INTERNATIONAL MILITARY MISSIONS

The EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity
- Raised Ambitions in Military Crisis Management?

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With its 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU signals strengthened ambitions in the security and defence arena. Central to this vision is the new Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), a modified version of the EU Battlegroups from 2007. The RDC proposal is born out of a changing European context, including a deteriorating security situation in and around the continent, as well as a desire to enhance the union's autonomous capabilities. Several measures, including common funding and command and control, are intended to facilitate the use of the RDC. It remains unclear, however, whether the suggested measures are adequate to overcome previous institutional obstacles to rapid deployment. Nevertheless, the creation of the RDC may hold symbolic value and offer possible operational spillover effects.[1]

THE EUROPEAN UNION (EU) is traditionally described as a peace and free trade project. Yet, over the years, the union has made efforts to carve out a place for itself as a security actor in an increasingly competitive world. With its new strategy for a common security and defence policy, the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (hereafter the Strategic Compass), launched in 2022, the EU aims to enhance its influence as a regional and global security actor.[2]

Crisis management has been a central way for the EU to demonstrate its ability to shoulder global security responsibilities. In recent years, the EU's military crisis management portfolio has predominantly focused on training and capacity building of partner states. However, the Strategic Compass presents increased ambitions in other aspects of military crisis management through the development of a new Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC). Comprised of 5,000 troops, the RDC is meant to enable the EU to react to threats and crises outside the union.[3] The RDC is based on the EU Battlegroup format, which launched in 2007, but has never been deployed.

This memo examines the EU's intention to be a stronger military crisis management actor, with a focus on the RDC. The analysis is guided by two questions:

- *Why* is the EU choosing to strengthen its military crisis management ambitions at this particular moment?
- *How* is the RDC meant to meet these strengthened ambitions?

The study is based on a qualitative content analysis of interviews with practitioners and researchers who work on the RDC and EU's military crisis management.[4] The interview data was supplemented by official documents regarding the Strategic Compass and its preparatory processes, as well as documents concerning, for example, the EU Battlegroups and the 2016 *Global Strategy*

1 This memo is produced within FOI's project on International Military Missions, commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Defence. The authors are grateful to Dr Laura Chappell and colleagues at FOI for their feedback on an earlier version of the text.

2 EEAS. *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security.* 21 March 2022.

3 EEAS. *A Strategic Compass*.

4 The authors conducted 12 semi-structured interviews in Brussels and Stockholm with practitioners from the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Council, the EU Military Staff (EUMS), the permanent representation to the EU of Sweden, as well as researchers from the Egmont Institute, the European Policy Centre (EPC), the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).

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for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy (hereafter the Global Strategy), for historical reference. The analysis also draws on existing academic and policy literature concerning the EU's crisis management, with a particular focus on the EU Battlegroups and the RDC.

The next section provides a brief background of the EU's evolving role in military crisis management since its inception. The ensuing section explores the contextual conditions that motivate *why* the EU seeks a stronger role within military crisis management in general and rapid reaction in particular. By considering a number of conditions for implementation, the analysis then addresses *how* the RDC intends to live up to these ambitions. Finally, the concluding discussion offers reflections on how the RDC can be understood within the broader development of the EU's security and defence toolkit.

Background – The EU and military crisis management

The EU's foreign, security and defence policy has developed rapidly since its early formulations in the late 1990s. Crisis management, both civilian and military, has been a key feature of this development and has become one of the main ways in which the EU projects power and influence outside of the union.[5] Although the EU has conducted more civilian missions and operations, military crisis management has grown significantly since the union's first military operation, in 2003.

The EU's evolution within military crisis management showcases both the opportunities and the challenges it faces in carving a greater role for itself as an external security actor. As early as 1992, the members of the EU's predecessor, the Western European Union, agreed on the Petersburg Declaration, which outlined the possibilities for acting outside the union in different types of situations, ranging from conflict prevention to military crisis management. The tasks were specified in the Helsinki Headline Goal agreed in 1999; it included plans to create a European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF), comprised of 60,000 troops deployable within 60 days. Originally intended to reach full operational capability (FOC) by 2003, the ERRF was never declared fully operational.

In 2003, the EU carried out its first ever military operation (Concordia). It took over the responsibilities of NATO's operation in Macedonia, including the use of NATO's operational headquarters (OHQ). The EU's operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Artemis) later the same year represented the union's first military deployment conducted outside of the European continent and without the help of NATO.[6] Involving 2,000 soldiers, overseen and managed by a French OHQ, Operation Artemis is widely seen as paving the way for the creation of the EU Battlegroups a year later. The EU Battlegroups were based on an infantry battalion force of 1,500 troops, which were to be deployable within 5–10 days and supported by strategic enablers through air and sea power. While they were declared operational in 2007, the EU Battlegroups have never been used.[7]

The EU has nonetheless continued to launch both military and civilian crisis management operations beyond the union's territory. Since Operation Artemis in 2003, the EU has conducted military operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR Althea); the DRC (EUFOR RD Congo); Chad and the Central African Republic (EUFOR Tchad/RCA); Somalia (EUNAVFOR Atalanta); and the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR Med Sophia, Irini).[8] The tasks have ranged from facilitating humanitarian aid, as in Tchad/RCA, to counterpiracy, as in Operation Atalanta. However, most of the military operations have been limited in size, scope, mandate and ambition, both as a result of cumbersome bureaucratic processes as well as disagreements between member states. Furthermore, the EU has remained averse to risk in its military deployments, avoiding the most dangerous conflict zones and the peaks of conflicts.[9]

Alongside its military operations, the EU has also conducted several training missions, in which EU military personnel train, mentor and advise security and defence forces of partner states. Through its training missions, the EU is able to provide assistance to partner states while at the same time avoiding the risks

5 Krotz, Ulrich and Wright, Katerina. "CSDP Military Operations" in Meijer, Hugo, and Marco Wyss (eds), *The Handbook of European Defence Policies and Armed Forces*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

6 Fahron-Hussey, Claudia. *Military Crisis Management Operations by NATO and the EU: The Decision-Making Process*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019.

7 Granholm, Niklas and Jonson, Pål. *EU Battlegroups in Context: Underlying Dynamics, Military and Political Challenges.* Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2006.

8 EEAS. *Missions and Operations*. 23 January 2023.

9 Krotz & Wright, *CSDP Military Operations*.

and force protection demands involved in partaking in kinetic military operations.[10] The first EU Training Mission (EUTM) was launched in 2010 to train and advise Somali soldiers in Uganda, but has since moved to the Somali capital, Mogadishu. Since then, the EU has conducted training and capacity building missions in support of the partner forces of Mali (EUTM), the Central African Republic (EUTM), Mozambique (EUTM), Niger (EUMPM) and Ukraine (EUMAM). Their record in improving security on the ground is mixed, at best, partly due to significant shortfalls in personnel and equipment as well as tensions with partner states.[11] Additionally, the EUTMs do not offer the flexibility to tailor the EU's offering to a partner's needs. The fact that the EU has continued to receive requests for training from partner states may nonetheless offer some indication of success.

Over the years, the EU has steadily created structures to facilitate its provision of military crisis management support to partner states. With the Lisbon Treaty, in 2008, EU member states laid the foundations for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and created the European External Action Service (EEAS) to oversee civilian and military crisis management missions and operations. In 2017, the EU established the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) to assume command of all non-executive training missions. In 2021, the EU launched the European Peace Facility (EPF), an off-budget financial instrument that reimburses member states for financing military assistance packages to partner countries. Later the same year, the EU piloted a concept entitled Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) to coordinate the deployment of EU member states' naval and air assets in the Gulf of Guinea in response to an increase in piracy and armed robbery of vessels in the region.

These developments have taken place against a backdrop of wider discussions surrounding the EU's role as a global security actor. Since the French-British St. Malo Summit in 1998, there have been calls for the EU to develop the capability to conduct military actions autonomously. The EU's efforts have, for the past decade, often been framed as part of a broader pursuit of "strategic autonomy". Often left undefined, strategic autonomy can be seen as envisioning the EU assuming greater responsibility for its security and defence while hedging against strategic uncertainties.[12] The 2016 Global Strategy accordingly emphasised the need for autonomous capabilities to respond to external crises.[13] The fact that the EU's military crisis management efforts have entailed some overlap with NATO's out-of-area operations has contributed to concerns among certain member states that the EU's activities risk duplicating NATO, or challenging its primacy for European defence.

In March 2022, just weeks after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU published the Strategic Compass, its new security and defence strategy. Organised into four thematic areas (Act, Secure, Invest and Partner), the purpose of the Strategic Compass is to provide guidance on how to attain more "robust capabilities and willingness to use them."[14] Moreover, it aims to guide the necessary development of the EU's security and defence agenda for the next ten years and demonstrate the union's clear ambition to strengthen its role in the military arena. The Strategic Compass emphasises the need for the union to have a substantive ability to conduct military missions and operations so that it can respond and react to threats and crises outside the union. The RDC is presented as key to realising this vision. According to the Strategic Compass, the RDC will be a modular force composed of 5,000 troops, including land, air and maritime components, in addition to strategic enablers.

A gap to fill – Why the EU aims to step up as a military crisis manager

Previous efforts to establish rapid reaction capabilities, such as the ERRF and the EU Battlegroups, have stalled, while the EU has in large part focused its military crisis management ambitions elsewhere. Why, then, is the EU choosing to strengthen its rapid reaction capabilities at this particular time? In order to comprehend the EU's trajectory, it is necessary to situate the RDC initiative in a broader context. Four contextual factors, which all reflect and reveal capacity deficits in different

10 In contrast to military operations, training missions have a non-executive mandate, meaning that the EU is supporting the host nation in an advisory role. Operations, on the other hand, have an executive mandate, meaning that they may conduct actions on behalf of the host state. Council of the European Union. *European Union Concept for EU-led Military Operations and Missions*. 19 December 2014.

11 Hagström Frisell, Eva and Sjökvist, Emma. *To Train and Equip Partner Nations – Implications of the European Peace Facility.* Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2021.

12 Fiott, Daniel. *Strategic autonomy: towards 'European sovereignty' in defence?* EUISS Brief. 2018.

13 EEAS. *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe: A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*. Brussels: EEAS. 2016.

14 EEAS. *A Strategic Compass*, p. 5.

ways, are central to understanding this development: the EU's difficulties in adequately responding to sudden and dramatic international events; the US shifting strategic focus; NATO's de-prioritisation of out-of-area operations; and the war in Ukraine.

Firstly, a number of dramatic and salient events put the spotlight on crucial deficits in the EU's resources and capabilities. During the Libya crisis, in 2011, the EU Battlegroup on standby was a land-based group. In the discussions leading up to the eventual international response to the crisis, it became evident that the battlegroup at hand was unsuitable for the amphibious character of the operation and that such an operation could not be successful without US and NATO support. In addition, there was internal EU opposition, both from Germany as well as from the High Representative, Catherine Ashton, to forceful military action.[15] In the end, individual EU member states still provided different types of assistance, such as air support, to NATO's Operation Unified Protector.[16] It is telling that the NATO option was ultimately more feasible than using the EU Battlegroups; this reflects a number of inherent problems, not least the lack of flexibility and internal resistance among EU member states. A more recent example is the failure of European states to independently handle the evacuation from Kabul, which once more highlighted the dependence of EU states on the US for strategic enablers, such as airlift and intelligence.[17]

Taken together, these experiences stress the urgent need for the EU to be able to take rapid military action tailored to the specific needs of a certain situation, where a minimum expectation is the ability to evacuate its own citizens. The problem is that, as a result of rapid reductions in national defence capabilities following the end of the Cold War, no EU member state has the full range of military capabilities to handle all scenarios on its own.[18] In theory, this could be remedied by a comprehensive EU response. At the same time, the experiences of trying to deploy the EU Battlegroups showed a need for something different.

Secondly, and closely related, there is concern in Europe over the sustainability of the US' military commitment to the continent. When Donald Trump won the US presidential election in 2016, it ignited uncertainty as to the direction that the US was heading in and how reliable it was as an ally.[19] Although the transatlantic relationship has strengthened during the Biden administration, the US is gradually continuing to shift its attention to strategic competition with China, which it perceives as its greatest long-term threat. The result is that the level of support that has been provided to European partners during the past decades is increasingly being called into question in Washington, with calls for other actors on the continent to do more.[20] The arguments heard in Europe include that the US cannot shoulder all crises; that Europe should take the lead in providing security along its own periphery; and that, in terms of its defence, Europe must shoulder a greater share of the burden.[21]

As these calls grow stronger, a number of member states, with France in the lead, have advocated for stronger European integration and a more authoritative union under the banner of strategic autonomy. Europe, it is said, needs to answer Washington's calls to take greater responsibility for the continent's security and defence, including in its neighbourhood. The EU's objective of having its own military capabilities and ability to act independently can partly be interpreted as a form of hedging against a scenario in which, over time, the US withdraws from Europe.[22] The enthusiasm for strategic autonomy is not shared equally, however; certain member states, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe, have questioned whether full strategic autonomy is possible or even desirable in the EU's case.

15 Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023; Reykers, Yf. "No supply without demand: Explaining the absence of the EU Battlegroups in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic," *European Security*, 25:3, 346-365, 2016.

16 Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023; Lindström, Madelene & Zetterlund, Kristina. *Setting the Stage for the Military Intervention in Libya – Decisions made and their implications for the EU and NATO*. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2012.

17 Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

18 Hagström Frisell, Eva & Sjökvist, Emma. *Military Cooperation Around Framework Nations: A European Solution to the Problem of Limited Defence Capabilities.* Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2019.

19 Interview with practitioner, 26 April 2023; Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

20 Rossbach, Niklas H. "Threats against the West and the future of transatlantic relations," in Lundén et al. (eds.) *Strategic Outlook 9 Future Threats.* Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2021.

21 Interview with researcher, 25 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023; Sjökvist, Emma & Hagström Frisell, Eva. *Rethinking European Military Engagements Abroad*.

22 Biscop, Sven. "Mogherini and the Holy Grail. The quest for European strategic autonomy," in Haar, Roberta et al. *The Making of European Security Policy: Between Institutional Dynamics and Global Challenges*. Routledge. 2021; Fiott, Daniel. *Strategic autonomy: Towards "European sovereignty" in defence?*; Interview with practitioner 27 April 2023.

The EU thus also recognises the importance of being considered a credible and attractive US partner in all areas, especially in military situations.

Thirdly, NATO is perceived as shifting away from crisis management/out-of-area operations towards deterrence and the defence of allied territory. This shift has implications for the EU.[23] Traditionally, the two organisations have had an inherent difference in scope and focus. Territorial defence of Europe has always been an essential task for NATO, and one that the EU has not had any serious ambition to encroach upon. In the same way, NATO does not venture into civilian crisis management operations, an area that the EU has extensively engaged in. Military crisis management, however, is an area where the two organisations have had operational overlap during the past two decades.[24]

NATO's return to its primary task of deterrence and defence thus potentially leaves a gap in conducting military crisis management outside of NATO territory, a gap that the EU could or should fill, or where it could at least function as a stronger complement to NATO. With that said, there is also an imminent risk of creating a duplication of NATO commitments. In relation to the RDC, for instance, the member states do not have an unlimited number of troops available on standby; it will be a challenge to meet both NATO and EU requirements at the same time.[25]

Fourthly, all this must be understood against the backdrop of a significantly altered European security landscape, which lends heightened salience to all other contextual factors. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has ignited a deep re-evaluation of European security at large. Accordingly, the Security Compass' foreword, by High Representative and Vice President (HR/VP) Josep Borrell, includes formulations such as "Europe is in even more danger than we thought just a few months ago . . . we now need to ensure that we turn the EU's geopolitical awakening into a more permanent strategic posture"[26]

Along these lines, interviewees consistently referred to the war in Ukraine and the accelerated threat from Russia as game-changers for the development of Europe as a more sovereign actor in the defence field.[27] Not only has the war in Ukraine been yet another reminder that the EU must be able to act on its own, it has also led to tangible changes. One significant development is that it has increased the member states' willingness to financially contribute to the EPF. As a result, the EU mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM) has been formed to involve both training and direct support with military equipment.[28]

In sum, the EU is motivated by both external and internal factors to take on more responsibility for military crisis management in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. These motivations are a product of necessity, as outlined above, as well as of the ambition to be a more credible actor in the security field. In this context, the RDC stands out as a prominent example of a tool the EU is using to carve out a credible position in the landscape of military crisis management.

The Rapid Deployment Capacity – Overcoming the lack of political will?

The RDC is intended to strengthen the EU's capacity to respond quickly to crises in non-permissive environments. How is the RDC meant to meet this ambition? Below follows a discussion of the origins of the RDC and of the different conditions that are intended to enable its future deployment.

Although profiled as a new initiative, the RDC is largely based on the existing EU Battlegroup format that, at its launch in 2007, was hailed as a game-changer for European security and defence integration, but that has remained on standby and unused ever since. This is despite several instances, including in Chad (2008), Ivory Coast (2010), Libya (2011), Mali (2013) and the Central African Republic (2014), in which its use was

23 Interviews with practitioners, 26 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023; Koivula, Tommi. "Carry that weight: Assessing continuity and change in NATO's burden-sharing disputes," in *Defense & Security Analysis*, 37:2, 145–163. 2021.

24 Fahron-Hussey, *Military Crisis Management Operations by NATO and the EU.*

25 Brieger, Robert (2022). "We need to enhance cooperation, at all levels." *European Defence Matters*. Issue 23. Interview with researcher, 25 April 2023; Interview with practitioner, 26 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

26 EEAS. *A Strategic Compass*. p. 4.

27 Interview with practitioner, 25 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 25 April 2023; Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023.

28 Interview with practitioner, 25 April 2023; Interviews with practitioners, 26 April 2023; Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023.

specifically requested by member states.[29] The non-use of the EU Battlegroups has been extensively analysed and, among other factors, attributed to: a lack of flexibility and availability of operational headquarters on high readiness; inadequate and unfair funding mechanisms; and insufficient planning and decision-making procedures.[30] Ultimately, these factors are seen as contributing to the member states' lack of political will to deploy the battlegroups.

Conceptually, the RDC thus originated from the understanding that the EU's existing security and defence instruments were insufficient for the evolving needs. Indeed, among EU officials who were interviewed in Brussels as part of this study, the non-deployment of the EU Battlegroups remained one of the recurring motivations for the composition of the RDC.[31] Where the idea first originated is difficult to establish, however. Analysts have pointed to a proposal by 14 member states in a Foreign Affairs Council meeting in May 2021.[32] Several interviewees claimed that the idea originated from HR/VP Josep Borrell.[33] Notwithstanding that, the concept was discussed and developed by member states during the process of drafting the Strategic Compass.[34] When designing the RDC, the EU inserted a number of new conditions intended to overcome the structural flaws that hindered deployment of the EU Battlegroups.

A modular force under EU command

The RDC will be based on substantially modified EU Battlegroups, meaning that the structure is largely already in place. Ultimately, the decision was taken to build on an existing concept instead of starting afresh, despite initial opposition by certain member states, given the apparent flaws.[35] One of the main distinguishing features of the RDC is that it will be a modular force as opposed to the EU Battlegroups' fixed force structure. The idea is that the RDC will consist of tailored force packages, composed of land, air, and maritime components, as well as strategic enablers. In theory, this structure is intended to allow flexibility, ensuring that the RDC can be adapted to the operational requirements at hand in a specific crisis. However, the actual level of flexibility will be determined by the composition of the national force packages on standby.

According to current ambitions, the RDC should be fully operational by 2025. The EU's MPCC will be used for command and control (C2), and must therefore also reach FOC by then. The use of a centralised C2 function is a departure from the battlegroup format, in which the OHQ was subject to change with each new rotation. This was associated with a number of issues, not least the time and resources needed to activate and staff national OHQs on a rotational basis. In 2010, for instance, the EU Battlegroup was considered for enabling evacuation from the Ivory Coast, but the lack of an active OHQ meant that the process would have taken too long.[36]

A preferable alternative is to enact a standing and permanent C2 structure. According to the Strategic Compass, the MPCC should be able to "plan and conduct all non-executive military missions and two small-scale or one medium-scale executive operation/s as well as live exercises" by 2025.[37] Until now, the MPCC has only commanded non-executive military training missions, despite an earlier Council agreement that the MPCC should, by 2020, be able to provide C2 to one battalion-sized executive operation.[38] The problem is that the MPCC has neither been adequately funded nor sufficiently staffed for the task. In part, the role of the MPCC has remained limited due to resistance among certain member states to the EU's assuming operational

29 For an overview of these instances, see Meyer, Christoph, Van Osch, Ton and Reykers, Yf. *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: This time, it's for real?* European Parliament, October 2022, p. 6.

30 Reykers, Yf. "EU Battlegroups: From standby to standstill." In J. Karlsrud, & Y. Reykers (eds.), *Multinational Rapid Response Mechanisms: From Institutional Proliferation to Institutional Exploitation* (1 ed., pp. 41–56). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. Global Institutions Series. 2019; Zandee, Dick and Stoetman, Adája; Meyer, et. al. *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: This time, it's for real?* European Parliament, October 2022; *Realising the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity: Opportunities and pitfalls*, Clingendael Policy Brief, October 2022.

31 Interviews with practitioners, 25, 26 and 27 April 2023.

32 Chappell, Laura. "From the EU Battlegroup Concept to the Rapid Deployment Capacity: A Gear Change in the EU's Rapid Deployment Capabilities?" *EU Radio,* 19 May 2023; Council of the European Union. Outcome of the Council Meeting: 3791st Council Meeting, Foreign Affairs. 6 May 2021.

33 Interviews with practitioners, 26 April 2023; Borrell, Josep. "What's next for European defence?" *EEAS*, 7 May 2021.

34 Interviews with practitioners, 26 April 2023.

35 Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

36 Meyer et. al. *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.*

37 EEAS. *A Strategic Compass.* P. 30.

38 Council of the European Union. *Council conclusions on Security and Defence in the context of the EU Global Strategy*, 19 November 2018.

command, which may in turn have contributed to mistrust in the EU's C2 structure.[39]

According to an annual progress report released by the EEAS, efforts are underway to strengthen the MPCC, including by increasing staffing levels and ensuring proper communications and information systems.[40] However, even if understaffing of the MPCC is remedied, the MPCC is limited in its function by its current location, which is neither large enough nor fit for a military headquarters. There are plans to relocate to a new building, which might minimise the infrastructure obstacle.[41] Nonetheless, the MPCC's limitations to date and the short timeframe suggest that it will be a challenge to reach the goals set in the Strategic Compass.

The EEAS develops operational scenarios with the intention of facilitating the MPCC and the RDC in reaching FOC by 2025. The first live exercise was conducted in October 2023 in Spain, with Spanish, French, Portuguese, Irish, and Romanian assets and personnel totalling 2800 troops. The scenario for the live exercise was the initial phase of a stabilisation operation in a fictitious country outside the EU's borders, which included maritime, air, and land forces as well as space and cyber capabilities.[42] Even if operational challenges faced during the exercise are unlikely to be made public, it is already clear that the number of participating troops is far below the target for the RDC. This raises the question of how willing member states are to contribute to this format, at least for the time being.

Greater sharing of costs and resources

A common conclusion in analyses of the EU Battlegroup concept is that insufficient funding and resources have contributed to the lack of deployment. The main reason posited is that the EU Battlegroups suffered from a lack of common cost mechanisms; it is up to the member state(s) on standby to cover the cost of deployment, in accordance with the principle "costs lie where they fall." On a national level, member states have not budgeted for such costs, leading to an assumption of non-use, which, in turn, entrenches a negative precedent.[43] This dynamic has been described not only as hindering deployment but also as undermining the EU's spirit of solidarity and cooperation.[44]

According to the Strategic Compass, the RDC will benefit from an extension in the scope of common costs, although what this means in practice has not been disclosed. Interviewees describe the EPF as a game changer and as the single most important difference in terms of implementation conditions for the RDC compared to the EU Battlegroups.[45] The EPF financed the live exercise in 2023, for instance.[46] Additionally, since the EPF has been used to finance military assistance to Ukraine, there seems to be political will among member states to increase the funding. At the same time, however, given the proportion of the EPF that has been directed towards assistance to Ukraine, there is a risk that there will not be adequate funding for the RDC and MPCC. With that in mind, there may be a need for a sustainable financing solution for the RDC beyond the EPF budget.[47]

The Strategic Compass notes an ambition to ramp up personnel contributions to both the MPCC and the RDC. However, other CSDP missions and operations, notably the EUTM, have suffered from significant personnel vacancies that have rendered certain parts non-operational.[48] At the same time that Europeans are launching the RDC, they are meant to make up the majority of the new NATO Force Model, comprised of 300,000 troops in a high state of readiness.[49] Under the "single set of forces" principle, member states have one pool of forces to draw from for contributions to the EU, NATO, or other formats. In the context of still-limited defence capabilities among European states, it is easy

39 Interview with researcher, 26 April 2023; Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

40 EEAS. *Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic compass for Security and Defence*. March 2023.

41 Reykers, Yf & Adriaensen, Johan. "The politics of understaffing international organisations: The EU Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)," *European Security*, 32:4.

42 EEAS. *MILEX23: EU carries out first military live exercise in Cádiz*. 16 October 2023. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/milex23-eu-carries-out-first-military-live-exercise-c%C3%A1diz_en, accessed 14 November 2023.

43 Meyer et. al. *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.*

44 European Parliament. *Resolution of 19 April 2023 on the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity, EU Battlegroups and Article 44 TEU: The way forward (2022/2145(INI))*.

45 Interview with practitioner, 25 April 2023; Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023.

46 Kayali, Laura. EU troops storm the beaches as bloc aims to be military player. *POLITICO.* 28 October 2023.

47 Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023.

48 Hagström Frisell & Sjökvist, *To Train and Equip Partner Nations.*

49 Biscop, Sven. *The New Force Model: NATO's European Army?* Egmont Policy Brief 285, Egmont Institute. 8 September 2022.

to imagine that this may further limit the number of troops available to the RDC.[50]

Even though it is expected to be costly, interviewees have reasoned that the RDC may also reduce overall costs through potential spillover effects. Enhanced command structures, force generation, preplanning, and preparatory decision-making are all examples of measures that may benefit EU security measures in general and enhance the ability to act in the event of a crisis, even if not in the framework of the RDC.[51] Although never deployed, the EU Battlegroups had an impact on the national level in certain member states. In Sweden, for instance, the formation of the Swedish-led battlegroup was at the time seen as an important aspect of the armed forces' new mission-based defence concept.[52] Participating in international missions has in turn contributed to greater interoperability between the Armed Forces' and those of European partners.[53]

Enhanced planning and scenario discussions

The Strategic Compass presents the RDC as suitable for different phases of operations in a non-permissive environment; specific examples include initial entry, reinforcement, or a reserve force to secure an exit.[54] It is no coincidence that these examples correspond to recent failures to mount a coordinated EU response to crises in its neighbourhood, such as those in Kabul, Libya, and Sudan. Moreover, operational scenarios have been developed for the RDC during 2022 and 2023, including a rescue and evacuation operation, as well as an operation in the initial phase of stabilisation. These scenarios reflect the desire for a relatively small force with a limited operational scope. For instance, the capacity to secure an airport was a recurring example brought up in interviews with officials in Brussels.[55] The RDC is thus neither intended nor designed for extended stabilisation operations in hostile environments, not to mention reinforcement of deterrence and defence in a European context.[56]

The Strategic Compass was largely driven by member states, as opposed to the EU's previous defence strategy document, the Global Strategy, which was perceived as the institutional project of the EEAS.[57] In theory, this dynamic should lead to greater ownership by the member states of the goals contained therein.[58] This is important, seeing as deploying the RDC will require a political decision by the European Council, which is comprised of member states with different interests and threat perceptions. What seems like a crisis of strategic concern for one group of member states may not motivate the same level of engagement in others whose interests predominantly lie in another region, for example.

The development of operational scenarios and holding regular live exercises will be used to facilitate strategic and operational discussions among member states, ultimately enabling political decision-making in the event of a crisis. The current operational scenarios lead to different plans depending on the conditions in the region and country of concern. Subsequently, this planning will in turn further lead to the development of contingency plans that have been pre-accepted by the Council.[59] Such efforts are intended to overcome traditional sensitivities about discussing possible regional scenarios.[60] Indeed, scholars have pointed to the lack of a coherent European strategic culture as a factor that hindered the effectiveness of the EU Battlegroups.[61]

The EU is working on measures to enable the Council's decision-making process to become quicker and more flexible, such as through constructive abstention, whereby member states may dissent from an initiative without vetoing it. However, even if the Council approves deployment, it is ultimately the member state(s) on standby that decide to deploy the troops, since the personnel and capabilities are at their behest.

50 Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

51 Interview with practitioner 26 April 2023.

52 Swedish National Audit Office. *Summary: The Nordic Battlegroup 2008 – a part of the EU's rapid reaction capability*, 2010.

53 Hagström Frisell, Eva and Nykvist, Björn. *Building interoperability with partners - Swedish lessons from international military missions.* Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2021.

54 EEAS. A Strategic Compass.

55 Interviews with practitioners, 26 April 2023.

56 Interviews with practitioners, 26 April 2023.

57 Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

58 Interview with researcher, 16 May 2023.

59 Interview with practitioner, 27 April 2023.

60 Interview with researcher, 26 April 2023.

61 Chappell, Laura. "Differing member state approaches to the development of the EU Battlegroup Concept: implications for CSDP." *European Security*, Vol 18, No. 4. 2009.

Among member states, there are different national approval processes for military actions. As pointed out in previous analyses, national debates within the parliaments and publics of member states regarding the commitment involved in the RDC and the potential for deployment are important to facilitate political decision-making.[62] Without clear decision-making procedures for the RDC, it risks becoming a paper tiger.[63]

One option is that the Council approves action by a coalition of willing member states to undertake tasks on behalf of the EU under Article 44 of the Treaty. While this would still require a unanimous decision by the Council, it could allow member states to support EU action without directly taking part, which could be useful in domestically sensitive cases. Ad hoc coalitions of individual EU member states have been common in a number of previous situations, but with Article 44, this could be done under an EU flag that gives the coalition more legitimacy and access to EU funding and expertise. It should be noted, however, that Article 44 has thus far never been used and that concerns have been raised that it could undermine the EU's integrated approach as an external crisis manager.[64] It is furthermore unclear whether the activation of Article 44 would help to enhance the credibility of the EU, since it could indicate that there are political divisions among member states regarding how to respond to a crisis.

Rapid reaction – An operational tool or a strategic symbol?

This memo outlines the context, origins, aims and conditions for implementation of the EU's rapid deployment ambitions in order to examine *why* the EU is choosing to strengthen its military crisis management ambitions at this particular time, and *how* the RDC is meant to meet this ambition. Below is a summary of the findings, followed by concluding reflections.

Why is the EU choosing to strengthen its military crisis management ambitions now? This analysis suggests that the EU sees both an opportunity and a responsibility to step up as an international crisis manager. In part, this stems from previous experiences in which the EU Battlegroups could have been used but were not, for both practical and political reasons. A changing security landscape, meanwhile, demands that the union be able to take rapid military action. This includes shifting American strategic priorities, NATO's turning away from out-of-area operations, and accelerated aggression from Russia. The accumulation of these circumstances has created a current "window of opportunity," or perhaps a "window of necessity," for the EU to strengthen its military crisis management ambitions.

How is the RDC meant to meet this ambition? The RDC represents a robust and targeted capability to function in an explicit conflict situation. The EU intends to remedy revealed deficits in the EU Battlegroups by increasing flexibility through modular force packages, enacting a centralised OHQ, distributing costs more fairly, and preparing on the basis of concrete scenarios. Rapid reaction capabilities are evidently seen as an important part of the EU's military crisis management toolkit, despite their shortcomings to date. However, it is not evident that the measures intended to lessen the institutional obstacles to deploying the EU's rapid reaction are adequate. The difficulty in achieving rapid decision-making is one aspect; the delays in establishing C2 structures is another.

Even under perfect institutional conditions, the fact remains that the EU is constituted by its member states; the efficiency and effectiveness of its international and military crisis response will ultimately depend on their will. This memo echoes previous research that argues that political will is in fact decisive for the RDC's future prospects.[65] The early EU consensus regarding support to Ukraine shows that when there is political will, there is a way. Nonetheless, the willingness to engage in different countries and regions varies across members. Furthermore, member states have different reputations and positions abroad (resulting from colonial heritage, for example). When crises emerge in the future, ad hoc coalitions between a smaller group of states will therefore probably still be an attractive option. In other words, despite efforts to overcome bureaucracy, true rapidity seems difficult to achieve when 27 member states need to be in agreement.

In the coming years, EU member states will be expected to address different types of capability shortfalls at the national level in order to provide personnel,

62 Meyer et. al. *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity*.

63 Blockmans, Steven, Macchiarini Crosson, Dylan and Paikin, Zachary. *The EU's Strategic Compass – A guide to reverse strategic shrinkage?* CEPS Policy Insights, March 2022; Zandee & Stoetman, *Realising the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.*

64 EEAS. *Shared Vision, Common Action;* European Parliament*, Resolution of 19 April 2023*; Meyer et al., *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity*.

65 Meyer et al., *The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity*; Mustasilta, Katariina. *The EU's external conflict responses: Drivers and emerging trends in the era of strategic competition*. FIIA Working Paper 135. 2023; Zandee & Stoetman, *Realising the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity.*

equipment, and strategic enablers for the RDC and its support structures.[66] At the same time, NATO's shift towards deterrence and defence will place demands on European NATO allies. Given that European states do not have an unlimited number of troops available at high readiness, it may be a challenge to meet RDC requirements.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that while there is a serious ambition to make the RDC deployable, it might be even more relevant and appropriate to view this new instrument as one part of a larger process. The RDC can be instrumental at both the operational and the strategic levels. To actually make use of the RDC and put it into practice is just one, and perhaps not the most important, of several aims of the new rapid reaction force. Regardless of whether the RDC will ever be used in an evacuation, stabilisation, or any other crisis situation, it is nevertheless an important vehicle for the EU to strengthen capabilities, enhance interoperability and contacts between member states, develop a common understanding, and brand the EU as a military crisis manager in the international arena. In other words, it might be fruitful to understand the RDC not only in terms of what it can do but also in terms of what it represents.

At the same time, this argument could also be used when assessing the impact of the EU Battlegroups, which tend to be viewed through the lens of their non-deployment rather than praised for their symbolic effects. Therefore, if the RDC indeed meets the same fate as the Battlegroups and is never used in a crisis situation, there is an imminent risk that it will become yet another symbol for the union's difficulties to unite and take action. ■

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66 European Parliament. *Resolution of 19 April 2023.*