



Letter by Four Defence Ministers about the Future of European Defence

Marcin Terlikowski

On 30 May, the defence ministers of France, Germany, Italy, and Spain issued a joint letter to Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and their counterparts in the EU Member States. The letter proposes to deepen the recent reforms of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Why was the letter issued now?

It attempts to set the course for developing CSDP after the COVID-19 pandemic. The expected recession and need to adjust socio-economic life in the EU to the sustained threat from the coronavirus will distract many governments from common security and defence policy. The four Member States, militarily the strongest in the EU and boasting the biggest defence industry in Europe, see common political, economic, and military interest in developing CSDP. A similar letter by this group of states led to the launch in 2017 of "permanent structured cooperation" (PESCO), a security and defence mechanism and they have been driving the work on the European Defence Fund (EDF). In the new letter, they call for both stronger PESCO and a larger budget for the EDF, close to the originally planned €13 billion, referring to the EC's recent proposal for the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027.

What would a strengthened PESCO look like?

The letter proposes to use the 2020 Strategic Review to make the PESCO National Implementation Plans (NIP) more granular. The NIPs indicate how states intend to fulfil the 20 binding commitments to develop defence cooperation within the EU framework that constitute the second pillar of PESCO (the first being common projects of military and defence-industrial cooperation). To now, the NIPs have been generic, so

it is hard to evaluate the performance of governments. Next, PESCO projects that do not deliver as expected should be terminated. In turn, the biggest ones, which involve the joint development of new armaments (and happen to be led by the states-signatories of the letter) should receive priority over new initiatives in receiving funding from the EDF. It argues that, among the new PESCO projects, those common military capabilities directly reinforcing the EU's capacity for autonomous operations should be preferred.

What are the other ideas explored in the letter?

The ministers propose to engage EU Member States and institutions in regular wargaming, civil-military tabletop exercises, and scenario-based discussions. This can lay the foundations for potential use in a crisis of Art 42.7 TEU, which provides for mutual assistance in case of armed aggression. They also call for a strategic reflection process to start this year—a "Strategic Compass" focusing on threats to the Union (also proposed by the upcoming German presidency of the EU). Finally, they put forward the concept of further reinforcing a special EU cell tasked with planning and conducting Union military missions (MPCC), so that it can become a kind of own operational headquarters—EU OHQ—which has been proposed for years but consistently blocked by the United Kingdom.

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What is the importance of deepened EU-NATO cooperation?

The European members of NATO possess a limited pool of forces, fit for defending the Alliance's Eastern Flank against Russia, or for large peace and stabilisation operations outside Europe. Hence, developing defence cooperation in the EU is important also for the credibility of NATO's defence and deterrence. The condition, however, is that EU actions are synchronised with, and do not duplicate, what NATO is doing. Close EU-NATO cooperation is also key to addressing hybrid threats (including disinformation, propaganda, and cyberattacks). The letter stresses the need to deepen the relationship between the two organisations and to establish a "European pillar within NATO". Yet, it does not provide any concrete proposals in this regards except for calling for quick compromise on the long-negotiated EU Council decision allowing the participation of non-EU states, mostly NATO members, in PESCO projects.

What are the chances the proposals of the four ministers will be implemented?

The letter is a compromise between France, which wants to increase Europe's capacity to run military autonomous operations—without NATO and the U.S.—and Germany, which is supportive of autonomous European defence but wary of undermining transatlantic security guarantees. Hence, the proposals from the letter are likely to be supported by many EU Member States and institutions, and implemented. At the same time, many governments will focus on fulfilling goals set through NATO, rather than the EU, as they consider the Alliance the pillar of their security (and a useful tool to foster relations with the U.S., despite transatlantic tensions). This may petrify the perception of CSDP as unable to deliver tangible results and further prompt the four states to deepen defence cooperation outside the EU—bilaterally through intergovernmental armament programs and the European Intervention Initiative.

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