

Expanding horizons: the EU's growing military footprint

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Over the past two years the EU's military operations have increased considerably, with the latest counter-migrant mission in the Mediterranean illustrating its growing ambitions to protect the continent's security. Tim Ripley reports on the expanding mission set that is putting the organisation to the test at all levels, politically, operationally, and tactically

In the run-up to many EU summits there is typically media speculation that the organisation's leaders are set to form a so-called 'Euro Army'. While the European heads of government invariably deny that the union has ambitions to become a military power, over the past 20 years they have set in train a series of initiatives that have seen the EU take on an increasing number of military activities.

Several thousand military personnel working under the banner of the EU can now be found in missions across three continents and at sea in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. These range from monitoring and police-capacity-building missions to military training, counter-piracy, peacekeeping, and maritime interdiction operations.

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Origins

The growing involvement of the EU in military affairs gathered momentum in the 1990s with the demise of the Soviet Union and the withdrawal of a significant number of US military personnel from Europe. Famously in 1991, just as the Yugoslav conflict was igniting, Jacques Poos, the foreign affairs minister of Luxembourg and president of the EU Council, declared that the "hour of Europe" had arrived. His optimism that Europe could bring peace to the Balkans was short-lived, however, and ultimately NATO intervention, with strong US involvement, proved instrumental in bringing peace to the region.

The route to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has therefore been evolutionary in nature. During the late 1990s the Western European Union military planning staff, the origins of which stretch back to 1954 and the so-called 'St Petersburg tasks' for humanitarian operations and peacekeeping, were subsumed into the CSDP. This was formalised in 2000 with the appointment of the first EU High Representative to oversee the organisation's common foreign policy. This evolved into the current CSDP as a result of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which set up the latest iteration of the EU foreign and security policy structures. Federica Mogherini, the current High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and former Italian foreign minister, oversees the European Military Staff (EUMS), based in central Brussels. Mogherini, in turn, is advised by the EU Military Committee, which is made up of the chiefs of defence from each of the 28 EU member countries.

The formal directive for the EUMS is to perform "early warning, situation assessment, and strategic planning" for St Petersburg tasks, which are defined as crisis management,

peacekeeping, and humanitarian missions in situations that fall short of all-out combat operations. Its 200 civilian and military personnel are based in the Kortenberg building, a short distance from the EU's main headquarters at the Berlaymont building in downtown Brussels. The EUMS is currently headed by Lieutenant General Esa Pulkkinen from Finland; his deputy is Rear Admiral Bruce Williams from the United Kingdom.

Once the European heads of government decide to launch a mission, the EUMS develops the strategic concept, rules of engagement, and operational objectives. After these have been approved by the heads of government, the day-to-day command-and-control (C2) of EU military missions is passed to what is termed an operational headquarters (OHQ): an existing military headquarters in an EU member state or assigned by NATO.

EU missions over the past 13 years have been controlled by national military headquarters in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Italy, with one mission controlled by NATO Allied Command Operations (ACO), formerly known as the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), which is located in Mons, Belgium.

The EUMS has a limited capacity to establish its own Operations Centre (OPSCEN) in Brussels to run missions where a national headquarters cannot be found to do the task. A facility has been built and equipped for this task inside the EUMS building in Brussels but has not yet been required.

The EU Summit in Helsinki in 1999 set in train the establishment of a pool of military capabilities to support distinct European operations. The most well-known of these is the EU battlegroup concept, under which European nations agreed to take it in turns to stand up two 1,500-strong task forces or battlegroups for high-readiness or rapid-deployment missions. Since 2005 the EU has had two battlegroups on alert to support its operations, as well as having an OHQ on standby at any point in time.



A British Army sniper takes aim during the UK's two-week EU battle group certification exercise on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, in May. (David Pimblett/DPL)

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In May, following the completion of a certification exercise on Salisbury Plain, the United Kingdom stood up an EU battlegroup for a six-month period of duty with a structure typical of force packages committed to this mission. The two-week stand-up exercise, which concluded on 20 May, comprised 1,446 personnel built around the British Army's 2nd Battalion of The Yorkshire Regiment, which is equipped with light armoured wheeled vehicles. The unit will operate from its home base at Catterick Garrison in Yorkshire, standing ready to deploy in crisis situations for the rest of the year.

The battlegroup is supported by an engineer squadron from 21 Engineer Regiment, a combat service support squadron from 6 Regiment Royal Logistic Corps, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) detachment from 47 Regiment Royal Artillery, as well as electronic warfare troops from 14 Signals Regiment and a detachment from 3 Regiment Royal Military Police.



A Latvian armoured patrol vehicle is pictured during the UK's two-week EU battle group certification exercise on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire, in May. (David Pimblett/DPL)

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Naval missions



The French Navy Floréal-class guided-missile frigate FS Nivôse, deployed in support of EU NAVFOR's Operation 'Atalanta', intercepts pirate skiffs off Somalia in March 2010. (PA)

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The two most high-profile EU missions to date have been carried out at sea. The first, Operation 'Atalanta', got under way in 2008 off the coast of Somalia as part of the international effort to defeat piracy originating from that region. This mission was formally mandated to protect vessels from the World Food Programme delivering humanitarian aid to Somalia and other vulnerable shipping by deterring and disrupting pirate attacks.

When the mission was launched in 2008 more than 20 merchant vessels were attacked that year and the international community was determined to do more to protect civilian cargo vessels from being seized by pirates for ransom and their crews being held hostage. The EU in effect deployed a task force of up to half a dozen warships, backed by boarding parties, embarked surveillance helicopters, land-based maritime patrol aircraft, and logistic supply ships. EU navies contributed assets for several months at a time and established joint logistic facilities in the region to support the mission.



An EU NAVFOR helicopter observing a commercial shipping vessel off the Horn of Africa. Securing the safe passage of commercial cargo through global hot spots is a primary interest for EU member states. (EU NAVFOR)

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The counter-piracy operation saw the EU task force operate in co-operation with similar task groups provided by NATO and US-led coalition naval forces in the Middle East, as well as ships of local navies. Co-ordination was established between all the naval forces in the region to divide up the areas which were under threat from pirates and allocate forces to patrol them. Information was shared in real time of emerging pirate threats and surveillance assets were allocated to ensure the best coverage across the Indian Ocean.

Almost every EU country contributed forces of some sort to Operation 'Atalanta' during the course of the mission. The bigger navies sent warships and several small nations without ocean-going naval forces contributed specialist boarding personnel, intelligence experts, and staff officers. Even land-locked Luxembourg funded the leasing of a private-sector maritime patrol aircraft. Operation 'Atalanta' has a mandate to continue until December, but it is unclear yet if the mission will be renewed.

The situation onshore in Somalia has dramatically improved since the entry of UN-backed African Union peacekeepers and piracy has dropped to a handful of attacks over a year since 2013. Any follow-on anti-piracy mission is expected to be co-ordinated with partners in NATO, the US-led coalition, and local allies to determine if a smaller naval force can now keep a lid on any future pirate attacks.



Rescued migrants disembark from the Italian Navy FREMM frigate ITS Carlo Bergamini in Augusta, Sicily, in April 2015. The Mediterranean migration crisis prompted EU leaders to launch EUNAVFOR-MED, otherwise known as Operation 'Sophia', to ultimately stop the movement of migrants from Libya. (PA)

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German Bundeswehr troops participating in EUNAVFOR-MED in the Mediterranean Sea transport refugees to the German frigate FGS Schleswig-Holstein (not pictured) on 19 September 2015. UK survey ship HMS Enterprise, also participating in the EU operation, is pictured in the background. (PA)

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Training missions

EU land missions have undergone considerable evolution since March 2003 when the first operation was launched in Macedonia. That mission essentially saw the EU take over the NATO operation monitoring the peace settlement in the Balkan country with some 400 military personnel. Later in 2003 the mission was replaced with an EU police force.

In 2004 the EU took over the NATO mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina to monitor and implement the military aspects of the 1996 Dayton Peace Accords. Operation 'Althea' initially had nearly 7,000 troops, but as the security situation in the country has continued to improve, force levels have decreased to around 600 troops.

The configuration of the force has also changed over time, with the majority of its single multinational battalion now concentrating on training the Balkan country's armed forces. Some 17 liaison officer detachments are posted around the country to monitor local military activity and ensure Dayton compliance. An Immediate Reserve Force is held at readiness around Europe to return to Bosnia-Herzegovina in the event of a crisis or during tense periods such as elections.

This move from land-based peacekeeping to capacity building is also taking place in the EU's operations in Africa. Its first missions in the DRC, Chad, and the Central African Republic (CAR) were classic peacekeeping missions to pave the way for the deployment of 'blue helmet' UN troops.



Somali Army personnel undergoing training with the EU Training Mission (EUTM) in Somalia in December 2014. (EUTM Somalia)

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Currently, the EU's three operations in Africa are dubbed advisory and training missions. In 2010 the EU Training Mission in Somalia was launched and a training base was set up in Uganda to train recruits to the Somali armed forces outside their home country. As the security situation

improved during 2013, a 16-strong team of trainers moved to Mogadishu to begin training Somali forces on their home territory.

EU involvement in the CAR is considerably larger, with nearly 700 troops on the ground as part of what is termed a military advisory mission. These troops began arriving in early 2014 to take over from African Union and French peacekeeping troops that were trying to keep a lid on a civil war. Since then the EU force has focused on training local security forces.

After Jihadi insurgents launched an offensive in 2013 that threatened to overrun the North African country of Mali, a French-led force counter-attacked to drive them back. In a bid to build up the country's security forces, in January 2013 the EU committed to providing a 200-strong training mission in Mali to eventually train up 3,000 local soldiers organised into four battalions.



A German instructor from the EU Training Mission in Mali speaking to Malian soldiers during a training operation in Koulikoro in May. For three years, 560 soldiers from the EU training mission, including 200 Germans, have been training the Malian army. (PA)

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Euro Army

The EU's current military operations are diverse in nature but have yet to move beyond the classic St Petersburg tasks of peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, training, advisory, and counter-piracy missions. The EU has also not yet moved to establish any kind of significant permanent military organisations or standing forces as NATO has.

On 28 June Mogherini submitted a document outlining future measures to enhance European defence and security co-operation entitled: 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy'. The document includes enhanced defence co-operation across Europe, including shared structures and joint equipment procurement. EU national leaders are now considering the proposals.

In her introduction Mogherini writes, "The strategy nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union. This is necessary to promote the common interests of our citizens, as well as our principles and values. Yet we know that such priorities are best served when we are not alone. And they are best served in an international system based on rules and on multilateralism. This is no time for global policemen and lone warriors. Our foreign and security policy has to handle global pressures and local dynamics; it has to cope with superpowers as well as with increasingly fractured identities."

Meanwhile, leaks in May from Germany's draft unpublished defence white paper suggest that the government in Berlin wants to back the establishment of a more robust EU military structure, including a larger permanent military headquarters to command operations and the joint sharing of European military assets such as helicopters and transport aircraft. This potential structure, dubbed the 'European Defence Union', is aimed at boosting the output of the continent's 28 armed forces to allow Europe to take a leadership role in world affairs.

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