

Advancing military mobility in Europe: An uphill battle

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has made military mobility a top priority for the EU and NATO. The return of traditional military threats and a refocus on territorial defence require a focus on eliminating obstacles that prevent armed forces from swiftly moving across EU borders. In the current European security context, military mobility is also a matter of deterrence and collective security posture.

Military means are currently being moved on the Eastern flank, which NATO has constantly reinforced, while at the same time, billions worth of equipment has been sent to Ukraine as part of EU and allies' support. The transport and delivery of tanks, armoured personnel carriers, infantry fighting vehicles, and other equipment that multiple countries supply to Ukraine are part of the military mobility process.

This Policy Brief¹ will map the actions taken at the EU level to develop military mobility over the past years, with emphasis on the EU Action Plan 2.0.² It will also identify and analyse current EU objectives, outline key challenges, and provide recommendations to enhance military mobility in Europe.

CONTEXT AND HISTORY – MILITARY MOBILITY ON THE EU AGENDA

After the end of the Cold War, in the absence of traditional military threats, the attention and priority given to military capabilities declined, and defence budgets shrunk. The focus of the armed forces switched from territorial defence to crisis management abroad.

The EU undertook efforts to design its approach to the post-Cold War security environment and develop a common security and defence policy. From the 1999 Helsinki Headline Goal – the ability to deploy 60,000 troops (15 brigades) within 60 days – the 2003 EU Security Strategy, the establishment of the EU battlegroups in 2005, to the 2016 Global Strategy speaking of “full-spectrum land, air, space, and maritime capabilities, including strategic enablers”, the EU has never been shy of making promises and setting ambitious goals. Military mobility should have normally occupied an important place, but it was not on the agenda.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was an important signal that conventional threats are still very much present and that European security and defence must be upgraded.

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As part of the renewed impetus to develop defence initiatives and instruments at the EU level, military mobility gradually gained more importance. The 2017 Joint Communication from the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and

Security Policy on improving military mobility in the EU³ recognised the strategic momentum to expedite military mobility and connect different policy domains. Military mobility was added in 2017 to the EU-NATO common set of proposals⁴ for implementing the EU-NATO Joint Declaration of July 2016, with the concrete objective of establishing consultations at the staff level to forge synergies between the organisations and tackle current challenges. The European Defence Agency (EDA) also played an important supporting role by establishing an ad-hoc working group on cross-border military transportation within Europe.⁵

Efforts at the EU level concretised in the 2018 Action Plan on military mobility and the June 2018 Foreign Affairs Council⁶ laid out multiple commitments for member states:

- ▶ Develop national plans for military mobility.
- ▶ Grant cross-border movement permissions within five working days.
- ▶ Create a strongly interconnected network of national points of contact for all aspects relating to military mobility.
- ▶ Use national and multinational exercises to practice regularly military mobility.

A Dutch-led Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project aimed at enhancing cooperation on military mobility was also launched in 2018, and the recommendations of the first-ever Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) Report published in 2020 included the need to enhance military mobility.

All these developments signalled that the importance of ensuring the mobility of military assets has significantly increased in urgency and that the EU and NATO have taken concrete steps. However, the momentum has not materialised beyond increased awareness, growing exchanges, and very slow progress on the commitments undertaken at the EU level.

Fast forward to February 2022, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought about the practical realisation of the weaknesses of military mobility in Europe.

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A Czech army train had to stop for more than 18 hours to move equipment consisting of tanks, trucks, and personnel onto another train because the railroad tracks are wider in the Baltic States than the European standard.⁷ The overall picture is bleak: in many cases, the transport infrastructure cannot support the weight of tanks and other military equipment, different rail gauges cause significant delays in moving equipment across borders, there are insufficient train carts available, and heavy bureaucracy hampers moving troops and equipment across countries swiftly.

The EU Strategic Compass, beefed up after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and adopted in March 2022, highlights the need to substantially enhance military mobility - strengthen dual-use transport infrastructure, harmonise cross-border procedures, work in close cooperation with NATO and partners - and lays out the path forward to an ambitious revised Action Plan 2.0 which was delivered according to the timeline.

While the EU sets directions, supports the process, and acts as a facilitator, member states must carry the lion's share of the work to advance military mobility since it is a nationally driven process. As a result, most objectives must be achieved at the national level.

Fig. 1

TIMELINE OF KEY DEVELOPMENTS

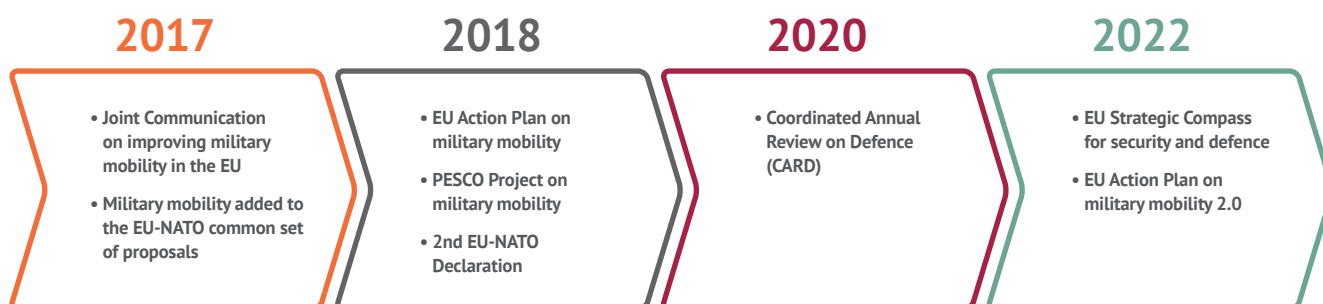


Table 1. EU Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0 - Key commitments

The EEAS in coordination with Member States, Commission services and EDA, will update the Military Requirements within and beyond the EU. The Military Requirements will be expanded to cover Fuel Supply Chain Infrastructure and include the dual use of the air traffic management communication, navigation and surveillance systems and infrastructures.

By mid-2023, Commission services together with the EEAS will carry out a study to identify possibilities for short-notice, large-scale movements to improve fuel resilience, long-term infrastructure planning and optimal use of this infrastructure.

By 2024, EDA will support participating Member States to fully implement the technical arrangements for cross-border movement permissions procedures for surface and air by monitoring their usage as well as by identifying and resolving bottlenecks and obstacles.

The EEAS, Commission services and EDA will exploit multinational exercises to mainstream military mobility activities (deployment, sustainment and redeployment of the forces), including EU live exercises and Parallel and Coordinated Exercises with NATO, as well as through EU participation in NATO exercises, as appropriate.

The Commission services, the EEAS and the NIS cooperation group (...) will conduct on a regular basis risk evaluation and risk scenarios from a cybersecurity perspective, focusing on priority critical sectors.

The EEAS together with Commission services and EDA will continue the EU-NATO Structured Dialogue on military mobility with a view to sharing information and ensuring coherence of respective work strands.

The EEAS together with Commission services and EDA will include military mobility where necessary in the security and defence dialogues with relevant partners, notably with Canada, Norway and the US.

Source: [EU Action Plan on Military Mobility 2.0](#)

ACTION PLAN 2.0

The EU Action Plan 2.0 covers four main pillars – multimodal corridors, regulatory measures, resilience and preparedness, and partnerships – and gives new impetus to cooperation with its variety of key commitments. In addition, it contains hooks that trigger action across different policies, such as energy, sustainability, and climate resilience. The updated Action Plan also brings new angles, such as the resilience and partnerships pillars.

The dual-use transport infrastructure pillar of military mobility is crucial. There is a 93% overlap between the military network and the trans-European transport (TEN-T) civilian network, which means that investments in transport infrastructure contribute automatically to military mobility. Therefore, existing infrastructure needs to be assessed, as well as how it complies with military needs. Through the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) – a multi-year (2021–2027) financial programme instrument – the EU has allocated around €1.69 billion for dual-use transport projects. In the first call (2021), 22 dual-use projects were selected to receive funding, while a second call was launched earlier than planned, in the first part of 2022 due to the invasion of Ukraine, with 35 proposals receiving funding.⁸

The Action Plan 2.0 contains many cross-domain aspects in the resilience and preparedness pillar with connections to multiple areas: protection against security risks in the transport sector, such as cybersecurity threats, foreign direct investments by third countries, the impact of climate change, and the green energy transition. The need

to identify and improve deficits in logistical capacities is of specific relevance - for example, the European strategic airlift capacities for outsized or specialised cargo, the requirements for sealift, and specialised rail transport.

The dedicated partnerships pillar is novel and focuses on EU-NATO cooperation, enhancing cooperation with the US, Canada, Norway, and the UK, enhancing dialogue with regional partners, including Ukraine and Moldova, and sharing best practices with the Western Balkans. Military mobility has been a flagship project for EU-NATO relations since 2017. Cooperation in this area has been open and transparent through structured dialogue, question-based discussions and staff exchanges outside the structured dialogue.

MAIN CHALLENGES

The way forward to enhance military mobility laid out in the Action Plan 2.0 is ambitious and links initiatives at the EU level. However, several challenges persist and need to be urgently addressed by the EU and the member states.

Limited funding is available for dual-use transport infrastructure projects at the EU level. For example, the European Commission initially proposed €6.5 billion for military mobility in the EU budget (2021-2027), while the final endorsed budget was slashed to €1.69 billion. Considering the demands for enhancing military mobility, this sum is proving too small to make an important difference.

Projects selected under the CEF include: increasing the operational capabilities of airports' capacity for military operations, developing road sections, improving maritime and land accessibility in ports, rehabilitating bridges and viaducts, and upgrading rail-road terminals, with a total amount of around €339 million for the first call. In contrast, the second call had its budget increased to around €616 million.⁹ However, these projects represent a fraction of everything covered by the TEN-T that requires significant upgrading to meet the military mobility requirements.

The mid-term review of the EU's seven-year budget will represent an opportunity for a course correction and additional funds dedicated to military mobility. Nonetheless, it is up to the member states to cover most of the infrastructure project costs, which might prove challenging in times of recession, the climate crisis, recovery from COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. One potential option to explore at the national level could be to include military mobility investments to achieve the 2% defence spending goal.

Overcoming **administrative and regulatory barriers** to military mobility is crucial, but the means to do so are missing. According to the Action Plan 2.0, "member states are invited to meet, by the end of 2023, the maximum five working days objective for border crossing procedures and explore the possibility of reducing the time to three working days for rapid reaction units". This "five-day" commitment is part of the military mobility pledge agreed to by the Council in June 2018. The fact that there was no progress in more than four years outlines the difficulties in making this collective objective uniform for all member states. The end-of-2023 commitment seems overly ambitious.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased awareness of military mobility requirements, but there is a concern: the political mindset at the national level does not seem to be on the same page with these requirements.

Advancements in developing military mobility and fulfilling commitments are behind schedule. While the June 2018 Foreign Affairs Council called on EU member states to develop national military mobility plans and proceed to implementation, only the Netherlands has adopted one. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has increased awareness of military mobility requirements, but there is a concern: the political mindset at the national level does not seem to be on the same page with these requirements.

There is a **lack of political buy-in and political will in the member states to enhance military mobility** and specifically to dedicate more funding to infrastructure

development keeping in mind the military mobility dimension and to forge a whole-of-government approach that would include armed forces, ministries of defence, transport, governance of cities and regions, and other stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENHANCE MILITARY MOBILITY IN EUROPE

► **Commitment to advancing military mobility needs to be long-term.** Keeping military mobility high on the political agenda for further funding and support is essential. On top of this, the implementation of the Action Plan 2.0 needs constant reviews, and member states need to follow through with the calls outlined in the plan.

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► **Military mobility needs to be complemented by a civilian dimension.** Civilian aspects of the Action Plan are likely to have more political and societal support, and civilian standards must come closer to the military standards for roads and infrastructure – which benefit the citizens, not only for military purposes. Investing in developing infrastructure can automatically mean advancing military mobility, and its dual-use nature should provide an additional political incentive for member states to embrace the project.

► **EU member states should urgently prioritise developing military mobility plans** – these should be based on a whole-of-government approach, encompass transport infrastructure priorities, develop multiple corridors and create a multi-stakeholder platform. Once the plans are in place, significant and continued attention should be dedicated to implementing, exploring synergies with the neighbouring member states and exchanging best practices.

► **Undergo a lessons-learned process from the movement of military equipment in the context of EU and allies' support to Ukraine.** The current moment offers plentiful opportunities to learn from the movement of military equipment donated to Ukraine and the movement of NATO forces to strengthen the Eastern flank. This process should also look at the issue of reverse mobility – bringing back deployed assets.

► Regions and cities have developed a wide network of exchanges at the European level. In their engagement, **some formats could also include discussions on dual-use infrastructure, funding, and sharing best practices and lessons learnt.**

► **Consider setting up an EU-NATO Centre of excellence dedicated to military mobility in Europe,** which would bring together experts and officials from EU member states, NATO countries, and partners and constantly raise awareness of the importance of military mobility, highlight the existent shortfalls, and keep the topic on the political agenda.

Fig. 2

MILITARY MOBILITY IN EUROPE - SWOT ANALYSIS



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- ¹ This paper also draws insights from the off-the-record EPC - Friedrich Naumann Foundation roundtable discussion on military mobility, held on 6 December 2022, in Brussels.
 - ² European Commission (2022), [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - Action plan on military mobility 2.0](#), Brussels, JOIN (2022) 48 final.
 - ³ European Commission (2017), [Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council - Improving Military Mobility in the European Union](#), Brussels, JOIN (2017) 41 final.
 - ⁴ Council of the EU (2017), [“Council conclusions on the Implementation of the Joint Declaration by the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization”](#), Brussels, 14802/17.
 - ⁵ European Defence Agency, [“Military mobility factsheet”](#), (accessed 25 January 2023).
 - ⁶ Council of the EU (2018), [“Council Conclusions on Security and Defence in the context of the EU Global Strategy”](#), Luxembourg, 10246/18.
 - ⁷ Siebold, Sabine, Anthony Deutsch, Andrius Sytas, [“Red tape, potholes and politics hamper NATO’s defence efforts as the Russia threat rises”](#), Reuters, 21 November 2022.
 - ⁸ Railway pro, [“Increased military mobility budget under the second call”](#), (accessed 10 February 2023).
 - ⁹ European Climate, Infrastructure and Environment Executive Agency, [“Transport infrastructure: EU allocates further EUR 616 million to civilian-defence dual-use investments on the Trans-European Transport Network”](#), (accessed 23 February 2023).

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