Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

European defence beyond institutional boundaries: Improved European defence through flexibility, differentiation and coordination

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Recommendations

As a response to the changing geopolitical situation, initiatives aimed to strengthen European defence have been taken in NATO, in the EU, but also bi- and multi-laterally between EU member states and associated non-members, such as Norway. This policy brief argues that all these processes must be taken into account when we want to measure the full security and defence capacity of Europe. Rather than a sign of fragmentation, they are preparing the ground for a new European defence architecture, characterised by a high degree of flexibility, which in the end may be better adapted to the current security context. To maximise the effect of this differentiated defence architecture, however, a certain coordination between the different initiatives is needed. There is now a window of opportunity for such coordination, as two key processes are now running in parallel: the development of a new "strategic concept" for NATO and the development of a "Strategic Compass" in the EU. If this succeeds, we can hope for the development of a more flexible and capable European defence.

Introduction

The global geopolitical situation has changed dramatically over the past decade. Europe is now facing growing threats from international terrorism with roots in the South, a more assertive Russia in the East, challenges of increased migration as well as uncertainties concerning transatlantic security cooperation. Combined, these challenges have increased the need for heightened security and defence cooperation between European states. The call for greater strategic sovereignty or autonomy grows continually louder. Despite different interpretations regarding what this means in concrete terms, it has kickstarted several important processes that all aim to strengthen Europe's security and defence capacity. Some of these processes seek to ensure long-term capability developments to fill the various shortcomings in European defence, while others highlight the need for creating a structure that allows for flexible "coalitions of the willing".

On the one hand, long-term capability developments have been ongoing in NATO for some time, but increasingly so also within the EU, through the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the European Defence Fund (EDF). These EU processes stimulate bottom-up defence integration amongst EU members and some selected associated non-members (like Norway). Parallel to these processes, however, there are also a series of bilateral, minilateral and multilateral initiatives of different kinds that have a looser institutional link, but still aim at improving the European defence capacity. Most notable is the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), the German-led Framework Nations Concept (FNC), as well as the French initiative to launch a European Intervention Initiative (EI2). In addition to this, there is also a set of sub-regional bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation agreements, such as those that exist between France and Germany, France and Italy, France and the UK and among the Nordic countries (NORDEFCO), the Visegrád 4 (V4), and the Benelux countries, to mention some.

The argument of this policy brief is based on recent (Rieker 2021; Rieker & Giske 2021) and ongoing research, which emphasise that the added value of viewing all these various processes as a whole and that this is key to get a more accurate picture of the existing European defence capacity.

A new and "differentiated" European defence architecture in the making

It has been suggested that Europe's most prominent challenge is not a lack of resources, but rather a lack of defence integration. Thus, a key question is how Europe can get more "bang for its buck"? Or perhaps more importantly, how to make the European defence capacities better adapted to the threats that Europe is currently facing and is likely to face in the foreseeable future? In the current context, two alternative approaches are often referred to: Either a strengthening of the European capacity in NATO, or a strengthening of the EUs Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Traditionally, there has been a division between those who preferred the first or the second option. However, in reality, this division is becoming increasingly artificial and a more feasible

way forward towards a strengthened European defence is through a combination of these two with the goal of creating positive synergies between both the bi-, mini- and multilateral initiatives and processes that already take place in Europe.

The main critique against such a take is that it may lead to higher levels of unnecessary duplication and fragmentation of European defence. However, this need not be the case. Rather it may promote the development of a more flexible and adaptable European defence structure. As the threats against the European continent has become more complex (cyber-attacks, hybrid warfare etc.), more flexibility in the European defence capacity is also required. In the end, such a process could be seen as an advantage as it contributes to making Europe stronger and more capable of handling the most likely threats that it is (and will be) facing. Following from this, we argue that differentiated integration may be seen as a positive process that may lead to a stronger rather than weaker European defence.

While differentiated integration is not a new phenomenon in European integration, the concept is mostly used to describe a process of differentiation within the EU, referring exclusively to processes where certain member states decide to move forward with more integration, implying a certain degree of transfer of competencies. PESCO is an example of such integration in the area of defence. In our perspective, however, differentiated defence integration may also include various initiatives that are taken outside the EU, but which taken together produce greater European defence integration and thus also a common European capacity to act. Still, for this to be a process that leads to integration and not fragmentation, they need to be part of a common European security architecture.

Applying a concept of integration that take all these European processes at different levels and within different frameworks into account, helps us to understand how the different processes are linked together. A key distinction is still then between vertical and horizontal integration, but with a slightly different meaning. While vertical integration traditionally is understood as transfer of competencies from the member state to the EU level, a broader understanding of the concept is needed in order to capture the processes outside the EU structures. By understanding different levels of vertical integration as something more than only transfer of competencies to the EU level, we open up for the inclusion of the many bilateral and multilateral European defence initiatives that must be characterised as something deeper than just state-to-state defence cooperation. By defining different levels of vertical integration through the level of interconnectedness among European states we open up for the inclusion of more initiatives. Three dimensions of such interconnectedness then becomes particularly important: i) the degrees of (political and economic) interdependencies; ii) the level of common norms, rules and objectives; and iii) the degree of contact points through common institutions or resources. Similarly, our understanding of horizontal integration, includes participation in the EU defence cooperation (CDSP) (with Denmark's opt out, or Norway's opt in), but it also goes beyond the EU and includes participation the various European defence cooperation initiatives that take place outside the EU structures, such as the many

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bilateral agreements between certain member states and those between a group of member states and associated non-members. This means that both EU defence cooperation, bilateral and minilateral forums as well as the European dimension of NATO must be seen as part of the differentiated European defence integration.

Combining vertical and horizontal integration with the broader set of defence initiatives taken both inside and outside of the EU institutions creates a framework which to a greater degree shows the full extent of Europe's combined defence capabilities as illustrated in the table 1 below. While this table provides a simplified overview of how the current differentiated European defence integration looks like, it does not say anything about what the drivers are and how it is likely to develop further. To be able to say something about this, we need to include a focus on agency. In short, how different levels of government push for or try to prevent further integration? We can distinguish between five different roles actors can take, namely that of leaders, followers, laggards, disruptors (and in the context of the EU also: leavers). Where the first two are characterised by attempts to drive integration forward, while the latter three are distinguished by attempts to slow down or reverse the integration process. In these processes, different states take on different roles, but also multilateral institutions themselves have a role to play. Often EU institutions take on a leading role in many of these processes and increasingly so as the EU institutions have gotten more competencies in defence. In other cases, the EU and NATO take on a joint role to push the process in a certain direction.

The role that the EU and NATO have to play here is crucial. While our core argument is that differentiated European defence integration is a positive trend, this will only be the case if the EU and NATO together take on a joint leadership role, making sure that there are more leaders and followers, than disruptors.

The need to make a link between EU's strategic compass and NATOs strategic concept

In general, studies of European security and defence tend to focus on the challenges rather than the opportunities. Clearly, there are a lot of specific challenges and problems to overcome. But if one becomes too problem oriented, there is a risk that one loses sight of the greater picture. In the end, rather than the lack of capacities, the greatest challenge for Europe's defence capacity is probably a lack of understanding of what kind of threats Europe currently is facing, how they can best be solved and with what kind of capacities Europe actually possesses. While European defence has its shortcomings, it can already do quite a lot if the situation requires it and there is political willingness to do so.

Both NATO and the EU are currently in a process of redefining its strategic thinking to be better at facing the threats of today. This is a great opportunity for improving the coordination and cooperation between two multilateral security institutions in Europe. Knowledge about which threats Europe is facing combined with a willingness to make use of the already existing capacities in a flexible manner to respond to these threats as effectively as possible is a prerequisite. Currently, the EU's process of developing a "Strategic Compass" and the forthcoming "strategic concept" of NATO provides an opportune moment to coordinate these processes and align both institutions and their respective member states.

Implications for Norway and policy recommendations

As a small non-EU NATO state, Norway is bound to be affected by the developments occurring in the European security and defence architecture. It is likely that Norway will be more dependent on the EU and its European allies in the years to come. Consequently, a stronger and more capable European defence capability will only serve to

Table 1:

European integration			Horizontal DI					
			EU				European/non-EU			
			Internal (opt out)		External (opt in)		Bilateralism		Mini/Multilateralism	
			Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal	Formal	Informal
Interdependencies	High		CSDP (-DK)		Norway		-France-Germany -France-UK -Polish-German -Dutch German	NORDEFCO BeNeSam Benelux Baltic	NATO-EU OCCAR	EI2 JEF FNC
	Low									
Consistency	High		CARD	Not yet			France-UK Dutch-German	BeNeSam	OCCAR	
	Low		CSDP		Norway		-France-Germany -Polish-German	NORDEFCO V4 Benelux Baltic	NATO-EU	EI2 JEF FNC
Structural Connectedness	High		PESCO, EDF (-DK & M)	Not yet	Norway,		-France - Germany -Dutch German	NORDEFCO BeNeSam	NATO-EU OCCAR	
	Low		CSDP: (-DK)		CSDP+ Norway		-France-UK -Polish-German	V4 Benelux Baltic		EI2 JEF FNC

Vertical DI

strengthen Norwegian defence capabilities. Norway should therefore continue to support the ongoing European processes, whether they are bi-, mini- or multilateral. Finally, Norway should develop recommendations for how NATO and the EU can work together to coordinate the various processes so that this differentiated European defence architecture is as effective as possible. There is no longer any reason to fear duplication and fragmentation. The real risk is rather that the traditional understanding of security and the incompatibility of different processes, may hinder an effective and integrated use of the many different initiatives out there which should be interpreted as a unique potential, rather than a sign of fragmentation.

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