the

crisis area. Some authors consider this number too low to fulfil its potential tasks (Meyer et al., 2022). Concerning strategic enablers, long-standing shortfalls could be solved by developing the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects structured around the need to create valuable capabilities for the EU RDC and boosting the European defence industry, which is now struggling to respond to the higher demands (Vandenkendelaere, 2022; Fiott & Simón, 2023). Ideally, the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) could determine the requirements. However, to fill gaps regarding intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, and precision weapons, the action plan extends well after 2025. Moreover, personnel shortfalls must also be addressed in the following years, and the EU Force Catalogue must be updated (Zandee & Stoetman, 2022).

Speeding up decision-making will be crucial to increase the chances of employability. Member States participating in the EU RDC should notify the headquarters of the units and equipment permanently at their disposal so that the country responsible can deploy them without delay (Mikser, 2023). National procedures will need to be adapted to allow for rapid deployment and increase the readiness of military modules. Therefore, the EU RDC should shorten the path to an operation by anticipating and depoliticising the process of assembling a force (Barcikowska, 2013). Regarding the funding issue, as outlined in the Strategic Compass, the EPD and potentially other effective financial solidarity mechanisms should be expanded or established to incorporate the costs of strategic transport and joint equipment or compensate contributing countries. This would maximise the EU RDC's likelihood of deployment. Moreover, the increase in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) budget provides the possibility to cover all administrative expenditures (Mikser, 2023). However, a more equitable repartition of costs remains a politically sensitive issue, and non-plannable incremental costs continue to worry Member States.

The EU RDC's forthcoming operability is a valid reason for promoting the expansion and centralisation of joint military-strategic command and control (C2) structures. While the MPCC, as stated above, will be the C2 structure of the EU RDC, it urgently requires considerable improvements. First, the headquarters must be at high readiness or permanently activated for the EU RDC to reach its deployment targets. Without an increase in personnel and resources and a further delegation of authority from Member States, the MPCC will not be ready to become the permanent structure assuming responsibilities for EU RDC's executive operations. The Battlegroups' experience shows that using pre-identified national headquarters is a suboptimal option due to the risk of politicisation and promptness issues. While these could be used as fall-back options in case of multiple crises, Member States should prioritise investing in further development to solve staffing shortages and the lack of secure information and communication systems (Meyer et al., 2022). Outsourcing support services to private companies creates a logistical concern, which

risks being underestimated (Major & Mölling, 2011). Although it is a cost-effective solution, the ability to relocate armed forces rapidly depends on how fast private agents can mobilise such services. Therefore, unforeseen global events or economic crises could paralyse the EU's rapid response capabilities when needed most.

The 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine underscored the urgency of reforming the Battlegroups and led most EU Member States to increase defence spending. As a reaction to the Russian invasion, the Versailles Declaration of March 11th, 2022, catalysed a renewed political commitment to enhancing European security, as European Heads of State or Government agreed to increase defence expenditures and capabilities (Fiott & Simón, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2024a). In this context, the EU RDC is a tool to implement the EU's approach to security, promoting coordination across various phases of a crisis or conflict and combining defence activities with development and diplomatic efforts. However, to realise this potential, EU Member States preliminarily need to achieve strategic interoperability, aligning their threat perceptions.

Moreover, the results of the 2024 US Presidential Elections have made it even more pressing for EU Member States to reduce operational dependency on the United States, whose resources will continue to be overstretched and who are less and less willing to get engaged in areas where the EU could intervene. Coordinating development plans to avoid duplication should prevent the EU's rapid intervention force from competing with NATO (Maślanka, 2024). However, the NRF and its proposed successor, the more European-focused, smaller Allied Reaction Force, risk overloading states possessing memberships in both organisations. Furthermore, allowing the same forces to be committed to the NRF and the EU RDC seems politically hazardous. Repartition of the deterrence and crisis management tasks could be a logical solution, but the substantial increase in NATO ambitions could delay the RDC development, especially considering the common high readiness status requirements (Fiott & Simón, 2023).

Finally, while the EU RDC marks progress beyond the Battlegroups, it should be noted that it just implements goals set decades ago, as the 1999 Headline Goal already envisioned the creation of a similar force structure (Biscop, 2021). Nevertheless, despite increased commitments, some Member States still hesitate to respect them due to cost-benefit concerns. Given the intergovernmental nature of the CSDP and the application of unanimity rules, political will remains a decisive factor in deploying the EU RDC (Members' Research Service, 2023). Therefore, EU actors will strive to mobilise peer pressure and inflict reputational damage to encourage compliance and dissuade unreasonable veto use (Meyer et al., 2022).

Concluding Remarks: Enhancing European Crisis Response

The article presented a comparative analysis between the EU RDC and the EU Battlegroups, analysing the shortcomings and limited achievements of the Battlegroups' experience and exploring the potential challenges that could hinder the deployment of the new EU RDC. It found that the RDC's successful implementation depends on overcoming persistent obstacles that the Battlegroups have encountered throughout their troubled history. Building upon the lessons learned from this previous initiative, such as interoperability and the lack of unified political will, is therefore determinant.

Certainly, the availability of an effective EU RDC is essential for establishing a stronger and more secure Europe. The RDC will function as a military tool designed to support EU efforts in crisis management, aligning with the EU's integrated approach to security, while NATO will remain the cornerstone of collective defence for the Allies and Euro-Atlantic security. The effectiveness of rapid military response will ultimately rely on its integration within a broader political and economic strategy aimed at enhancing the EU actorness and addressing the underlying causes of crises (Biscop, 2021; Anghel & Jones, 2022). Although intended for military purposes, the EU RDC can complement non-military actions to prevent escalation and mitigate protracted violence. It also addresses the long-standing political, institutional, and financial barriers to effective military deployment, which have prevented the use of the Battlegroups.

Eventually, the EU RDC could contribute to achieving the Strategic Compass' goals and developing capabilities to act in non-permissive environments with modular air, maritime, and land forces. By fostering harmonisation of military equipment and enhancing cooperation among EU Member States, the EU RDC can also allow the Union to take on greater international responsibility for projecting stability beyond Europe's borders, especially since Member States are realising it is increasingly difficult to act unilaterally (EEAS, 2017).

In conclusion, the EU RDC represents a significant step towards establishing an autonomous, effective crisis management capacity within the CSDP framework. Through this initiative, the EU can fulfil its long-term objective of achieving strategic autonomy in foreign and security policy. By bridging previous gaps and solving some remaining fundamental challenges, the EU RDC has the potential to make Europe a more credible, rapid, and effective actor in crisis management and response.

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