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WRITTEN BY

ANTONIO SORBINO

EDITED BY

JACK KIRK

SUPERVISED BY

BENJAMIN ROBITAILLE

Introduction

Recent developments, such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and concerns about the sustainability of US security commitments, have injected new momentum into the EU's pursuit of an autonomous defence architecture. This momentum has brought the question of governance to the forefront, highlighting the tension between two principal approaches: intergovernmentalism and supranationalism. This paper explores the impact of intergovernmentalism on the efforts to establish a common European defence, analysing this dynamic through the prism of interoperability. The paper proposes the following roadmap: the first section concerns the philosophies of EU governance with a focus on intergovernmentalism; the second section addresses the challenges in developing a common European defence architecture by looking at the institutional, material, and strategic dimensions of interoperability; and the third focuses on the gradual supranationalisation of EU defence, which signals a movement beyond strict intergovernmentalism.

Through an exploration of interoperability, the paper highlights the interplay between national sovereignties and the collective defence needs of the EU. By examining the barriers that monolithic intergovernmental logics impose on defence integration from a multidimensional perspective, this article concludes that this philosophy of governance cannot serve as the foundation for a truly common European defence.

1. Philosophies of EU Governance

The EU represents a mosaic of governance systems in which various actors and networks shape decision-making outcomes. In this intricate multi-level system, there are two contrasting and intertwined philosophies of governance: supranationalism and intergovernmentalism. The first advocates for decision-making processes that transcend national boundaries, emphasising a collective European identity and shared sovereignty. The second champions the primacy of national governments in the decision-making process, particularly in areas of core state powers (Fabbrini, 2020). These are considered philosophies of governance because they represent fundamental and distinct ideologies regarding how authority and decision-making should be structured within the EU. This dichotomy shapes the fabric of European integration, weaving a complex tapestry of cooperation and contention. The duality between these governance regimes not only underlines the complex power structure within the EU but also defines the path towards an ever more integrated yet diverse union (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). The intergovernmental philosophy of governance is at the core of the two main policy instruments that define the strategic posture of the EU on the international chessboard, namely the Common Foreign

and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This institutionalist approach to governing the EU's hard power presupposes that decisions concerning the EU strategic dimension can achieve complete consensus among the member states (MS) in the European Council and the Council of the EU (further referred to as the Council) through a decision-making process that relies mainly on unanimity (Fabbrini, 2013). It is important to highlight that one constitutional feature of this governance methodology is the possibility for MS in the Council to exercise their right of veto (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). Each MS therefore has the power to veto decisions they perceive as contrary to their national interests, potentially obstructing the adoption of common policies. Under the intergovernmental logic, the integration process occurs via consensual and voluntary coordination (Hooghe & Marks, 2019).

Intergovernmentalism can be understood as “a ‘form of competition and cooperation among national governments’ at the EU level where each national government seeks to advance its national preferences in a ‘mutually advantageous’ manner” (Fiott, 2023, pp. 448-449). Moreover, according to Article 24 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), under this model it should be possible to realise the “progressive framing of a common defence policy that might lead to a common defence” (European Union, 2012, p. 18). Although there is no official definition, a common defence is understood in this article as the creation of a collective defence framework that presupposes the presence of a common capacity for action, defence investments and operational strategic culture. Nevertheless, the intergovernmental philosophy, emphasising national sovereignty and the prerogative of MS, can significantly delay the EU's development of a cohesive defence ecosystem and, most importantly, obstruct efforts to promote greater interoperability across various levels.

2. Challenges to a Common European Defence

In broader terms, interoperability is “the degree to which diverse systems, organisations, and/or individuals are able to work together to achieve a common goal” (Ide & Pustejovsky, 2010, p. 2). In the European context, interoperability represents a crucial component of achieving an “ever closer-union” (Dinan, 2005). In the realm of defence, interoperability constitutes the lintel on which a common European defence architecture is founded, especially the integration of various sectors requiring coordinated action across diverse actors. In this sense, interoperability postulates integration. The intergovernmental philosophy of governance, which prioritises national interests over common interests, poses significant challenges to achieving a comprehensive interoperability, thereby hampering a truly shared defence architecture. Interoperability can take various forms, and this article will explore it through its institutional, material, and strategic dimensions.

Institutional interoperability refers to the ability of various institutions within the EU to collaborate effectively to achieve common political objectives. In the context of European defence, this means coordination between various European actors involved in defence policies. Ensuring institutional interoperability is crucial for establishing a common European defence and facilitating coherent action through a balanced institutional framework. However, the intergovernmental governance model can undermine this equilibrium, delaying the development of a European defence architecture, as the MS, each with their own different political vision, have full control and authority of this area. Given the intergovernmental nature of this policy area, there is limited if not absent cooperation between the Council and supranational bodies such as the Commission and the European Parliament. While the latter are not closely involved in defence policy formulation, they nevertheless have an expanded role that impacts these policies, for example at the market and industry defence levels (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). This disconnect leads to institutional incoherence, influencing the EU's capacity to respond to external crises.

The institutional dynamics present within the Council reflect a decision-making process that can often be hampered by national vetoes and extensive consensus-seeking (Benisheva, 2024). This intergovernmental approach weakens the Union's capacity to manage critical situations, as inertia frequently takes precedence over urgency. Vetoes and unanimity are institutional burdens that hinder the EU's path toward greater geopolitical responsiveness, resulting in collective silence (Pirozzi & Ntousas, 2019) and a political paralysis that hamper the EU's capacity to act decisively (Morillas, 2021). For instance, during the war in Ukraine, Orbán's Hungary exploited the lengthy delays associated with unanimity and vetoes to stall the decision-making process, constraining the EU's response to the war (Schmidt & Glied, 2024). This pursuit of consensus through voluntary coordination among the 27 MS sometimes leads to extended decision-making dynamics, where accommodating the reservations of each country can dilute the strength and coherence of adopted policies. This "intergovernmental fallacy" (European Parliament, 2010) further weakens efforts to build institutional capacity for a common defence, as the interests of a single MS often prevail over the collective interests of the community.

Intergovernmental logics can be seen in other EU defence initiatives. The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), developed to enhance defence collaboration among MS, fails to provide a pragmatic approach to defence enhancement, presupposing a voluntary framework for data sharing that "limits the effectiveness of the defence report and prevents transparency between all MS" (Munson et al., 2020, p. 7). The effectiveness of the European Defence Agency (EDA), which strives to coordinate defence strategies, can be limited by

intergovernmental governance (Karampekios & Oikonomou, 2015). The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), designed to enhance EU defence capabilities also presents structural problems. Firstly, “information sharing between MS in PESCO is currently optional; this is a problem and contributes to the failure of CARD” (Munson et al., p. 11, 2020). Secondly, MS participating in PESCO are expected to make binding commitments to develop their military capabilities and increase defence spending, but these commitments lack strong mechanisms for enforcement. Furthermore, the reliance on national voluntary implementation and the need for Council approval can introduce delays and inconsistencies regarding how PESCO commitments are fulfilled. Divergent national priorities and varying levels of commitment can lead to fragmentation in defence and inefficiencies in resource allocation (Houdé & Wessel, 2023). PESCO exemplifies the complexities of voluntary intergovernmental cooperation, with its voluntary framework often leading to inconsistencies in participation and execution, thus complicating the standardisation and harmonisation of military forces among MS (Biscop, 2021).

These examples make clear that “EU defence initiatives fall short of meaningful institutional interoperability and strategic planning” (Munson et al., 2020, p. 13). Thus, “the development of full institutional interoperability at the European level is a long and difficult endeavour, and the roadmap available to date is just a rough sketch so far” (Contini & Lanzara, 2013, p. 38). The intergovernmental philosophy of governance, rooted in voluntary coordination, unanimity, and veto powers, significantly complicates the EU’s institutional path towards becoming a responsive defence actor.

Material Interoperability

Material interoperability is the capacity within the EU to align and integrate different industrial, military, technological systems (Helwig, 2020). This broad-based material cohesion is critical for enhancing efficiency and facilitating coordinated efforts across the EU. Effective material interoperability enhances standardisation and harmonisation of different systems, crucial in ensuring responsive transnational collaboration. Such material integration not only optimises the use of resources but strengthens the EU’s ability to respond decisively to external challenges, enhancing regional stability and collective security.

However, intergovernmental logics deeply influence the material dynamics of this interoperability as they often result in a fragmented approach. This fragmentation can be observed in the European defence industry, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine, where the duplication of efforts and resources among MS undermined the EU’s ability to present a unified response. According to Draghi (2024a), the EU’s defence industrial landscape is largely shaped by national players with limited domestic markets, contributing

to fragmentation that hampers both operational effectiveness and interoperability. This is illustrated by the fact that EU MS have sent ten different types of 155mm artillery to Ukraine, creating severe logistical challenges for its armed forces. Consequently, this fragmentation results in expensive duplication, complicated logistics and obstructed interoperability (Clapp, 2024).

Each member state prioritises national defence industries, tailored to specific national standards, which can be resistant to adopting broader EU standards for economic, political, or strategic reasons (Bohez, 2024). This resistance complicates the process of achieving material interoperability, which requires the reconciliation of diverse material resources. It should be reiterated that “interoperability implies ‘sharing’ as opposed to ‘owning’ resources” (Contini & Lanzara, 2013, p. 38). The issue is that “defence planning remains stuck at the national rather than at the European, or even Atlantic, level” (Biscop, 2021) and consequently European governments conceptualise defence industry autonomy from a national perspective rather than a European one (Fiott, 2018).

These varying national standards, design principles, and industrial interests create further challenges to reaching a consensus and complicate the process of achieving material interoperability. For instance, France's war-fighting requirements for versatile, exportable combat aircraft often conflict with Germany's preference for heavy long-range interceptors. Similarly, divergences in main battle tank preferences, France favouring lighter vehicles and Germany opting for heavier armour, have repeatedly hindered successful European-wide tank collaboration (Andersson, 2023). Hence, these divergences “have repeatedly led to failures in agreeing on single programmes big enough to drive defence industrial consolidation at the European level from the top” (Andersson, 2023, p. 4). The achievement of material interoperability is hindered by fragmentation, rooted in intergovernmental mentalities that favour the national over the European. The MS that possess advanced defence material elements “have traditionally defended a « sovereignist » policy agenda where states are meant to be the only actors competent to regulate defence matters” (Bohez, 2024, p. 32). The issue therefore originates from the perception among MS that defence material aspects fall strictly within their sovereign control, which persistently undermines the stability of the EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDITB), the future building blocks of common European defence.

Strategic Interoperability

Strategic interoperability is the alignment of the diverse political visions among EU MS towards a common operational strategic culture. This convergence is crucial for ensuring that all members share a common understanding of, and commitment to, the Union's

overarching goals and collective defence interests. Strategic interoperability is essential for building a common European defence, as it aligns various national defence strategies with the collective interests of the EU. Nevertheless, each MS distinct national interests and strategic preferences can clash, presenting a significant challenge. Intergovernmental logics manifests through this political reluctance to compromise on national priorities, impeding the development of a unified defence strategy across the EU (Sorbino, 2024).

The so-called “strategic cacophony” of clashing national strategic interests, represents an obstacle for the development of a common European strategic culture (Giusti & Grevi, 2022). Moreover, “such strategic cacophony is particularly noticeable during the conflict in Ukraine, where the Union has struggled to align the European collective interest with the combination of different national strategic cultures” (Sorbino, 2024, p. 4). For example, Northern European nations such as Germany argued for funding defence through national resources, while Southern European countries supported the idea of using common European debt. In Eastern Europe, Poland continues to view Russia as a critical threat, contrasting with Hungary’s view of Russia as an ally (Fabbrini, 2024). Heterogeneity of strategic thinking and threat assessments complicate the realisation of a coherent and common strategic culture, impeding the pursuit of strategic interoperability. Consequently, this divergence hinders the development of a common European defence, as a unified approach is essential for effective collective security measures. Without alignment in strategic perspectives and threat perceptions, the EU will struggle to implement and maintain a cohesive defence strategy.

3. A movement beyond intergovernmentalism

Over recent years, supranational logics have been introduced to European defence governance in addition to classic intergovernmental frameworks. From the occupation of Crimea to the current war in Ukraine, the European Commission has demonstrated marked political entrepreneurship in the defence sector, using these “critical junctures” as opportunities to expand its role in an area traditionally dominated by MS (Håkansson, 2023). This has resulted in the circumvention of some intergovernmental resistance, redefining the landscape of European security and defence over time. Key examples of this approach include the launch of the EDF and the creation of the Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space (DG DEFIS), which consolidated the Commission's role as an actor in strategic policy management, materially enhancing its role in defence and security. During the war in Ukraine, the Commission stimulated a whole series of initiatives (e.g., the European Defence Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA), the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), the European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS) and the European Defence Industrial Programme(EDIP)) through the integration of

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European defence capabilities and common procurement. In this regard, “the Commission has seized on the opportunity of advancing EU policy in the area of common defence procurement... In this sense, Russia’s war on Ukraine has not only exposed the costs of fragmentation in Europe’s defence market, but it has provided a political impetus to organise defence procurement at the Union level” (Fiott, 2023, p. 455). These initiatives signal a further step towards supranational logics: for the first time, through the EDIRPA and ASAP, the EU has directly funded the acquisition of armaments. Through the EDIS and EDIP, the EU aims to establish a common defence procurement system and enhance the EDITB (Stoetman, 2023). These recent initiatives indicate the Commission’s willingness to institutionalise and make permanent EU defence funding, moving from a post-Ukraine emergency phase to stable and responsive structures.

In addition, the introduction of the Commissioner for Defence and Space represents a further step, reinforcing the commitment of the Commission to build a Defence Union. This project, one of the new Commission’s political priorities along with the creation of a Single Market for Defence, aims to strengthen cooperation between MS and European institutions, thus promoting deeper integration. Projects like these underscore the Commission’s commitment to integrating supranational market logic within intergovernmental frameworks. This approach fits into the wider vision of a Defence Union as a significant advance in military and defence collaboration and a powerful indicator of political and strategic unification at the EU level to attain strategic autonomy.

Seizing the window opened in recent years, the Commission has promoted supranational logics by introducing common funds, regulations and action plans aimed at uniting national efforts under a single Community banner. Hence, it can be observed “a process of partial supranationalisation during the last decades. In sum, the developments since the Treaty of Lisbon can be considered as important steps toward a more supranational and integrated structure of the CSDP” (Ertel & Göler, 2025, p. 60).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the complex challenges that undermine the establishment of a truly common European defence. The intergovernmental philosophy of EU governance is at the core of the problems that affect the multidimensional aspects of interoperability, essential for building a unified defence architecture. The tension between national sovereignty and collective defence efforts within the EU exacerbates these challenges, as MS sometimes prioritise their individual policies over collective ones. This article has demonstrated that intergovernmentalism cannot serve as the philosophical model for a common European defence from an institutional, material, and strategic perspective ...

paradigms of precise mass because, when deployed at scale, these platforms provide advantages to the armed forces, especially if coordinated attacks aim to saturate enemy defences. Assessing the threats and potential of such systems and adapting investment strategies accordingly, mainly balancing technological superiority with mass production, will prove crucial to strengthen the EU and NATO conventional deterrence posture and ensure long-term operational effectiveness for European armed forces. In addition, the political entrepreneurial activities of the Commission have brought forward a form of institutional hybridisation in defence policy, where the supranational logics mesh with intergovernmental frameworks. The dawn of a new era in European defence requires a bold reimagining of cooperation and commitment, where unity does not merely coexist with diversity but is strengthened by it. As Mario Draghi argues, “it will be only through unity that we will be able to retain our strength and defend our values” (Draghi, 2024b, p. 11).

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