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UN SHIRBRIG and EU Battlegroups

Recommendation to
the European Union
the United Nations

by Joachim Koops

EFFECTIVE MULTILATERALISM

The European Union has since the adoption of the European Security Strategy in December 2003 been eager to stress the importance of its new foreign policy philosophy of Effective Multilateralism.

The upshot of this European vision of international relations lies in the

EU's commitment to a rule-based international order with a capable and credible United Nations system at its core. This means upholding the UN Charter against breaches of its principles and norms, if necessary with military force. Consequently, strengthening the UN, particularly in the field of crisis management and conflict prevention, has become a top priority in the EU's pursuit of Effective Multilateralism.

MAIN POINTS

The EU should ensure its new Battlegroups reinforce the UN's Multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) to strengthen the UN's capacity and authority to maintain international order in accordance with the key principle of its foreign policy vision of Effective Multilateralism.

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In this context, the EU has not only issued numerous EU-UN statements of intention (most notably the Declaration on Cooperation in Crisis Management), but has also moved EU-UN cooperation into the practical realm, most recently by developing the Battlegroup concept.

The OCGG welcomes the potential contributions the EU's development of its own military capacities could make to a more effective global governance system. The swift deployment of EU battlegroups could not only play an important role in reinforcing the UN's many overstretched peace missions – particularly on the African continent – but the very establishment of these autonomous Battlegroups also provides the EU with greater strategic independence and flexibility vis-à-vis NATO and the United States.

However, if the European commitment to UN-centred Effective Multilateralism is to be taken seriously, it is vital the EU's Battlegroup project is not merely advanced in a self-serving vacuum. Instead, close coordination and full harmonisation with the UN's existing – but so far largely neglected – Multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade (SHIRBRIG) is urgently needed to reinvigorate the UN's peacebuilding efforts and to give real meaning to the EU's newly emerging foreign policy objectives.

EU BATTLEGROUPS IN SUPPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS?

First suggested by Germany, Britain, and France (the 'big three' who gave the initial impetus to the European Security Strategy in the first place), the creation of the 1,500 troops strong Battle-groups (either formed by a single nation or composed multinationally by up to four member states) would provide a highly flexible EU military rapid reaction instrument. Deployable within 15 days and sustainable for 1-3 months, these compact EU forces could launch deft but robust UN-support interventions in places as far away as the African continent.

This was aptly demonstrated by the EU mission Artemis. Lasting from June to September 2003, in aid of a UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Artemis has been regarded by the EU as reference point for the kind of operations likely to be undertaken by its Battlegroups in the future.

The most important feature, according to EU policy-makers and defence ministers, is that the 13 Battlegroups, to be operational from January onwards, are specifically designed to be used in response to requests from the UN. The new EU com-

bat units could therefore, as claimed by officials, be deployed under Chapter VII mandates in support of pressurised UN troops. Thus, the EU could be an effective partner in crisis hotspots such as Lebanon and Darfur.

Yet, while this at first sight may look like Effective Multilateralism in the making, a closer and more critical look at the details of the Battlegroup concept arguably reveals a rather reluctant EU and the danger of weakening the UN and undermining the very core principle of Effective Multilateralism itself.

The main EU position paper by Germany, Britain, and France emphasizes that although the Battlegroups are specifically designed for UN support, they are not exclusively formed for such a purpose. The EU reserves the right to decide on a case by case basis whether to reinforce UN undertakings or launch an autonomous operation irrespective of prior UN Security Council authorization. This confronts the UN with the same kind of dilemma it is already facing in its relations with NATO: a high level of uncertainty as to when the UN can rely on another organisation's support and as to whether the principles, authority, and legitimacy of the UN system and international law will be respected.

It would be highly counter-productive to develop Battlegroups with the express aim of reinforcing a rule-based international order with the UN at its core, whilst leaving open the possibility of undermining both with autonomous, unauthorized operations. This would mean that the EU could launch a mission with the declared goal of upholding the principles of the UN Charter whilst violating them with the very same operation.

The insistence on the Battlegroups' autonomy also reinforces another more worrying suspicion that emerges when reviewing the EU declarations and agreements on the topic: the concept could be more about increasing the EU's profile as an international actor and about the advancement of its own deeper integration than about a systematic commitment to bolstering the UN's existing capacities. Whilst deeper European integration in the defence realm is of course to be greeted with enthusiasm, it is nevertheless imperative to be clear about the overall use and application of the emerging EU defence forces: in line with the overall EU foreign policy guiding principle of Effective Multilateralism, the UN has to remain the primary direct beneficiary.

Under the current arrangements, however, EU support for the UN is merely indi-

rect. The UN would still be left in limbo, unable to plan ahead on what kind of permanent troop-pool it could rely on. There is indeed a distinct lack of direct reinforcement of the UN's developing crisis tools on part of the EU. In this light, it is indeed rather puzzling and lamentable that the EU's 'big three' have so far persistently circumnavigated the issue of backing the already existing UN rapid deployment unit on which the EU Battlegroup Concept seems to be modelled: SHIRBRIG – the Multinational Standby High Readiness Brigade for United Nations Operations.

WHAT ABOUT SHIRBRIG?

EU declarations merely point in passing towards the potential of considering 'learned lessons' from SHIRBRIG or the possibility of using it to relieve Battlegroup operations (and, significantly, not the other way round). The most straightforward approach to strengthen the UN – directly committing soldiers and resources to SHIRBRIG's pool – has so far been no way near EU contemplation.

Yet SHIRBRIG, largely neglected by international attention, has been one of the most successful and promising develop-

ments towards an effective standing UN army.

Deployable within 15-30 days and self-sufficiently sustainable for up to 3 months, SHIRBRIG has already undertaken four successful missions (UNMEE, UNMIL, UNAMIS, UNMIS), and could become an effective security provider in more serious conflict zones, such as Darfur.

Founded upon a Danish initiative in 1994, SHIRBRIG was declared fully operational in January 2000 with 16 participating nations (Argentina, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Ireland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden) and 7 observer countries (Chile, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Jordan, Senegal and Portugal). This makes SHIRBRIG the first and only truly multinational, permanent UN combat unit dedicated to Chapter VI and VII missions.

SHIRBRIG focuses in particular on the African continent for its crisis management operations. To this end it works closely together with the African Union (AU) and has already launched several initiatives for enhancing the AU's own rapid response mechanisms. In this sense, SHIRBRIG makes an important contribution to the structural and long-

term stabilisation of one of the world's most war-torn regions.

In the light of the broad coalition of participating countries and given the EU's reiterations of its commitment to enhancing the UN's crisis management capabilities as well as its numerous declarations on strengthening the AU, it is indeed startling that neither of the EU's 'big three' nor the EU as a whole support SHIRBRIG in any way, despite its potentials on the one hand and its urgent need for more manpower and resources on the other.

Instead, despite SHIRBRIG's limited but encouraging deployments so far (to Ethiopia, Liberia, and most recently Sudan), the EU seems to have opted for copying and duplicating the SHIRBRIG model for its own Battlegroups rather than for contributing to the UN brigade directly.

By developing Battlegroups without coordinating with and giving support to SHIRBRIG, the EU appears rather disingenuous and indeed counterproductive in its quest for creating a world order based on Effective Multilateralism. Inadvertently, the EU could thus even undermine the UN's own authority and capacities. This would be exactly the opposite of what the EU's foreign policy philosophy of Effective Multilateralism professes to achieve.

EFFICIENT COORDINATION

The key to a beneficial development of the EU's Battlegroups and to a successful application of Effective Multilateralism – and thus to prevent it from merely becoming an empty policy slogan – lies in 'Efficient Interorganisationalism': the transparent, mutually reinforcing and pragmatic coordination of the different rapid reaction brigades currently developed by the EU, the UN and the AU. It is, first and foremost, the EU's duty to play a leading role in such harmonisation efforts. In particular, it should:

- Fully coordinate the strategic development of its Battlegroups with the needs and experiences of SHIRBRIG and the AU within an integrated framework of UN-centred Effective Multilateralism and the AU-centred African Peace Facility
- Ensure constant and seamless exchange of information, planning and "learned lessons" reports between the military staff of the EU and SHIRBRIG
- Organise, at least bi-annually, joint military training exercises between EU Battlegroups and SHIRBRIG in the field (as a start, invite SHIRBRIG person-

nel to Germany's annual Battlegroup 'Exercise European Endeavour')

- Develop a common early warning mechanism and joint monitoring schemes for the early detection of potential crises

An important first step for effective coordination and cooperation, however, would be the formalisation (such as in the form of the EU-UN Crisis Management Declaration of 2003) of Battlegroup-SHIRBRIG relations on the ground. Those EU Member States, which are both Battlegroup lead-nations and members of SHIRBRIG (such as Sweden, Italy and Spain) are in a particular influential position and should lobby for more EU attention to be given to SHIRBRIG. Italy, which currently holds the rotating presidency of SHIRBRIG, has indeed a special responsibility to promote closer interorganisational cooperation and harmonisation.

The need for close cooperation between the EU, SHIRBRIG, and by implication the AU, should of course not distract from the 'stand alone' value the development of the EU's Battlegroup Concept could have for the international community. In the case of a blatantly unreasonable veto dead-lock in the Security Council when urgent action would be needed,

EU Battlegroups could serve as a flexible and autonomous option of last resort. This, however, should remain the exception rather than the rule.

The EU should not yield to the temptation of launching autonomous military missions simply for the sake of becoming a more visible and respected global actor. The surest way of gaining global respect and recognition is by resolutely following through and implementing its ambitious foreign policy doctrine of UN-centred Effective Multilateralism. But if you want to take Effective Multilateralism more seriously than the self-serving proliferation of your own organisation, then you have to support SHIRBRIG.

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