



BULLETIN

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Polish-led EU Battle Group

by Marcin Terlikowski

For the next half a year, the Polish-led European Union's Battle Group, with Polish troops comprising half of its personnel, will be on a standby, ready to be immediately sent on a military mission if such a need arises. But the likelihood of the Group's deployment is not high, mainly a result of major weaknesses of the very system under which EU battle groups operate. Overcoming that system's dysfunctionality and rationalizing the mechanisms for generating forces for EU military operations may be the subject of Polish initiatives when this country holds the EU's rotating presidency in 2011.

On 1 January 2010, the standby period began for an EU Battle Group (EUBG) manned by Poland, Germany, Slovakia, Lithuania and Latvia, which was formed under a 2006 agreement between those countries. Battle groups are the rapid response forces of the EU, kept at its exclusive disposal, to be deployed in the most militarily demanding operations under the common security and defense policy (CSDP), in accordance with Article 43 TEU. The battle group system has been in place since 2007: each half-year two groups of no less than 1,500 personnel each are on standby, ready to be deployed within 15 days of an EU Council decision, in the indicated area even several thousand kilometers away from EU borders.

EU Battle Group Structure and Tasks. Poland, the Group's framework nation providing command and half of the force, was in 2007–2009 responsible for most of the organizational matters, such as reaching agreement with partners on the size and types of Group units, and holding maneuvers. Out of the Group's total roll-call of 1,800, 30% comes from Germany (mostly logistic-support and medical units), and 10% each from Slovakia (engineers), Lithuania and Latvia. The Polish contribution comprises primarily staff support and combat units of the 17th Wielkopolska Mechanized Brigade, which have gained experience in Iraq and Afghanistan (some of them are assigned to join the Polish Military Contingent in NATO's Afghan mission in 2011). During the EUBG standby period, these units are stationed in their home countries on heightened alert. If and when a decision is taken on EUBG deployment, the units will be called together and moved, with the force headquarters (FHQ), to mission area, whereas the operational headquarters (OHQ) will be located in Potsdam (whence, in 2006, the EU's mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was run). Also on standby, in parallel with EUBG, is a British-Dutch group.

Under the battle groups' underlying concept, EUBG is to be an entry force, or the first military force moving into a crisis-hit area, with the main task of stabilizing the situation. Due to its extensive combat capabilities, the EUBG will perform the toughest military missions, requiring active security provision (patrolling, setting up guard posts, protecting selected facilities, such as refugee camps) and, if needed, also combat engagement (e.g. fighting off rebel attacks). Just as all battle groups, EUBG is capable of conducting operations for 30–120 days, a period assumed to suffice for completion of the mission. But the EUBG may also be deployed, at an initial phase, as part of a larger international mission better suited to the nature of a given crisis situation (e.g. thanks to an additional civilian component).

Weaknesses of the EU Battle Group System. Even though the battle groups are regarded as the EU's flagship military instrument, they have yet to be put to use. This reflects a lack of member states' will: most are wary of engaging in military operations, especially where the mission carries no

significant weight for their security interests while necessitating major financial and political costs, including a risk of manpower losses, which are likely to come with an operational deployment of battle groups. For this reason, in order to avoid setting precedents that might give rise to the groups' regular deployment in CSDP operations, governments have been blocking deployment attempts. And some member states, mostly for financial reasons, simultaneously put their units on standby for battle groups and also for other similar national defense systems or NATO initiatives. This practice provides an added disincentive for member states to possibly deploy an on-duty battle group, for fear that it would make it more difficult for them to meet other commitments.

Some member states are discouraged by the very nature of this CSDP instrument. The battle groups are meant to be rapid response forces with extended military capabilities, to be deployed in particularly tough conditions. But so far CSDP operations have not required any intensive or swift engagement of EU units, nor have they carried a risk of major escalation of violence. In less demanding missions (in military terms), such as humanitarian, advisory or training missions, the deployment of battle groups would be ineffective and costly (given their specific skills and specialization level). Hence some member states (e.g. Germany and the Netherlands) find it unwarranted to use battle groups in operations of that kind, emphasizing that their deployment should be confined to the gravest crisis situations.

The failure of Sweden's 2008 and 2009 initiatives on battle groups' operational deployment provides a telling example. As the framework nation in the Nordic Battle Group, Sweden proposed in 2008 that the Group be deployed as part of the EU mission in Chad and the Central African Republic. Most member states didn't support this idea, and so Sweden—during its presidency in the latter half of 2009—proposed a more flexible approach, under which a battle group, or its selected elements, could be deployed in typical CSDP missions subject to consent from the constituent countries. The initiative received a skeptical reception in the EU, and the Council, in its 17 November 2009 conclusions on the CSDP, said that the groups' deployment in operations of that kind could only be possible in exceptional circumstances, evaluated on a case-by-case basis and requiring each time a consensus within the EU. The current presidency, Spain, betrays no particular interest in promoting the Swedish initiative.

Conclusions. The battle groups system in its present form is dysfunctional and does not solve the CSDP's foremost issue, i.e. problems with generating military units for missions other than rapid response operations. And in the case of a major crisis in the EU's near vicinity—a crisis requiring quick and energetic reaction—small-sized battle groups might prove insufficient. Consequently, the present system of battle groups is an instrument of limited usefulness, although it is of considerable political importance. The battle groups provide the only military instrument—highly specialized and of multinational nature—at the Union's exclusive disposal, thus offering evidence of progress in CSDP development. That is why many member states are planning to form successive groups in the years ahead. But as shown by the case of Swedish proposals, any far-reaching reforms (including towards the groups' more flexible deployment) are highly unlikely this year.

In these circumstances, given the relatively high level of stability of the security situation in the EU's neighborhood, it is highly unlikely that the Polish-led EUBG might be deployed. But it is not inconceivable that other member states or EU institutions might propose that some EUBG units be used to support ongoing or newly launched CSDP missions. It should be borne in mind that consent would then translate into an EUBG split-up, thus undermining the sense of the efforts put in by Poland and other member states towards its formation. But during its own presidency, Poland should consider initiating work on an overall improvement of the mechanisms to generate military forces for CSDP missions, including the rationalization of the battle groups system.