

## Guest Editorial

### **The Role of the European Union Military Committee in EU External Relations**

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The European Union Military Committee is the highest military body set up within the European Council. Its mission, as defined in the Council Decision of 22 January 2001, is to provide the Political and Security Committee with advice and recommendations on all military matters within the European Union (EU).<sup>1</sup> Subsequently it has assumed an additional role, to promote EU and to support and contribute to the European diplomacy.

Europe may not have an army of its own, nevertheless, the EU Military Committee represent twenty-eight national Armed Forces which, combined, make up for the second larger army in the world. Its Chairman is the military adviser to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on all military matters and represents the primary Point of Contact with the Operation Commanders of the EU's military operations.

Public diplomacy and strategic communications lie at the heart of contemporary politics. Military diplomacy has always been a limited but significant element of the whole external diplomacy of a nation (or international organization in the EU case), representing the core element of its Hard power. Connected to their counterparts by a shared sacred code of patriotism, loyalism, self-determination and duty, high ranking officers always indulged the ability to better and relay difficult messages despite pertaining language, cultural or other barriers. Their similar background and experiences and the decipherment of the secret messages relayed by stripes, medals and ribbons help establish a certain level of respect among the interlocutors at first sight. A respect that opens doors usually closed to outsiders. They constitute the bonds that unite the members of this cast, regardless of their nationality; they are bridges where none seems to be existing. However, and due to the overwhelmingly civilian nature of the European Union,

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<sup>1</sup> Council Decision of 22 Jan. 2001 setting up the Military Committee of the European Union, 2001/79/CFSP (2001).

the respective potential of the EU Military Committee was vaguely left unexploited.

This changed in June 2016 with the presentation of the EU Global Strategy, which signalled a reprioritization of the European interests. The security of the Member-States' citizens and territory was acknowledged as a shared interest and an Implementation Plan to forward it followed suite. The terms '*EU security*' and '*EU defence*' began trending. The military element of the European Union was brought to the foreground. The EU Military Committee played an important role in the shaping of the Global Strategy. Its Chairman is included among the policy makers in this specific domain and is considered as an authoritative figure on the respective subject.

It is therefore not a surprise that the Military Committee has been asked to provide its insight, thoughts or proposals. The status of the Military Committee as the bearer of the military expertise in the EU resulted in numerous invitations for participation in high level conferences and roundtables, in an attempt of the organizers to inform their audiences in the most responsible way about the next day in European security defence.

As a result, the Military Committee became an integral and extremely active element of the EU effort to communicate its new Security Strategy, explaining and elaborating on its 'reliable security provider' narrative, exploiting the fertile ground and the increased interest the following day of the Global Strategy presentation. The timing, in the aftermath of a series of deadly terrorist attacks on EU soil and just after the Brexit referendum made the demand for answers and explanations increased and pressing. What is worth mentioning is that these invitations did not come solely from National Defence Universities or from think tanks focusing on security matters. Civilian Universities as well as civic or social organizations also displayed a genuine interest and required information.

In this framework, a large number of lectures, speeches and presentations at high level conferences and roundtables was requested and delivered, explaining and clarifying the EU positions, the targeted end-state and the steps that were undertaken or those that would follow, in order to dilute any misunderstandings and to prepare public opinion of what was to be expected in the near future. In particular occasions, these clarifications have been of extreme importance, as false expectations or wrong impressions were created. The term '*protection*', used in relation with Europe, led to a certain extent of misinterpretation with the term '*defence*'. Separating these two terms and the consequent tasks and clarifying the differences highlighting the distinct roles of EU and NATO in the security and defence of Europe, has been the first order of action. This way, the deepened cooperation with NATO that was established with the Warsaw Joint EU-NATO

Declaration, was put into the right tracks, strengthening the bonds between these two leading and complementary organizations.

Regarding NATO, the original forty-two (now seventy-four) mutually agreed actions form just one part of the ongoing cooperation. The formal joint meetings of the respective Military Committees, complemented by tactical informal ones that were initiated in 2016, played their constructive role in paving the way to the aforementioned cooperation. The same can be argued about the invitations to the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, SACEUR, US military officials (EUCOM, AFRICOM) to participate in the semi-annual EU Military Committees at the Chief of Defence level. In reciprocity, the Chairman of the EU Military Committee attends the NATO Military Committees at the same level. Openness and transparency from both sides led to the establishment of a level of understanding and trust that is quintessential for cooperation.

The same approach of openness is followed in relation to the six ongoing EU CSDP Missions and Operations. Almost all of them (with the exception of EUNAVFORMED Sophia) are open to partners' participation. To be more precise, third countries participation is not just welcome but it is actively pursued. This approach is applied with the acknowledgment of the advantage of having as wide a participation of like-minded nations as possible. The EU understands and accepts the fact that it cannot deliver alone. At the same time partners can provide capabilities missing or in scarcity among the EU Member-States, filling some of the gaps caused by the *'single set of forces'* reality.

What has also to be underlined, and usually falls below the radar of the various analyses, is the dynamic exchange of valuable experience and expertise among members of different nationalities (EU and partner nations some of which aspire to join the EU) and the bonds created among them. The EU Military Committee has been very active in reaching out to and attracting potential troop contributors. Judging by the results, it has also been quite successful as well. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jordan, Pakistan, South Korea and Vietnam are among these nations that already contribute or have expressed their intention to do so, in the EU military Missions and Operations.

As mentioned before, the EU Military Committee can be and is being used as a 'door opener'. There are a number of nations where the Armed Forces play a significant or even central political role. There are occasions when the relations between EU political leadership and third nations' governments could be characterized as delicate. Policies applied by the latter that are regarded to not be in line with European principles result in public disagreement and ultimately to a non-permissive environment for political dialogue. Notwithstanding the mutual reluctance to engage in such a dialogue, channels must be kept open, in order to facilitate bridging the pertaining gaps and remedy the relations. In these occasions,

the EU Military Committee offers a solution, as was showcased in the case of Myanmar.

With the support and approval of the highest echelons of EEAS, the Chairman of the EU Military Committee was the first high ranking EU official to meet with the newly elected, non-military government of the country in 2016. This first visit, followed by the visit of the Myanmar Chief of Defence to Brussels and repeated the following year created a certain level of optimism and paved the way for State Counsellor of the Union of Myanmar Aung San Suu Kyi's visit to Brussels. Unfortunately relations did not develop as expected, overturned by events on the ground. Yet, this unfortunate turn of events does not diminish the important role military diplomacy played in the first place.

It is irrefutable that in the age of information and strategic communications, no public figure can be spared nor excused for not putting the best of his/her efforts to the service of the institution he/she represents. This applies especially to those who combine expertise and authority on the most pressing issues for our societies. Security and defence undoubtedly qualify as such.

The EU Military Committee, being the representative of the military element of the EU and *ipso facto* related to, relevant to and concerned about the security and safety of the European citizens and territory, both directly and indirectly, will continue to provide its unique services to the fastest developing domain of the EU. At the same time and building on its elevated status, it remains committed and contributes – within the framework of its role and responsibilities – to the development of the Union's external relations, in accordance with the vision set out in the '*Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*'.