

## Will the December Summit provide a *coup de théâtre* in European defence?

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### ***CSDP in the December European Council: protagonist or background actor?***

On 19 and 20 December 2013, EU Heads of state or government will devote part of their year-end Summit to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), a critical, yet often neglected, policy area. In order to 'set the stage' for a substantial debate by national leaders on defence integration – the first since December 2008 – the High Representative/Vice President (HR/VP), Catherine Ashton, presented a 'Final Report on CSDP' last October, describing the state of play and formulating several recommendations for the road ahead.

The inclusion of defence in the European Council's 'political show' was long overdue. Yet, the CSDP could well retrograde from 'protagonist' to 'background actor'. Other priorities, such as the banking union, might overshadow the Summit, and chances are high that EU leaders will only be able to agree on the 'lowest common denominator' when it comes to CSDP. Indeed, risks of lip-service and inaction could affect each of the three 'clusters' identified in the HR/VP's Report: effectiveness, visibility and impact of CSDP, development of capabilities, and Europe's defence industry.

Concretely, EU leaders will probably emphasise the need to further operationalise the EU's 'comprehensive approach' to crisis management by implementing last week's joint Communication by the European Commission and the HR/VP, increase political and practical cooperation with partner countries and organisations, enhance the effectiveness of EU rapid response tools, notably the still-unexploited Battlegroups, and develop new strategies on cyber-defence and maritime policy. Yet, they might fail to substantially address the political, institutional, personnel and budgetary challenges affecting the EU's civilian and military operations, or strengthen the much-needed links between CSDP and other EU external policies.

The European Council is also expected to endorse collaborative capability projects on remotely-piloted aircraft systems, air-to-air refuelling, satellite communication and cyber-defence, and encourage the implementation of the EU's non-binding 'Code of Conduct on Pooling and Sharing'. Still, it will be less concrete both on the scale of the investments needed and the potential options for more systematic, long-term intra-European defence cooperation.

Finally, European leaders are likely to encourage further opening of defence markets, especially to small and medium-sized enterprises, more synergies between European civil and military research programmes, including via a Preparatory Action which, in time, could lead to Commission-funded CSDP-related research, EU-promoted military certification and standardisation, and increased intra-European security of supply. However, they will refrain from further discussing controversial issues such as industrial consolidation or the sector's emerging external dimension.

### ***European defence and security: a case of existential indecisiveness?***

The likely conclusions of the European Council suggest that Europe continues to act in defence and security like Zerlina, the hesitant servant who, courted by Mozart's Don Giovanni, responds to his insistent advances by singing '*vorrei ma non vorrei*' ('I'd like to, and yet I'm afraid').

Indeed, Europeans would like to project stronger influence across the world, but are still not able to agree on the strategic geographic and thematic priorities of the EU's external action. They privilege a more balanced civil-military approach as an effective 'recipe' to address multi-dimensional external crises, but still struggle to agree on the exact quality and quantity of 'ingredients' in their policy mix. They aspire to gain sounder military capabilities for territorial defence and 'out-of-area' operations, but still refrain from making the appropriate financial and political investments. They yearn for cutting-edge defence industrial capacities, but apparently lack an ambitious master plan on the way ahead.

The reasons for Europe's long-standing reluctance to get more serious on its 'hard power' relate to history and current economic and political constraints. It has to do with the continent's century-long experience of appalling violence, the Cold War's security 'free-riding reflex', Member States' distinct constitutional constraints and diplomatic allegiances, the severe impact of fiscal austerity on national defence budgets, a widespread sense of disenchantment *vis-à-vis* military interventions like those in Iraq, Afghanistan and partially Libya, but also persisting foreign policy discrepancies and domestic political uncertainties among Europe's few military 'heavy weights'.

While the Anglo-French duo previously served as the ultimately political engine of European defence cooperation, nowadays both London and Paris seem much more inclined to conceive CSDP as an '*à la carte*' option, as highlighted by the spirit of the 2010 Lancaster Treaty and their actual or attempted military initiatives. Moreover, despite some recent, encouraging statements on European defence by the new governing coalition, the fact that Berlin considers itself as a predominantly civilian power seems unlikely to fade away anytime soon.

### ***Towards a modest but constructive play-script for CSDP?***

Despite all these constraints, EU leaders need to acknowledge that the 'peace dividend' philosophy, largely dominating their defence policies in the past two decades, cannot simply translate into sluggish disengagement from a worrisome global security landscape. International politics is marked by a combination of traditional and new threats including regional conflicts, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, failed statehood, maritime and cyber piracy, and resource scarcity.

While addressing those challenges demands a sophisticated and multi-dimensional response from Europe and its partners, rightly embodied in the EU's longed-for 'comprehensive approach', the argument should not be pushed to the point of dismissing the need for reliable, underpinning military capabilities. What is needed, therefore, is a much deeper intra-European strategic consent, to be sustained by a robust and efficient CSDP, combining Member States' political visions and operational resources in a pragmatic spirit of complementarity with NATO.

Overall, the December Summit will surely fail to offer any amazing *coup de théâtre* in European defence. Those who hoped to witness some ground-breaking solutions will, once again, be disappointed. However, the Summit Conclusions will most likely be cautious but could provide a constructive play-script to progressively empower CSDP in the next few years. In order to do so, EU leaders need to accompany their general prescriptions with a substantive mandate to key EU implementing actors such as the European External Action Service, the European Defence Agency and the European Commission, clear timelines and a high-level review mechanism on CSDP operations, capability development and defence industry and markets. The likely decision by European leaders to revise their commitments by the end of 2015 should be greeted as a binding step in that direction – provided that a substantial follow-up process is put in place from 'day one'.

After years of unfulfilled promises, a credible political message in support of CSDP, nurtured by a continuous debate between Brussels and national capitals, is badly needed. Among other things, this would provide the next generation of EU leaders with a meaningful, long-term commitment to be shielded against the unpredictable drifts of European politics. Any alternative, low-key position would simply result in the umpteenth, second-rate show on the EU's lurching political stage.

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