



# BULLETIN

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## The EU's December Defence Summit: Towards Fragmentation of European Security?

Marcin Terlikowski

*The December European Council summit will debate Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) for the first time in five years. Yet, the summit has never been expected to bring a breakthrough, given that EU members have little appetite for crafting a strategic vision of the EU as a security actor. Consequently the meeting, which may achieve some progress on a practical level, will likely fail to place the proliferating number of vehicles for regional security and defence cooperation under a more rigid European coordination mechanism. Poland, a country concerned about the burden-shifting implications of “mini-lateralism” within the EU, should call for establishing such mechanisms.*

The 19–20 December European Council summit has not been seen as a chance for a new opening in the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or as an opportunity to overcome the structural weakness of the Union, which for the last decade has been unable to fulfil its declarations to become a global strategic actor with really effective actions. Of course, the summit will still be important, even if one takes into account that its agenda has been recently changed and now also involves economic issues. But its importance is largely framed in the negative: it could unwittingly contribute to a gradual weakening of common tools in favour of a fragmented approach lacking an overall communitarian context.

Within the three agreed pillars of discussion—the first, increasing the operational effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP; second, enhancing the development of defence capabilities; and third, strengthening Europe's defence industry—the summit is expected to focus on the latter. Thus, it is almost certain that the European Commission's research funds (Horizon 2020) will be made more widely available for dual-use R&T programmes, and that a set of tools will be created to help small- and medium-sized enterprises contribute to the competitiveness of the European defence sector. As regards the other pillars, the summit is likely to endorse a new, more flexible approach to EU battlegroups, with an aim to make them more generally applicable, less specialised and thereby easier (and cheaper) to deploy. And it will endorse a number of joint capability-development projects, initiated by groups of Member States on mid-air refuelling, remotely piloted aircraft systems (or, simply, drones), satellite communication and cyberdefence. Efforts may also begin on an EU maritime security strategy. All in all, then, this is a mix of long-discussed issues.

**Talks without Discussion.** This modus operandi follows the all-too-familiar logic of building CSDP step by step, introducing technical upgrades and bottom-up processes while avoiding strategic questions about the EU's level of ambition in the field of security and defence. And, as a decade's experience of EU operational activity shows, this approach is unlikely either to bring a qualitative difference in the Union's visibility and effectiveness as a strategic actor, or to improve the bloc's low standing in the international arena, at least not where capacity to engage in solving security crises is concerned. Yet, the indirect effect of the summit might be far more worrisome than “just” petrifying the impasse.

The true problem lies in prolonging the lack of willingness of EU Member States to discuss the security and defence policy instruments provided for by the Treaty of Lisbon. Although these tools are ambitious, the treaty keeps defence as a purely intergovernmental exercise, so the capitals have little reason to approach them with mistrust. Yet, mistrust is precisely what has prevailed to date. Today, even mentioning Lisbon's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) seems to be almost taboo, although a debate on its implementation might have helped establish a badly needed

framework for both the coordination of various ongoing bilateral and multilateral capability-development projects and the synchronisation of cuts in military capabilities. It is no surprise either that the EU has shirked debate about how to translate solidarity and mutual-assistance clauses into concrete mechanisms, although this would have addressed the recurrent problem of support for EU operations. Without this, the composition of the majority of CSDP missions will continue to reflect the national interest of an individual EU Member State in the relevant region.

A debate on all these issues might have taken place in the form of an EU defence and strategic review, an idea shyly mentioned by some experts and Member States. But again, there is no appetite in most capitals to launch this kind of process, let alone to kick off a formal revision of the outdated 2003 European Security Strategy. This undermines the European Council's positive moves, such as the anticipated endorsement of a series of capability-oriented projects, some critical for the operational effectiveness of European forces; without a common strategic vision for CSDP or the readiness to implement the Union's declared ambitions in the security domain, these initiatives may ultimately diminish the role of common tools.

**Fragmentation of European Security.** Building common capabilities between small groups of states or simply through bilateral cooperation is very attractive, since it is less laborious than a multilateral track that needs to accommodate the political, economic and operational interests of many states. But such "mini-lateral" projects may encourage political leaders to bypass international institutions, not only when it comes to developing joint military assets but also in formulating responses to security crises. The NATO mission in Libya started as a French–British endeavour; the stabilisation operation in Mali was conducted almost autonomously by France with the EU drafted in later as a supplementary actor; the would-be operation in Syria was supported by only a handful of European states; and the very recent operation in the Central African Republic was again initiated by France, this time with logistic support from the UK. This tendency is also reinforced by proposals to develop common EU military capabilities that could be used regardless of the international political context, i.e., by the EU, NATO or any coalition of the willing.

If the thinking on European defence follows this path, not only might CSDP all but disappear as an instrument employing military assets but also the security of Europe as a whole may be fragmented and, consequently, diminished. As a result, both the EU and NATO may gradually lose political cohesion, credibility and operational effectiveness: if it is accepted in Europe that it is regional groupings that should develop certain types of military capabilities and intensify cooperation in military education, training, exercises, logistics, procurement etc., then it may be inferred that those groupings are by default responsible for their regional security and their close external neighbourhood. The better the initial results of mini-lateral cooperation projects prove to be, the greater the temptation to regionalise European security and create informal defence-policy consultation mechanisms parallel to existing transatlantic and European structures.

That is why not only EU but also NATO may be affected: seeking its identity anew after withdrawing from Afghanistan, the transatlantic Alliance faces a serious challenge in keeping both the interoperability of its members' forces and their overall interest in investing in common initiatives and projects. Many Allies, engaged in regional military cooperation formats, may be unwilling to treat seriously NATO's defence-planning process. The CSDP and NATO are no longer seen as competitors—both Europeans and the U.S. see these two security policy vehicles as mutually reinforcing and strongly interconnected. This shouldn't come as a surprise. If European states are not willing to discuss the strategic vision for the EU, and instead prefer regional cooperation mechanisms, how can one expect that they will be suddenly willing to take up the same kind of discussion within the Alliance. Consequently, a weak CSDP and an EU unable to play a greater role as a security player mean also a weaker NATO with a less credible European caucus, striving not only to provide the right capabilities but also a coherent strategic concept of what NATO should actually become after 2014.

**Conclusions for Poland.** Poland should try to address these challenges by proposing to place regional capability-development initiatives under a stronger coordination mechanism at the level of the whole EU, as well as to reinforce EU–NATO cooperation in this area. A realistic goal for the last-minute decisions of the summit should be to initiate a defence review process in the EU focused on identifying and registering regional joint capability-development projects and mapping out options for coordinating them better, preferably under the aegis of the EDA. This proposal might be accompanied by an idea to start a broader debate on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty to reinforce CSDP and, in general, the security of the EU, and to initiate it following the European Parliament elections in 2014, when decisions on staffing key EU posts, particularly the High Representative, are at the forefront. With regards to EU–NATO relations, the most meaningful move would be to strengthen the synergies between both organisations' capability-development initiatives (respectively, "smart defence" and "pooling and sharing") and better harmonise exercises used to certify EU battlegroups with the NATO exercises within the "Connected Forces Initiative."