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Ad hoc coalitions in European security and defence: symptoms of short-term pragmatism, no more?

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ABSTRACT

Ad hoc forms of military cooperation have become commonplace in European security and defence. The EU has even voiced the ambition to strengthen mutual support between its CSDP operations and European-led ad hoc coalitions. We ask whether and how this mutual support is strengthened and what it means for European defence integration. We focus on two cases: Task Force Takuba deployed to the Sahel region and the European Maritime Awareness mission in the Strait of Hormuz. Our analysis shows that European-led ad hoc coalitions are driven by short-term pragmatism, focused on providing quick fixes to collective problems and achieving particularistic gains. Plans to strengthen mutual support with the EU mostly emerge gradually and bottom-up, from military-operational experiences. However, formal integration is often hindered by political quarrels. We conclude that the EU needs a strategic vision for the position of ad hoc coalitions in European security and defence.

KEYWORDS

European Union; CSDP; integration; differentiation; ad hoc coalitions

Introduction

On 19 February 2024, European Union (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell announced that the Foreign Affairs Council had reached an agreement to launch a new defensive EU naval operation in the Red Sea (Council of the EU 2024). The objective of this new EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operation, named 'EUNAVFOR Aspides', is to restore and safeguard freedom of navigation by protecting commercial shipping from missile and drone attacks by the Houthis, a terrorist movement operating from Yemen. In setting up this maritime operation, the EU builds upon Operation Agénor, the military pillar of the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) mission deployed in the Gulf region since January 2020. Interestingly, EMASoH/Agénor is not an EU initiative; it is a European-led ad hoc coalition that takes place outside the CSDP framework. This development shows not only the EU's emerging geopolitical awareness (Biscop 2024), it also illustrates the EU's ambition to 'strengthen mutual support between CSDP missions

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and operations and European-led ad hoc missions and operations', as expressed in the Strategic Compass of March 2022 (EEAS, 2022a, p. 30). Yet, we know little about when and how this ambition of mutual support translates into practice.

Research on the relationship between the EU and European-led ad hoc coalitions thus far is limited. Most studies have focused on explaining why ad hoc coalitions are sometimes preferred, not how their relationship with the EU develops over time. We know that ad hoc coalitions are an attractive option for states that are willing to cooperate to address a particular crisis, but seek to overcome gridlock in formal institutions or avoid political vetoes, lengthy decision-making procedures and loss of autonomy (Reykers et al. 2023). This has been shown for both European and non-European ad hoc coalitions (Brosig 2022; Brosig and Karlsrud 2024; de Coning, Yaw Tchie, and Grand 2022; Gnanguènon 2021; Karlsrud and Reykers 2020; Williams 2019). For EU member states, they are alternative governance arrangements that allow them to act more rapidly and flexibly compared to what would be possible currently within the EU's CSDP (Tardy 2020). With this article, we seek to push scholars and practitioners beyond this short-term orientation. We suggest that applying a longer-term perspective is required in order to better understand when and how mutual support between the EU and European-led ad hoc coalitions develops.

Today, views on the longer-term value of European-led ad hoc coalitions for the EU roughly fall in two camps. An optimistic reading treats them as arrangements which not only contribute to international or European security; they also foster interoperability, spur (joint) capability development as well as increase the European joint capacity to act and potentially even contribute to the formation of a European strategic culture (Zandee and Kruijver 2019). This is important for having a greater European (if not EU) strategic autonomy or strategic capability (Rieker & Giske 2023). From this perspective, ad hoc coalitions constitute a key part of a *differentiated defence integration* process (Leruth 2023; Rieker 2021). A more pessimistic reading views these ad hoc coalitions as alternative arrangements that may in the long-run reduce the chances of CSDP deployment exactly because of their short-term, problem-solving capacity (Karlsrud and Reykers 2019). Following that rationale, ad hoc coalitions are short-term initiatives intended to offer quick fixes for collective problems. If they are systematically preferred over EU mechanisms for crisis response without being integrated in the EU's CSDP framework, the argument goes, they might become competitors for scarce defence resources and potentially even undermine the EU's credibility as a security provider.

If we want to know what role there is for European-led ad hoc coalitions in the wider European defence integration project, we first need to explore when and how the ties between these coalitions and the EU can be strengthened. In this paper, we seek to find out whether, when and how we see a change towards an increased linkage of European-led ad hoc coalitions and the EU. We build on conceptual insights from the differentiated integration literature, which highlights that European security and defence cooperation and integration take place along a continuum (Rieker & Giske 2023; Amadio Viceré and Sus 2023). From such a perspective, European-led ad hoc coalitions are a form of informal differentiated cooperation taking place outside the EU CSDP framework, but often with a close (informal) link to it. Our analysis focuses on two recent coalitions: Task Force Takuba, deployed to the Sahel region from July 2020 until June 2022 and the aforementioned European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) deployed since

January 2020. Both operations are typical European-led ad hoc coalitions with (mainly) EU member states joining forces outside the CSDP framework. Both coalitions are also either explicitly or implicitly referred to in the Strategic Compass when outlining the ambition to strengthen mutual support between CSDP operations and ad hoc operations. Empirically, we rely on insights from interviews with political and military officials from the main troop contributing countries, EU officials and publicly available reports and mission evaluations.

Four findings from our analysis stand out. First, troop contributors consider these ad hoc coalitions predominantly as stand-alone cooperative efforts geared towards a specific crisis or an immediate collective need, more so than as stepping-stones for furthering European defence cooperation or integration. Second, these coalitions are not part of an a priori, strategic planning process that involves a clear transition plan with new or existing CSDP operations. Third, ideas and plans to strengthen institutional ties with the EU's CSDP kick in mostly gradually and bottom-up, based on specific military-operational needs. Fourth, even though the strengthening of mutual support between CSDP operations and European-led ad hoc coalitions is often desirable from a military-operational perspective, actually integrating these coalitions in the CSDP framework is often complicated by political quarrels about mission leadership, mandate definition and disagreements about the EU's role as a crisis manager. As a result, short-term pragmatism tends to remain the dominant rationale. Still, this does not necessarily mean that ad hoc coalitions do not affect European defence integration in the longer run. What kind of effect is difficult to measure right now, as this is a rather recent phenomenon.

Ad hoc forms of cooperation have become an integral part of the European security and defence architecture. They show that European integration is not necessarily limited to EU processes. Also non-EU initiatives can increasingly be seen as part of the wider European security and defence integration project by strengthening a mutual strategic culture and increasing interoperability. The question, however, is if these ad hoc initiatives remain stand-alone efforts, if they can be seen as an important supplement to and part of an increasingly differentiated European defence integration, or if they eventually become integrated in an EU framework. The findings of this paper show a potential tension between short-term logics that drive European-led ad hoc coalitions and the long-term oriented European defence integration agenda, both between EU member states and within the EU institutions. What is needed is a more deliberate strategic vision for the position of European-led ad hoc coalitions in European security and defence.

Positive differentiation in European security and defence

Cooperation in the domains of European security and defence takes many different forms. Much of it takes place among smaller groups of EU member states who decide to team up either within or outside the CSDP framework. Scholarly interest in explaining these different forms of cooperation has grown exponentially in recent years, resulting in a burgeoning scholarship on *differentiated integration and cooperation* (Amadio Viceré and Sus 2023; Rieker 2021; Rieker and Giske 2024).

Contemporary academic debates about differentiated forms of cooperation in European security and defence follow a similar rationale as earlier work about, *inter alia*, a multi-speed Europe (Stubb 1996) or core groups (Keukeleire 2006), with the main difference being that it has also started to include processes that are not necessarily EU

initiated. The original idea was to give groups of like-minded EU member states an opportunity to cooperate more closely, allowing for European defence integration to progress, while others can follow in due time. Denmark's opt-out has been one of the clearest illustrations thereof (Klose, Perot, and Temizisler 2023). While these initiatives were long seen as negative differentiation, in recent years we observe a more positive tone, depicting it as 'positive differentiation' (Blockmans and Crosson 2021; Howorth 2019). Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) is the most obvious example with currently 68 projects being developed, providing members the opportunity to move further in their defence integration. The radically changed European security environment, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has strengthened the case for differentiated cooperation in the area of security and defence. But there is one key difference: while the EU is still at the core of these processes by stimulating integration through funding incentives (e.g. European Defence Fund), European defence cooperation increasingly also takes place outside the EU. This is also stressed in the Strategic Compass, where the need to include partners outside the EU is considered crucial. It is not unreasonable to expect differentiated forms of cooperation to occur more frequently in the near future, as this is the only way to achieve European actorness in defence in a short to medium term.

Many of the European differentiated cooperation efforts taking place outside the CSDP framework have a clear, *long-term, strategic objective*. They are geared towards fostering European defence cooperation or integration. For instance, the French initiated European Intervention Initiative (E2I), the British initiated Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) or the German Framework Nation concept are geared towards facilitating military cooperation among European states, although in different ways – ranging from fostering long-term capability development within the EU to preparing the ground for rapid European troop deployment (Novák 2018; Rieker 2021; Saxi 2017; Zandee and Kruijver 2019). Also a whole range of bilateral and 'minilateral' arrangements serve similar long-term purposes, such as the French-German defence cooperation, the Benelux cooperation, the Visegrad 4 (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) or the Weimar triangle (France, Poland, and Germany). The same can be said about the many cooperation initiatives between EU members and certain non-EU allies, such as the Franco-British defence cooperation, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) or the Nordic group (Amadio Viceré and Sus 2023; Bengtsson 2020; Howorth 2019; Leruth 2023; Rieker 2021).

Ad hoc military coalitions, to the contrary, are generally seen as *short-notice, time- and task-specific* initiatives (Reykers et al. 2023). Their potential longer-term objectives and effects are much less obvious. As a result, also their longer-term relationship with the EU has hardly received attention, despite that there is a growing body of literature around ad hoc coalitions in international security (Brosig 2023; Brosig and Karlsrud 2024; Karlsrud and Reykers 2020) and European security (Arnold 2021). Most studies have focused predominantly on identifying why these coalitions are an attractive governance arrangement, guided by questions of institutional choice. Their short notice availability and loose structure are two of the most cited reasons why ad hoc coalitions are sometimes preferred (Reykers et al. 2023). In other words, a short-term pragmatic rationale, rather than a longer-term integration agenda, tends to prevail in the creation of ad hoc military coalitions. Traces of such pragmatic behaviour have also been found in analyses about why EU member states decide (not) to use CSDP operations. For instance, Tardy (2020)

showed how the choice of the institutional umbrella of French-led military operations was mostly guided by a self-interested cost–benefit analysis, including burden-sharing, legitimacy and EU actorness considerations. In situations where speed and decisiveness prevailed, rigid decision-making procedures in the EU and UN have pushed France to initiate unilateral deployments or multilateral French-led coalitions. Studies explaining the non-deployment of CSDP operations have offered us similar results. The fear of getting bogged down in lengthy decision-making processes and diverging strategic interests, alongside the perennial financial burden-sharing problem, have repeatedly hindered CSDP missions and operations (Koenig 2011; Nováky 2015; Reykers 2016, 2017; Tardy 2015).

What we currently lack are studies that look beyond the launching phase of ad hoc coalitions. This is remarkable, not because ad hoc coalitions are a new phenomenon – quite the contrary, ad hoc coalitions have been used for decades already (Maglia et al., 2023; Reykers et al. 2023); but rather because the EU and its member states have recently started to embrace ad hoc military coalitions as an integral part of the European security apparatus. The Strategic Compass reflects this development, but also the European Peace Facility (EPF) hints in that direction. With the EPF, the EU gave itself additional flexibility to fund peace support operations by coalitions that are not part of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), such as the Multinational Joint Task Force or the Joint Force of the Group of Five Sahel (EPRS 2021); at least before much of the EPF funds were used to offer military support to Ukraine. In order to understand the position of ad hoc coalitions in European security and in the European defence integration project, such a longer-term perspective is now much-needed.

Short-term pragmatism

To analyse whether, when and how mutual support between the EU and European-led ad hoc coalitions develops, we build on recent advancements in the literature on differentiated integration (Amadio Viceré and Sus 2023; Delreux and Keukeleire 2017; Rieker 2021). In their effort to classify variations of differentiation in European foreign, security and defence policy, Amadio Viceré and Sus (2023) suggest that the level of *institutional embeddedness* with(in) the EU is a key source of variation, alongside dimensions of formality. On the one end of the spectrum, we have informal differentiated forms of cooperation that are not, or only very loosely, anchored to the EU such as European-led ad hoc military coalitions. On the other end of the spectrum, we have enhanced cooperation formally taking place within the CSDP framework. Importantly, levels of institutional embeddedness can evolve over time. This implies that the study of differentiation in European security and defence should not focus narrowly on explaining why specific formats are used, but also pay closer attention to how the relationship of non-EU initiatives to the EU develops over time. We therefore propose a process-understanding to understand whether, when and how change takes place towards an increased linkage, and potentially institutional embeddedness, of European-led ad hoc coalitions with the EU. In our analysis, we focus on actual changes in the relationship between the two as well as on changes in the preferences of officials from troop contributing members and the EU – de facto the EEAS. In this way, we can also identify obstacles to the EU's wider ambition of strengthening mutual support.

Our guiding assumption is that the strengthening of mutual support between European-led ad hoc coalitions and the EU's CSDP is a process that takes time. This builds on the premise that *short-term crisis-oriented goals* (e.g. stabilisation) and *pragmatic individual interests* (e.g. reputational gains, expertise development) are the dominant drivers of lead nations and troop contributors of ad hoc coalitions. However, longer-term thinking about how these ad hoc coalitions relate to the EU and preferences for strengthening mutual support can emerge gradually during mission implementation. A process-oriented approach allows us to see changing views and preferences between the mission formation phase and mission implementation.

More in particular, we expect that ad hoc coalitions are during mission formation mainly seen as arrangements that permit cooperative-minded member states to rapidly address a particular crisis or collective security need when confronted with gridlock in multilateral settings such as the Council of the EU (Reykers et al. 2023). They are hence defined by short-term pragmatism. As a result, we also expect little reflection on their relationship with the EU at that stage. During mission implementation, however, ideas about strengthening mutual support with the EU can emerge in different ways. One way is through the development of transition plan. These can foresee a concrete follow-up role for either a CSDP operation or a European operation acting under the header of NATO. For instance, ad hoc military coalitions can take place as a first-entry force, a bridging force or as a reinforcement of an ongoing or new multilateral European mission or operation. This logic mirrors how the EU has in the past deployed CSDP operations with the explicit task of supporting UN peacekeeping missions, such as EUFOR RCA which was deployed in 2014 as a bridging force operation to the UN Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA); or earlier, Operation Artemis in 2003, which was as a robust reinforcement of the UN Mission in the DRC (MONUC) (Novosseloff 2011; Tardy 2015). However, we also expect that because of the short-notice and task-specific nature of ad hoc coalitions, such transition plans are mostly abstract and not put down on paper in concrete form at the coalition's outset. Rather, they emerge gradually and informally. Another way in which ideas to strengthen mutual support and potentially also institutional embeddedness can emerge is through mission evaluations. Although we expect that mission evaluations will predominantly focus on the specific mission goals and related operational implications, rather than on lessons about their relationship to the EU and its CSDP, the literature on differentiated integration shows that positive evaluations of differentiated forms of cooperation and integration can lead to more structured integration (Leruth 2023). It has not yet been answered if and how this also applies to ad hoc coalitions.

In sum, we expect that views and preferences in favour of strengthening mutual support between specific European-led ad hoc coalitions and the EU at best emerge gradually and most likely bottom-up, rather than as part of a deliberate long-term strategic planning process. Importantly, this does not mean that we expect troop contributors or EU officials to be completely blind for the longer-term effects of ad hoc forms cooperation on the wider European defence integration project. Involved actors may be well-aware of the possible positive spill over effects in the long run, either for the CSDP project or for strengthening the European pillar of NATO. They can have indirect effects and can serve implicit integration objectives. On the operational level, they can foster interoperability and raise awareness of capability gaps (such as strategic enablers or

intelligence capacity) which require a common European approach (Biscop 2020; Brooks and Meijer 2021). At the strategic level, they may lead to a further alignment of interests among member state governments. Yet, we expect short-term pragmatism to take priority – at least in an initial phase.

Case studies

Participation of EU member states in military ad hoc coalitions is not a new phenomenon. EU member states have taken part in, among others, the US-led Global Coalition against Daesh in Iraq and Syria since 2014, the French-led operations Barkhane and Sangaris in the Sahel region since 2013, the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan since 2001, and the Multinational Force in Lebanon in the 1980s. Yet, we will focus in our analysis on two typical European-led ad hoc coalitions: Task Force Takuba deployed to the Sahel region (2020–2022) and EMASoH/Agénor deployed to the Gulf region (2020–ongoing). While Task Force Takuba was a Special Forces mission, EMASoH is a maritime diplomatic initiative complemented with a military component, Operation Agénor. For both initiatives, France took up the role of framework nation to which a number of EU member states (and some non-EU members such as Norway) plugged in their assets and forces. Both operations have also either implicitly or explicitly been named in EU statements about the ambition to strengthen mutual support between European-led ad hoc coalitions and CSDP missions and operations. For instance, HR/VP Borrell already in May 2021 wrote in a blogpost that ‘we could enhance coordination and cooperation between our CSDP missions and operations, and such European ad-hoc coalitions’ thereby referring to examples such as ‘the Task Force Takuba in the Sahel or Operation Agénor in the Strait of Hormuz.’ (Borrell, 2021). Also in the Strategic Compass, the ambition was specified by giving the example of ‘developing closer cooperation in theatre in these areas for example, in the Sahel, Horn of Africa and Strait of Hormuz’ (EEAS 2022a, 26).

Empirically, we rely on insights from a series of interviews with high-level military officials involved in these operations, national representations to the EU and civilian and military EEAS officials.¹ We also use information from official EU documentation and publicly available parliamentary reports about these operations. The combination of this data offers us sufficient insights to draw conclusions about when and how the level and form of integration of these European-led ad hoc coalitions with the EU’s CSDP framework changes and how preferences about strengthening mutual support develop.

Task Force Takuba

January 2020 – April 2021: mission formation

Task Force Takuba was officially requested in January 2020 by the governments of Mali and Niger, to support their fight against jihadist insurgents in the border area between Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. The request was answered by a joint political statement by eleven European states who agreed to create a European-led coalition with the mandate to provide training and assistance to Malian armed forces.² The coalition would complement a host of other international and European initiatives deployed to the Sahel region, including the French-led military operation Barkhane, active since 2014, and the EU

Training Mission (EUTM) Mali, active since 2013. Task Force Takuba would operate under the chain of command of Barkhane, a decision driven by a desire to foster rapid deployment and a preference of France 'to retain operational command, while allowing close consultation with European allies, and achieve greater operational autonomy' (Arnold 2021, 4). From a French perspective, Task Force Takuba served the goal of Europeanizing the thus far French-dominated counter-terrorism activities. It also made it possible to get the UK on board, which would be unlikely under EU command (Interview 13.09.22).

Motivations of other troop contributors were diverse and mostly pragmatic. Estonia, which was among the main contributors with about 95 troops, is an interesting case in point as its contribution was driven mainly by particularistic interests, including short-term benefits and longer-term strategic considerations. On the one hand, contributing to French-led initiatives was a way to forge closer military ties with France and to compensate for the uncertainty about American security guarantees to Eastern Europe in the pre-Ukraine war period (Interview 24 May 2023). Its decision to join the French-led E2I in 2018 is another illustration thereof (Szymański 2020). On the other hand, its specific contribution to Task Force Takuba was also driven by the live training opportunity it would offer for the country's special operations forces (SOF) (Interview 3 April 2023). The particular character of Task Force Takuba, a SOF mission, is in that sense important in understanding its formation and the rationales of troop contributors. Referring to these SOF contributions, a Danish military official highlighted: 'these contributions mostly have a bottom-up aspect to it, with SOF seeing an opportunity somewhere and then asking their capitals if making a contribution is a possibility' (Interview 17 December 2022). The fact that Danish SOF were already present in the region before Takuba was formed facilitated the Danish decision to participate. Danish officials also framed their participation as 'a useful way for them to train their SOF' in preparation of their standby duties as part of the NATO Response Force in 2021 (Interview 17 December 2022).

Task Force Takuba declared initial operating capacity on 15 July 2020 and full operating capacity on 2 April 2021. In addition to France, which contributed about half of the coalition's forces, key contributors were Sweden, Estonia and the Czech Republic. The US provided necessary strategic enablers (including surveillance and transport capabilities) as part of bilateral agreements with France. In sum, the formation of Task Force Takuba was driven both by a top-down initiative from France driven by a desire to Europeanize its counter-terrorism activities in the region *and* a bottom-up push driven by more particularistic interests from individual troop contributors, including the training opportunities it would offer. Longer-term goals, beyond the prospect of fostering interoperability, were seemingly absent, or at least not explicitly mentioned during mission formation.

April 2021 – January 2022: gradual EU endorsement

The above does not mean that there were no (emerging) preferences for integrating Task Force Takuba in a broader CSDP framework. In the end, the EU was present in the region with EUTM Mali. According to interviewed high-level EU military officials, Task Force Takuba fitted in a wider idea to develop a European continuum of activities in support of the Malian forces. From a military perspective, support to the Malian armed forces would range from supporting basic military training by local trainers, to EUTM Mali training the trainers, deploying a *Unité Légère de Reconnaissance et Information* as part of Task Force Takuba, and French elements as part of Operation Barkhane accompanying

Malian forces in the field during executive operations (Interview 3 April 2023). Although there was the expectation among these EU military officials that Takuba would ‘one day become an EU operation’, formal planning about how and when such a transition would materialize never happened. This military perspective was predominantly driven by tactical and operational level considerations. At the political-strategic level, however, Takuba was for many officials – also from within the EEAS – too much an operation that served first and foremost French counter-terrorism objectives (Interview 11 May 2023).

What could nonetheless be noticed throughout the operation is a gradual endorsement from the EU of the task force and its activities. This was visible in the Sahel Strategy of 2021, as well as in several Council conclusions (see also Arnold 2021, 9). For instance, in the Council conclusions of 16 April 2021, it was mentioned that the participation of EU member states in Takuba, alongside initiatives such as MINUSMA or the EU missions in the region, was an illustration of the European commitment to peace, security, stability and protection of the civilian population in the Sahel (Council Conclusions, 2021a). Later, on 24–25 June 2021, the European Council highlighted a determination to continue EU and member state support to initiatives such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force ‘and engagement in Task Force Takuba’ (Council Conclusions, 2021b; see also Arnold 2021, 9). Yet, these remained mere expressions of interest in strengthening the ties with the EU, or simply emphasising that this operation was seen as an essential contribution to the broader framework of European security and defence.

February 2022: mission closure

In early 2022, increased pressure and obstruction from Mali’s new leadership – especially escalating anti-French sentiments – had created a context in which ‘the political, operational and legal conditions are no longer met to effectively continue their current military engagement in the fight against terrorism in Mali’, according to an Elysée statement that month (Elysée, 2022). The Elysée here referred not only to Taskforce Takuba, but also to Operation Barkhane, which was the umbrella operation of Takuba. One could say that Takuba was a direct attempt by the French to Europeanize an engagement that had become increasingly unpopular by the local population. Operating on a UN mandate and explicitly supported by the EU, Barkhane started out with broad international support. While the western support continued, the support from the local population plummeted as the operation failed to curb the level of violence and insecurity coming from the jihadist’s groups in the region. Little by little, the traditional scepticism towards France as a former colonial power returned, paving the way for a widespread interpretation that the French engagement in the region was nothing more than a symbol of neo-colonialist policy. From February 2022 onwards, France and other troop-contributing countries one after the other announced the withdrawal of their troops. Taskforce Takuba’s activities in Mali were ultimately concluded in June 2022 and French forces under Barkhane moved from Mali to Niger.

The early closure of Takuba raises the question if it would have been possible to strengthen the ties with the EU and institutionally embed the operation in a CSDP framework, should the situation and perceptions on the ground not have worsened. According to the French army spokesman, General Pascal Ianni, both the Barkhane and the Takuba operations have showed what ‘Europeans can accomplish together in complicated security environments,’ with operational experience that would be critical for

future joint operations. In his view, in addition to sharing an assessment of the situation, common procedures and a brotherhood of arms have been forged through this experience of working together (*France 24*, 2022). Although this only reflects the French perspective, it suggests that there is a certain expectation that bottom-up processes can build a basis for furthering European defence integration.

However, the French-led intervention also suffered considerably from several flaws which shaped the way it was perceived at the political-strategic levels within the EU institutions. One of the main problems was that the French effort to Europeanize its Sahel engagement did not change the overall perception of its operations in the region. They were still seen by most people inside and outside the region as French operations. This means that it was also (rightly or wrongly) more vulnerable to accusations of the operation being driven by a (post-colonial) hidden agenda. These perceptions created additional obstacles to reach agreement within the EEAS to even consider a strengthening of the link to the EU. Also the critique that the French-led engagement was overly military centred shaped the way it was perceived (Interview 11 May 2023). While this approach can be both defended from a military standpoint and explained by referring to the severity of the security situation, the strong counter-terrorist focus made it hard to align with the views of proponents within the EEAS of an EU comprehensive approach.³ In other words, not only the situation on the ground was an obstacle to strengthening institutional ties between Takuba and the EU, also perceptions about its mandate and leadership created political opposition.

EMASoH/Agénor

July 2019 – February 2020: mission formation

Following the Trump administration's announcement in mid-2018 to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (i.e. the 'Iran nuclear deal') and the introduction of new US sanctions against the Iran regime, tensions in the Gulf region increased visibly. Seizure of oil tankers by Iran and drone attacks on oil facilities raised global concerns about risks of escalating violence between both parties and, importantly, about the free movement of shipping in the strait between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman – a key passage for global oil transport. After a series of attacks on European tankers in summer 2019, the US established the 'International Maritime Security Construct' (IMSC) with the goal to reassure and safeguard the freedom of navigation in the region. In November 2019, Coalition Task Force Sentinel was established as the operational component of the IMSC, with the goal to also act as a deterrence force against future attacks in the region (US CENTCOM, 2019). Although multiple European governments received US requests to support the coalition, the composition of the coalition (including contributions from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and the US policy of 'maximum pressure' made most European governments decline this request to contribute – at the time of writing (February 2024), the coalition consists of contributions by 12 countries (Albania, Bahrain, Estonia, Jordan, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Seychelles, UAE, UK, and US) (Arnold 2021; HCSS 2021).

Talks about the creation of a European mission in the Strait of Hormuz took place largely in parallel with the US initiative, initially with France, Germany, and the UK as driving forces. As suggested in a report by the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies for the

Dutch Second Chamber, the option of a CSDP operation was preferred by some governments but quickly turned out to be impossible (HCSS 2021). One of these reasons was a French desire to move quickly and avoid consensus-seeking delays in the EU. Other reasons included the French preference for an active Danish contribution, as well as the initial idea that the UK would also participate. After the decision by the UK government in August 2019 to join the US-led IMSC, first Germany and then France (after Germany backed out) moved forward with the initiative to establish a European-led ad hoc coalition outside the CSDP framework. It was this French determination which reportedly made the difference in the relatively quick creation of the mission. As an involved military commander summarized: ‘there was insufficient appetite in NATO and the EU, and the IMSC was politically not possible, so this was the only acceptable option’ (Interview 15 December 2022). Yet, there was also a strong French desire for a ‘Europeanised’ mission, both for reasons of burden-sharing and legitimacy (Interview 3 April 2023). A series of operational planning meetings in September 2019 were followed by a joint political statement about the creation of EMASoH on 20 January 2020 by eight European governments. These were the governments of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal.⁴

Also in this case, troop contributors were predominantly driven by a combination of security concerns, about safeguarding the free movement of commercial shipping, and the prospect of particularistic gains, such as increasing their international visibility and creating goodwill in France. For instance, a Danish official at the EU highlighted how the French request to Denmark to provide the Force Commander of Agénor created an opportunity ‘to put our flag’ and show ‘in NATO’ that ‘we have not met our spending levels, but we do contribute actively’ (Interview 16 December 2022). Likewise the Dutch Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence not only put strong emphasis on mandate achievement in their evaluation of the mission, they also highlighted how bilateral political contacts had shown that being among the first to contribute militarily to EMASoH was appreciated by France (Document 2021Z22701, nr. 2).

EMASoH reached full operational capacity status in February 2020. The mission included a military pillar, Operation Agénor, with its Operational Headquarters in France and its Fleet Headquarters located in Abu Dhabi. Command and control has since been provided on a rotating basis by France, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Italy, illustrating its multinational approach. The mission is complemented with a diplomatic component led by a Senior Civilian Representative, a role assumed by the Dutch Ambassador Jeannette Seppen from February to August 2020 and by the Danish Ambassadors Julie Elisabeth Pruzan-Jorgensen and Jakob Brix Tange respectively from August 2020 until August 2021 and from September 2021 onwards. Importantly, EMASoH/Agénor was – and still is at the time of writing – geared towards creating maritime situational awareness. This focus on awareness and prevention of further escalation differs substantially from the more explicit deterrence goals of the US-led mission in the region.

The ad hoc nature of EMASoH/Agénor, at least in principle, did not exclude the possibility of a transformation into an EU-led operation after a certain period of time. However, interviews and insights from Council conclusions and decisions indicate that this was never really considered in the planning phase or in the initial stage of deployment. Rather, short-term pragmatism prevailed in the first months. For instance, an

involved high-level military official explained in December 2022 that the initial end state – at least for his country's contribution – was defined by 'the absence of incidents for a period of 6 months'. He added that 'we have now reached that stage more than once, but the geopolitical situation has changed and the case for an EU mission to take over is too thin' (Interview 15 December 2022). Other interviewees indicated that they 'do not recall having seen an exit option' while highlighting that 'exit is also usually linked to our NATO readiness commitments, as our troops have to come home once they have a readiness task in NATO' (Interview 16 December 2022). Overall, this illustrates the absence of a longer-term planning for mission follow-up or transition in the early stages of the operation.

February 2020 – December 2023: strengthening relations with EU NAVFOR Atalanta

Preferences about strengthening mutual support with EU CSDP operations, and later also plans to integrate EMASoH/Agénor into a CSDP framework, emerged only gradually. Our empirics show incremental steps in the direction of strengthening cooperation and partnership between EMASoH/Agénor and ongoing CSDP operations, and with EUNAVFOR Operation Atalanta specifically.

Particularly notable is the Council Decision of 12 December 2022, which extended the mandate of EUNAVFOR Atalanta until 2024. EUNAVFOR Atalanta was deployed in 2008 with the mandate to contribute to the deterrence, prevention, and repression of piracy off the Somali coast. Over the years, the operation's mandate was expanded to contribute to maritime security in the North Western Indian Ocean. Yet, the Council Decision of December 2022 not only extended the mandate of EUNAVFOR Atalanta in time, it also called for opening a 'dialogue with the European-led Maritime Situation Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) initiative and its military component, Operation Agénor in order to develop further links and synergies' (Council Decision, 2022/2441). This has led to increasingly visible meetings and consultations between commanders of Operation Agénor and EUNAVFOR Atalanta. The social media channels of EMASoH/Agénor repeatedly showed how coordination efforts were undertaken towards enhancing interoperability and information exchange between both missions. Also an EEAS task force was created which, together with a senior diplomatic coordinator, would coordinate discussions about a potential merger of EMASoH/Agénor with EUNAVFOR Atalanta (Interview 3 April 2023).

Because EUNAVFOR Atalanta and EMASoH/Agénor have different mandates and areas of deployment, merging them would not have led to a reduction of naval assets. It would have rather improved coordination at the political and military strategic levels. Operationally, both missions were already seen as complementary. Particularly important in this light are the EU's coordination efforts as part of the so-called 'Coordinated Maritime Presences' tool, which serves the purpose of coordinating member states' national naval and air assets in specific areas of interest. Through the so-called Maritime Area of Interest Coordination Cell (MAICC), which is a CFSP initiative created within the EEAS and EU Military Staff, the EU now intends to coordinate member states' individual naval activities in common maritime areas of interest. While this started with a pilot project in the Gulf of Guinea, the EU recently expanded the concept to the North Western Indian Ocean, where EUNAVFOR Atalanta is active (EEAS, 2022b). In this way, the EU not only plays a coordinating role in terms of fostering information exchange, it also tries to ensure

a constant maritime presence in these maritime areas, by means of actively reaching out to and communicating with the OHQs of these nationally deployed assets (Interview 4 March 2023).

However, our empirics show that the plans to strengthen the institutional ties between EUNAVFOR Atalanta and EMASoH/Agénor were driven not only by efficiency concerns. The desire by France to Europeanize Operation Agénor by integrating it into EUNAVFOR Atalanta was another key driver of these developments. As shown in the Takuba case, French Europeanization moves are not new. Moreover, ad hoc coalitions often heavily rely on the initiative and contributions made by the framework nation, which implies that they run the risk of being perceived as a vehicle of the framework nation's interests. This is not different for EMASoH/Agénor. A letter by the Dutch government to the second chamber illustrated this concern. In response to questions about why, at a certain moment, tasks were transferred from the OHQ to the FHQ, the letter referred to 'a shared observation within EMASoH' that the OHQ was predominantly focused on French national missions in the region (Document 2021Z22701, nr. 39; HCSS 2021),.

January 2024 – ongoing: a new EU maritime operation in the Red Sea

In January 2024, Belgium started its six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union with one of its ambitions in the field of CSDP being 'enhancing consensus on the potential integration of EMASoH (European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz) – Op AGENOR into Op ATALANTA' (Belgium Defence, 2024, p. 5). However, an escalating security situation in the Red Sea area disrupted these plans. Within weeks, discussions about integrating Operation Agénor into EUNAVFOR Atalanta made room for the launch of a new EU CSDP naval operation in the Red Sea which would build upon Operation Agénor.

The security situation in the Red Sea area escalated rapidly after the start of the war in the Gaza strip in October 2023 (Crisis Group 2024). From mid-October already, Houthis – an armed political and religious group operating from Yemen – launched drones and missiles targeting initially the Red Sea coast of Israel, but soon also commercial shipping. Given that nearly 15% of global seaborne trade passes the Red Sea, the potential economic effects caused serious international concern (White House, 2024). It was the US who initially took the lead in creating a new international multinational security initiative in December 2023 in response to these Houthi attacks. Operation Prosperity Guardian would bring together more than 20 countries, 'to include the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles and Spain' (US Department of Defense 2023). However, several countries – including France, Italy and Spain – quickly decided that they would not want to operate under US command and sent ships on their own initiative. Their decision was driven by a fear of being seen as taking a partisan side in the war of Israel in Gaza (European Parliament Research Service, 2024; Interview 26 January 2024).

The idea to launch an EU CSDP maritime operation emerged in December 2023. Interestingly, the original idea was to reinforce EUNAVFOR Atalanta and expand its mandate to include other tasks, also on the coasts of the Red Sea (European Parliament Research Service 2024). It is worth noting here that the mandated area of operations of EUNAVFOR Atalanta was earlier already expanded from the North Western Indian Ocean to include the Red Sea area. This move was made to enable a European evacuation

operation from the Port of Sudan in May 2023 (Interview 26 January 2024; Biscop 2024). Although the plan to expand EUNAVFOR Atalanta would be an efficient move from an operational perspective, it was met with political opposition from Spain, which provides the Atalanta OHQ and hence also the Operations Commander. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez justified his opposition by stating that EUNAVFOR Atalanta had ‘neither the characteristics nor the nature required for the Red Sea’ (Reuters 2023). However, he also added that Spain was open to a new EU mission. On 12 January 2024, Spanish Minister of Defence Margarita Robles declared that ‘Spain’s position out of a sense of responsibility and commitment to peace is not to intervene in the Red Sea’ (Reuters 2024).

As a result of the Spanish opposition against expanding EUNAVFOR Atalanta, the alternative option of launching an entirely new EU CSDP maritime operation was tabled, for which also EMASoH/Agénor came into the picture. On 16 January 2024, the EU Political and Security Committee provided preliminary support for the creation of a new EU naval operation, which would build on the military pillar of EMASoH, Operation Agénor (European Parliament Research Service 2024). Spain constructively abstained from the discussion in order not to hinder the EU initiative (Euractiv 2024). A week later, the Foreign Affairs Council reached a principled agreement to launch a new defensive EU maritime operation in the Red Sea (EEAS 2024) and it approved the launch of EUNAVFOR Aspides on 19 February 2024 (Council of the EU 2024). Interestingly, this new CSDP naval operation operates under Greek operational command and it builds upon contributions made by EU member states to EMASoH/Agénor. In other words, despite partly overlapping mandates, both operations would operate side-by-side. Member states that contribute personnel and naval assets to Agénor agreed to also make these available to EUNAVFOR Aspides on their way to (or from) the Strait of Hormuz.

Two important lessons about the ambition to strengthen mutual support between CSDP operations and European-led ad hoc coalitions can be learned from this remarkable chain of events. A first lesson is that a lack of political consensus is a key obstacle to strengthening institutional ties. The case of EMASoH/Agénor shows that plans to strengthen ties or even integrate European-led ad hoc coalitions into a CSDP framework can emerge gradually, and they most likely emerge from concrete military-operational needs or experiences. However, reaching political consensus proves difficult. One obstacle relates to command and control. While Operation Agénor is essentially a French-led operation, EUNAVFOR Atalanta has always been a Spanish-led operation. Political quarrels about command and control of CSDP missions and operations is nothing new in the EU. Another related obstacle relates to fundamental disagreements between EU member states about the role the EU should play, and the military tasks it should perform, in international crisis management. The preference of France for an EU that is capable of performing high-end military tasks is not shared by member states such as Spain. Fears of getting dragged into an escalating conflict in the Middle East created an additional obstacle. A second lesson is that short-term pragmatism tends to prevail. The rapidly changing security situation in the Red Sea and wider Middle East thwarted the gradually emerging plan to integrate EMASoH/Agénor into EUNAVFOR Atalanta. The decision to build upon Operation Agénor for deploying Operation Aspides is a clear illustration of this pragmatism, rather than a result of a deliberate strategy to strengthen mutual support between EU CSDP operations and European-led ad hoc coalitions. Still, this pragmatism does not

necessarily indicate a weaker European security and defence policy. It could also be interpreted as yet another example of differentiated defence integration where different types of operations operate side by side with the same objective, namely to increase European security.

Conclusions

European-led ad hoc coalitions are here to stay. The Strategic Compass of March 2022 shows that the EU increasingly embraces differentiated forms of cooperation and integration taking place outside its CSDP framework. It even suggests that 'The EU could further support European-led ad hoc missions and operations that serve EU interests' (EEAS, 2022a, p. 26). In this paper, we argued that if we want to know what role there is for European-led ad hoc coalitions in the wider European defence integration project, we should first explore when and how mutual support between these coalitions and the EU's CSDP is or can be strengthened. In the end, differentiated forms of cooperation and integration are not static, and their institutional ties with the EU may change over time.

We started our research from the assumption that the strengthening of mutual support between European-led ad hoc coalitions and the EU's CSDP is a process that takes time. This builds on the idea that ad hoc coalitions are first and foremost driven by short-term crisis-oriented goals and pragmatic individual interests of their troop contributors. Yet, we also argued for looking beyond the mission formation stage to see if and how preferences and plans to link European-led ad hoc coalitions to the CSDP framework may emerge. For doing so, we looked at two recent cases: Taskforce Takuba deployed in the Sahel region (2020–2022) and EMASoH/Agénor deployed in the Strait of Hormuz (2020–ongoing).

Our analysis has led to four main findings. First, troop contributors to European-led ad hoc coalitions are mainly driven by a combination of a collective security concern that requires rapid collective action and the prospect of particularistic gains. The latter includes a returning French desire to Europeanize its military activities abroad, the ambition of smaller troop contributors to show their flag and the benefit of giving national troops international operational experience. Second, we found little to no evidence of strategic planning about transition plans with new or existing CSDP operations during mission formation. However, our analysis also clearly shows that preferences – and even plans – to strengthen the links and sometimes also the institutional ties between European-led ad hoc coalitions and the EU can emerge gradually. Yet, for both Task Force Takuba and EMASoH/Agénor, these plans emerged mainly from the military-operational level, either because of specific operational needs or because of the prospect of potential efficiency gains that would follow from merging a European-led ad hoc coalition with a CSDP operation. This is our third main finding. However, our fourth finding is that even though the strengthening of mutual support between CSDP operations and European-led ad hoc coalitions is often desirable from a military-operational perspective, actually integrating these coalitions in the CSDP framework is often complicated by political quarrels about mission leadership, mandate definition and disagreements about the EU's role as a crisis manager. As a result, short-term pragmatism tends to remain the dominant rationale to get things done. The rapidly changing security situation in the Red Sea area, is the clearest illustration thereof.

Still, it is important to note that the use of European-led ad hoc coalitions should not necessarily be a problem for European defence integration as such, under the condition that coordination between the patchwork of operations and initiatives is guaranteed. The move towards a more differentiated (and pragmatic type of) European defence integration, with ad hoc operations and CSDP operations operating side-by-side could be the future of European security and defence if they are embedded in an overarching European strategy. This is why scholars and practitioners in the fields of European security and defence should move beyond a narrow focus on the short-term rationales driving ad hoc coalitions. Ad hoc coalitions are becoming an integral part of the formal and informal European security and defence architecture. Thus, a longer-term perspective is required to better understand their contemporary and future role. What we need is a better embedding of European ad hoc military coalitions in an EU strategic vision about the further development of the European security and defence architecture. In the end, this is more important than forcing some kind of institutional integration of European ad hoc coalitions and the CSDP framework.

Notes

1. An overview of interviews can be consulted in the [Annex](#).
2. 'Task Force Takuba: political statement by the governments of Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Mali, Niger, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and the United Kingdom', 20 March 2020, <https://www.government.se/495ef1/globalassets/government/dokument/forsvarsdepartementet/2020/political-statement-task-force-takuba.pdf>.
3. The French withdrawal from the region was the result of a combination of local politics, its own colonial legacy, as well as a rather effective Russian-led disinformation campaign (Tuma 2022).
4. European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH): political statement by the governments of Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, and Portugal (20 January 2020). Available online (Accessed on 17 February 2023): <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/news/article/european-maritime-awareness-in-the-soh-emasoh-political-statement-by-the>.

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Annex - List of interviews

- Interview with two diplomats in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris (in person), 13 September 2022.
- Interview with two military and one civilian in the Ministère des Armées, Paris (in person), 21 September 2022 (in person).
- Interview with national military official, video conference, 15 December 2023.
- Interview with national military official, Brussels (in person), 16 December 2022.
- Interview with EU Military Staff official, Brussels (in person), 03 April 2023.
- Interview with EU official, Brussels (in person), 11 May 2023.
- Interview with diplomat in the Estonian Ministry Foreign Affairs, Tallinn (video conference), 24 May 2023.
- Follow-up interview with EU Military Staff official, telephone, 29 January 2024.