THE EUROPEAN UNION’S
DEFENSE DIMENSION

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The role of the European Union Military Staff (EUMS) is to define the global agenda of the European Union (EU), particularly its defense dimension. Here I summarize that agenda and offer some reflections on it.

Three Concentric Circles

The EUMS's role can be described in terms of three concentric circles of European defense. The outermost circle subsumes the EU's outreach to protect and advance broad European and Western values. Existing diplomacy and the EU's formal intergovernmental foreign policy institutions provide a framework for a common policy. This dimension is global and serves as the basis for European governments for the more supranational Commission to engage further with non-military measures.

The second circle addresses the realization of the EU's defense interests outside of the EU's territory. This falls within my mandate, where I operate as Mission Commander outside of the European territory. Geographically, we do not have a 360-degree scope: we focus more on the South and Southeast. The work we do in sub-Saharan Africa is part of defense of the EU's interests, for example, when we help prevent the instability caused by smuggling from Africa into Europe. This undertaking to prevent smuggling is within the Commission's goals of foreign aid and civil and crisis management. I quite often use the expression that there is no development without security, and no security without sustainable development. That is what we're doing in the African continent. Currently, we are present in the Federal Republic of Somalia,
the Central African Republic and the Republic of Mali—all of which are areas where the EU is going to invest a lot of money in our defense work.

This second circle is my responsibility as a Mission Commander. Altogether, the EU has 17 military and civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations: 11 of which are civilian law enforcement missions located in Africa, the Middle East, and even Eastern Europe, specifically in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. In terms of the military, we have three non-executive training missions on the African Continent and three executive operations: one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which dates back to 2004, as well as two naval operations: Operation ATALANTA off the coast of Somalia, and Operation IRINI in the Mediterranean. Altogether, we have about 3,000 military and civilian personnel deployed in these military operations.

As we come closest to EU territory, we encounter the third circle, for which we use the expression “protection of Europe,” or the protection of European citizens. This is not primarily about managing collective defense, which is a responsibility of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and of individual member states. Rather, at this point in time, the role of the EUMS is to build capabilities. Certainly, given that 21 of the 27 EU member states are also members of NATO, I do not see any huge risk in our duplicated military capabilities for those within the EU and those member states that do not belong to the EU. Furthermore, we have been doing important work to support NATO. The work that we’re doing in Africa also protects Europe as a whole, and it even protects the transatlantic community. Drug smuggling, for example, from Africa to Europe, and then onward to the United States and Canada as well. It’s important to understand that NATO is indeed protecting Europe, but we’re also protecting the EU for non-NATO member states like Finland. Therefore, supporting military mobility is equally important. If you can also support NATO’s strength and collective defense, this is the other side of the same coin.

1 Figure 1 is an overview of current EU missions and operations, all of which support a comprehensive approach to EU defense, are in agreement with the EU delegations in the corresponding area, and work within the framework of EU regional policies. “Military and Civilian Missions and Operations,” European External Action Service, March 5, 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/430/military-and-civilian-missions-and-operations_en.
European Military Cooperation in the Context of NATO and the EU

We have come to a point, I would argue, at which it is in the interest of member states to work together more closely. The game changer, in my view, has been the emergence of a “supranational Commission.” The Commission is not intergovernmental by nature, but now has spent money to support European security. It goes without saying that the Commission’s broader interests, particularly regarding industry, are not always the same as the military’s. The Commission’s interests are focused on building up the very fragmented European defense industry, rather than in protecting European industries from competition.

The EUMS works on hybrid operations. Within that framework, the EU and the European Commission have great potential to work in tandem – if their respective competencies are properly utilized and coordinated. They both have capabilities that can strengthen the capacity of their member states. In terms of capabilities development cycles, we have aligned them, to the extent possible, with those of NATO and EU member states. Of course, our aim is a little bit different, but we are fully transparent in terms of the processes, and we know very well what the others are doing.

Still, we primarily act with NATO, our counterpart institution. Yet, of course, we also have a direct dialogue with the United States. The EU was an economic and political union until the adoption of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in 2000 and the establishment of the European Union Military Committee (EUMC) and the EUMS military structures, which permitted us to respond to crises. Without the US engagement in Bosnia, we would have never done anything meaningful there—and Europe responded by developing capacity to act more independently. Hence, CSDP became an objective and was established so that in the future we could respond to a crisis, such as the one in Bosnia.

My approach has been to visit the US Defense and State Departments once or twice a year. In doing so, I have discussions with my colleagues in both of these departments. I would say there is an increasing need for that. One might ask: why? The answer is simple: one US concern has been regarding EU defense capabilities and initiatives, as they relate to the US defense industry. I think part of what the critics say is correct: we are not accustomed to communicating with intergovernmental actors. However, the concerns are certainly a bit overestimated on the US side. While it has to do with politics, of course, there may be a very positive impact generated by our defense industry because our work in Europe may then support NATO’s capabilities. In terms of competition in industries, European defense industries are not really in competition in terms of quantities, and we will not be. The risk of that is rather low.

Quite often, one can find European leaders who talk about a “European Army” resulting in our autonomy, with the connotation that this outcome is quite bad. Instead of “autonomy,” I prefer the term “responsibility.” And so, there is a European responsibility to take better care of our resources, security, and defense; none,
however, at the expense of the defense industry's of the United States or NATO.

The Covid-19 pandemic has proven, once again, that we must work together. We cannot tackle these global security challenges alone. Instead, we must work very closely together—in a transatlantic context—regardless of any disagreements we may have. Going forward, the transatlantic link and the US presence in NATO will be even more important than in the past. Therefore, for the future of European Union defense, we need to strengthen our dialogue with the US. Without compromising NATO, we need to have a dialogue not just with US executive administrations but also US industries.

Overall, I believe we should be spending more on defense and spending smarter. In order to be “smarter,” we should focus on defense cooperation rather than on protecting our very fragmented defense industries. Doing more together: that is EU defense cooperation.

The Mediterranean

Starting in Syria—and now in Libya—Russia has become more active in the Mediterranean region. Other players have as well. Yet, we don’t know, of course, what they want from the EU. On Libya, it’s quite interesting that Russia and Turkey are backing different horses: Russia is supporting Field Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, the commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army, and Turkey the Government of National Accord (GNA), an interim government formed under the terms of the Libyan Political Agreement. My personal opinion, as an individual and not in my EUMS capacity, is that the response to the situation in Libya from the EU has been rather weak and that Libya deserved stronger support from us. Through this, we have left space for Russia and Turkey to operate in Libya, similarly to what we did in Syria. Once the box is open, it’s very difficult to close it. When viewed in the context of the Eastern Mediterranean, including Cyprus, Egypt, and Turkey, that is quite an explosive area and will remain explosive in the months and years to come. Therefore, any operation is a risk.

Africa, Migration and Smuggling

There have been many EUMS missions in Africa. Sometimes the references to migration have been explicit, as is the case with smuggling. Sometimes the references are implicit, as is the case with the concern for routes for migrants, illicit goods, or terrorists. I tell African leaders that we are there to mitigate threats to the EU, help them address the security of their own country, and assist them in developing their societies. We do this to offer their citizens the opportunity to have livelihoods. However, all such measures impact migration. Migration is a symptom and a sensitive issue, so much so that a few years ago we were surprised by the magnitude of the illegal migration that came to Europe. Furthermore, we are still facing a “post-migration-crisis trauma,” which makes it very difficult to talk about migration among the EU member states.

Much of this has to do with migration. In the Mediterranean, we are dealing with the symptoms and looking for solutions. Building up our capacities to prevent the migrants from coming to Europe is beyond our abilities. And so, that is not the answer. One solution would be for the EU to work with other partners to create better futures for the countries from
which the populations are coming. Otherwise, we will have even bigger challenges in the years to come. In terms of smuggling, it’s not just occurring in sub-Saharan Africa, but also throughout a large portion of Western Africa. This huge operational theater extends from the Mediterranean down to the Gulf of Guinea and involves the smuggling of arms, human beings, and drugs, just to name a few. Smuggling, coupled with migration, makes the situation in Africa even more difficult. Traditionally in Africa, people are migrating all the time, but usually within Africa. Historically, we have not seen major migration routes from Africa to Europe; and so, we may have the time we need to quell these issues, but only if we perform well. We could, in future years, see the migration issue escalating once again.

Disinformation

The EUMS pays very close attention to disinformation concerns and, in particular, any related Chinese and Russian activities on this issue. We have been active for many years on this subject. As a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have activated a strategic communication strategy so that our CSDP missions can provide an informed narrative for audiences in Europe as well as for our host nations in Africa. However, my operational area is not limited to Africa. It also includes these very important global issues and the institutional framework for addressing them is the same.

We have a realistic understanding of the role played by China and Russia in disinformation and other related issues. While China is an

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important trading partner for the EU, it also maintains a lot of investments in Europe, perhaps too many. In addition, China is a large investor in Africa. Therefore, I have conveyed to my friends in the United States that their competition with China should also account for the massive Chinese investments in Africa. On the subject of Russia, it does not like the European Union. The EU has imposed sanctions on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine, which have not been well received by Moscow. We have been faced with massive disinformation campaigns from Russia, and they have sought to increase their influence by focusing on pro-Russian governments among the EU member states.

**The American Presidential Elections**

The EU needs to deal with any administration in the United States, Republican or Democratic. Though President Trump has recently increased the salience of US criticisms, similar concerns existed during the previous administration—just not as openly. However, the co-defense initiatives have only been active for four years. Regardless of which President leads the US, we will continue to have that dialogue. It is our responsibility to explain to our American counterparts exactly what we are doing, what we are not doing, and how to engage with and account for EUMS defense actions. I would say our institutions have recognized that important dynamic. Sometimes, achieving that is more difficult for the EU because we are not the “United States of Europe.”

We cooperate on an intergovernmental level throughout many of these processes. Therefore, we need to strengthen our communication with US administrations.

All in all, I hope that the US continues to engage closely with NATO and the EUMS.

In truth, Europe has needed the US in a multitude of ways following the Second World War. The very reasons for the establishment of NATO and the European Union were to increase the stability of Europe and to prevent war on the European continent. That’s the bigger framework. Therefore, I don’t think an augmentation in US capabilities will have a major impact on the EU’s military capabilities because said augmentation is a symptom of conditions that already exist. Additionally, I don’t see the European defense dimension being dependent on the US elections. While we will start establishing our own role, that role will be in support of other engagements as well. We are not going to challenge the nature of NATO. In my personal view, that is something that will never happen.
About the Author

General Esa Pulkkinen, is one of eight original ‘founding fathers’ of the European Union Military Staff (EUMS) and recently marked the end of 10 years aggregated service with the EUMS in a variety of capacities, including as Director General of the EUMS and since June 2017, double hatted as the first Director of the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and Commander of the EU’s non-executive military training missions in the Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia. As Director General of the EUMS and Director of the MPCC, PTG Pulkkinen was accountable to the EU High Representative, Mr. Borrell and to the EU Political and Security Committee (PSC).
References


