



Putting the Core at the Centre The Crisis Response Operation Core (CROC) and the Future of PESCO

Sven Biscop

The reader who cannot readily identify the meaning of CROC (Croque Monsieur? Croque Madame?) in the context of European defence can be forgiven. The flurry of activity in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) since 2016 has generated a host of new acronyms (PESCO, CARD, EDF...), of which the CROC, the Crisis Response Operation Core, certainly is among the least known. It deserves more attention however, for it ought to be at the centre of efforts to take Permanent Structured Cooperation forward.

The CROC is one of the first batch of PESCO projects announced in 2017. Its aim is to facilitate force-generation for expeditionary operations. The initial Franco-German food-for-thought paper on the CROC (September 2017) was very ambitious: it aimed at a force package of 1 division or 3 brigades plus the required strategic enablers, as a first step towards the EU's Headline Goal, which it translated into the need for a corps headquarters, 3 divisions and 9 to 12 brigades.

EU Member States have been claiming to be pursuing the 1999 Headline Goal, the ability to deploy a corps of 60,000, for twenty years now. In reality, many have come to see it as an unrealistic level of ambition, though why that should be so, given that the EU-28 pay 1.5 million men and women to wear uniform, is not clear. The Franco-German vision for the CROC seemed to be taking the Headline Goal serious again, in line with the view that the aim of PESCO should be to arrive at "a coherent full spectrum force package". Their food-for-thought paper did not propose, however, to identify and assign units to the CROC, hence the added value to the existing Headline Goal process appeared limited. The EU's Force Catalogue already lists theoretically available capabilities without identifying units, rendering an assessment of their actual readiness impossible.

BATTALION, BRIGADE, CORPS

The CROC now joins together Cyprus, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Their implementation study (January 2019) provides for the development of a set of possible and probable crisis scenarios, each of which will give rise to a Contingency Operation Plan, from which a Force

Element List with specific military capability needs will be derived. The participating Member States are to report the capabilities that they have that fulfil these requirements. The aim is not to create a stand-by force or to maintain a certain state of readiness, but since these capabilities would be pre-identified, this should accelerate force generation when it is decided to mount an actual operation. Furthermore, as a future step, command and control options should also be pre-identified.

Pre-identification of units is a plus compared to the overall Headline Goal process. But the major caveat is that the implementation study envisages no more than a brigade-size force plus enablers.

This low level of ambition is symptomatic of the state of Europe's armed forces and of the absence of strategic vision. During the Cold War, the building-block of our combined force structure was the corps. Even the smaller nations such as Belgium contributed a national corps, which took its place in the line and was supported by the multinational NATO command structure and specific multinational assets (such as the AWACS). Today, for most European states a mere battalion already counts as a major deployment. Often, governments even think in terms of just companies or half-companies. This is how the EU Battlegroup, a battalion-size force, has come to dominate the picture of European defence.

I am not proposing to reintroduce conscription, of course, and to recreate the 1st Belgian Corps in Germany. What I am firmly stating is that a brigade cannot be the level of ambition for a multinational CROC, for the individual nations already mount brigades (as the table at the end of this paper shows). Belgium alone fields a motorised brigade (and, according to NATO, should actually add a second, mechanised one). A

brigade, therefore, must be the smallest national building-block towards the constitution of a multinational corps, in order to finally achieve the Headline Goal – not just on paper, in a theoretical catalogue, but in reality.

A CORPS AS THE CORE

The debate on PESCO (and the European Defence Fund) mostly focuses on projects to develop new platforms and systems. The purpose of these projects, to equip a “coherent full spectrum force package”, has been lost from view.¹ Yet it is essential to achieving the EU's level of ambition. If the Member States use PESCO only to collectively procure equipment for their national forces, they will for sure save money, but their mostly small individual forces will not become much more employable, for lack of scale and lack of enablers. The latter can only be generated in numbers that make a difference if a large group of states pool their efforts.

The key to enhancing the readiness of our armed forces is to constitute a multinational force package, with the brigade as a building block: a corps-sized CROC.

First, a smaller nation can field a brigade by itself, but lacks the scale to provide all of the required combat support and combat service support units. In the framework of the CROC, a combination of integration and specialisation can be organised. In some support areas, nations can merge their capabilities into permanently integrated multinational support units. In others, a division of labour can be established with the national support units provided by one nation supporting the brigades of the others as well.² As a result, all brigades will be more usable, in more scenarios, then when they have to rely on national support only.

Second, in the framework of the CROC the participating states can harmonize equipment and doctrine, in order to achieve maximum synergies and effects of scale, and launch other PESCO projects to that end. There is, for example, space for only one future main battle tank in Europe, which should at the very least equip all armoured brigades in the CROC.

Third, the CROC can serve as the benchmark to quantify the need for strategic enablers: the corps is the minimum scale at which the EU should achieve autonomy in expeditionary operations. If necessary, EU Member States should be able to deploy the CROC without having to rely on any non-European assets in any capability area.

In other words, the CROC can be the central PESCO project, which serves as a guiding framework for the others. It is the translation into reality of the Headline Goal, to which the other PESCO projects can be tailored.

THE BENELUX, EI2, AND THE CROC

The German-Netherlands Corps is an example of far-reaching integration between land forces. Belgium and France have just launched the CaMo Project (for *Capacité Motorisée*), which will see at least equally far-reaching integration of the Belgian motorised brigade with the French Armée de Terre.

Both Belgium and the Netherlands already participate in France's European Intervention Initiative (EI2), launched in 2018 with the aim of increasing the capacity of the now 10 members to act together.⁴ Concretely, participating states opt to join one or more working groups (such as on the Sahel, the Baltic, the Caribbean, power projection, or terrorism) in order to forge a prior common understanding of the potential joint action that they might undertake if a crisis occurs in one of these areas. Put differently, in EI2

France hopes to create a pool of able and willing partners to build ad hoc coalitions for French-led military interventions.

The link with the CROC is obvious: it is the understanding on likely scenarios for intervention forged in EI2 that ought to inform the Contingency Operation Plans for the CROC. These will be much more ambitious than the areas mentioned in the CROC implementation study, which proposes to focus only on humanitarian assistance, non-combatant evacuation, protecting lines of communication and critical resources (which is more ambitious) and conflict prevention (with battlegroup-size forces). Governments may wish that they will only ever face less threatening scenarios, but it is the probable scenarios that we will be obliged to deal with, not those that we would like to deal with, that should determine the composition of the coherent full spectrum force package.

It would make sense, therefore, that the Benelux countries (for the armed forces of Luxembourg are closely integrated with those of Belgium) and the other members of EI2 that are willing to contribute at least a brigade, join the CROC. Vice versa, Italy, as a key member of the CROC, ought to join EI2.

THE CROC, NATO, AND THE EU

As the Baltic focus of one of the EI2 working groups and the launching of PESCO projects on intra-European military mobility and on main battle tanks prove, the various new European defence initiatives are not only about expeditionary operations. Already today, PESCO is de facto being understood as addressing the armed forces of the participating states in their entirety, with the aim of collectively achieving both the EU and NATO levels of ambition in an integrated manner, for territorial defence and expeditionary operations.

NATO planning envisages 3 army corps. The CROC could be one of those. It would be the corps on which the EU objective of strategic autonomy would centre: ready to take its place in the line alongside the non-EU NATO allies in case of an Article 5 scenario, but as ready to be deployed on expeditionary operations outside the EU relying only on the assets of the participating states, or to act to protect Europe in case the mutual defence guarantee of Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union is activated. The CROC could thus comprise both heavy armoured brigades and more rapidly deployable motorised brigades.⁵ This would allow all current participants in E12 to contribute fully to the CROC as well if they so wish.⁶

CONCLUSION: DON'T YIELD TO PESCO-PESSIMISM

Thinking on the CROC currently focuses on land forces and the required enablers. But it is obvious that similar schemes are possible, and necessary, for Europe's naval and air forces as well, which should be added to the CROC. Moreover, a fully operational CROC will require the guaranteed availability of a standing joint command structure, including for scenarios in which the Europeans deploy alone, without non-EU allies.

If we want European defence to advance, we should be truly ambitious. There is no point in

announcing grand multinational initiatives that in terms of the level of ambition do not look beyond what its individual members should already be capable of today. Similarly, every initiative that brings together a subset of the EU-28 should be truly integrative from the start. Otherwise one might as well stay within the purely intergovernmental framework of the CSDP.

Yielding to PESCO-pessimism is easy, but also dangerous. Do we really need more convincing of the fact that nobody, not even the US, will defend our interests for us? That is why the PESCO-realists must be PESCO-optimists.

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop, an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College (ESDC), lectures at Ghent University and heads the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations.

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TABLE

Brigade Formations in the EU-28	
Armoured	7
Mechanised Infantry	22
Infantry	36
Light Infantry	5
Paratroop / Air Mobile / Rapid Reaction	14
Marine Infantry	3
Mountain	6

ENDNOTES

¹ This aim was provisionally stated in the 13 November 2017 Notification Document, in which Member States announced their intention to activate PESCO, but it was already dropped from the 8 December 2017 Council Decision that launched PESCO.

² Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation is an existing example of such organisation in the maritime domain: ships sail under the national flag with a national crew, but support functions are either binational or provided by one nation for both.

³ This includes the digitalisation and the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) into our militaries. In AI overall, Europe can obviously not afford several national projects: if it doesn't want to fall even further behind in this crucial field, there will have to be an integrated EU effort. Similarly, it would make sense for our armed forces to integrate the military applications of digitalisation and AI from the start, via the CROC, instead of launching separate national initiatives.

⁴ Belgium, Estonia, Finland, France, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the UK.

⁵ One could imagine two cores within the CROC, one focusing more on territorial defence and the other on expeditionary operations.

⁶ The UK would likely remain reticent to join such an integrated scheme, but could ensure that its own expeditionary forces in particular are interoperable with the CROC, along the lines of its current cooperation with France in the Combined Joint Expeditionary Force (CJEF) and with Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden in the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF).