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**Europe's New Defence Ambitions:
Engagements in the Wider MENA Region**
Dr. Saskia van Genugten
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Dr. Saskia van Genugten
Senior Research Fellow, Emirates Diplomatic Academy.

Dr. Saskia van Genugten is a Senior Research Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Peace and Security Programme at the Emirates Diplomatic Academy. Previously, she served as a Foreign Affairs Advisor to the Senate of the Netherlands, as Political Affairs Officer at the UN Support Mission in Libya, and as a manager at PricewaterhouseCoopers. Dr. Van Genugten holds a PhD from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). She is the author of *Western relations with Libya: 1911-2011* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and several articles on European and Middle East Affairs.

Summary

- While issues such as Brexit, Catalonia and the rise of nationalism dominate the global headlines and point towards the disintegrating forces at play in Europe, a new ambition for increased European defence cooperation and a collective effort to upgrade capabilities, is currently exposing a rather different trend going on among the EU member states.
- EU leaders' increased political will to pool and align defence resources reflects an acknowledgment of a changing geopolitical outlook, in which both external and internal developments are compromising Europe's security. These include the Brexit vote, Trump's 'America First' policies and a more assertive Russia.
- The Brexit vote has actually been the most powerful enabler to bolster European defence cooperation. The UK has persistently watered down or vetoed EU ambitions in this area. With Britain no longer actively involved, the remaining key EU member states (France and Germany) have quickly started to lift the level of ambition for security and defence cooperation.
- The Syrian refugee crisis as well as a string of terrorist attacks have provided Europe's wake up call to strengthen its own security. A convergence of member states' threat perceptions around issues of migration, refugees, terrorism and organised crime have made the stability of the MENA region a key concern in Europe's new security ambitions.
- In mid-December, the European Council officially endorsed a 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' (PESCO), a mechanism through which 25 out of the current 28 EU member states have pledged to enhance defence cooperation, both with regard to capability development projects as well as through projects focused on pooling operational forces.
- PESCO is only the latest initiative indicating a change in Europe's views on defence issues. Other examples include the adoption of the EU Global Strategy and its implementation strategy in 2016, and in 2017 the launch of a European Defence Fund (EDF), a 'Coordinated Annual Review on Defence' (CARD) as well as a 'Military Planning and Conduct Capability' (MPCC).
- Of the sixteen current, ongoing missions in the framework of the EU's CSDP, nine are located in the wider MENA region. The overall focus areas of these missions in MENA are fighting terrorism and organised crime, managing migration flows and enhancing border management.
- Given the convergence of threat perceptions of key EU member states around issues related to the MENA region, the more enabling environment is likely to lead to concrete proposals and operational actions in the area of (limited) stabilisation efforts in (North) Africa, in Libya and Mali in particular.
- The EU is also likely to further strengthen its efforts in the MENA region to cooperate with respective authorities on border management and border control, countering terrorism and countering radicalisation.

The Issue

During the European Council Summit held in mid-December, EU leaders officially adopted the so-called 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' (PESCO), a mechanism through which 25 out of the current 28 EU member states have pledged to enhance defence cooperation, both with regard to capability development projects as well as through projects focused on pooling operational forces.

During the summit, EU member states also review progress in the areas of EU-NATO cooperation and made suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of the civilian missions taking place under the umbrella of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). While other issues, including Brexit, Catalonia and the rise of nationalism are dominating the global headlines and point towards the disintegrating forces at play in Europe, a new ambition for increased European defence cooperation and a collective effort to upgrade capabilities, is exposing a rather different trend going on among the EU member states and reflects geopolitical changes that involve a potential rebalancing of transatlantic relations as well as EU-Russia relations.

PESCO is only the latest initiative indicating a change in Europe's views on defence issues. After decades of relative inertia on the common security and defence files, European leaders suddenly are showing genuine political will towards boosting cooperation efforts on defence-related matters. Indeed, the past two years have seen a wealth of steps in this policy area. Beyond PESCO, examples include the adoption of the EU Global Strategy and its implementation strategy in 2016, and in 2017 the launch of a European Defence Fund (EDF), a 'Coordinated Annual Review on Defence' (CARD) as well as a 'Military Planning and Conduct Capability' (MPCC).

This EDA Insight looks at the driving factors behind Europe's renewed assertiveness on defence matters, provides an overview of the recently launched initiatives and assesses the potential implications, including for Europe's civilian and military operations in the wider MENA region. It concludes that, given the convergence of threat perceptions of key EU member states around issues related to the MENA region, the more enabling environment is likely to lead to concrete proposals and operational actions in the area of (limited) stabilisation efforts in (North) Africa, in Libya and Mali in particular.

Why Is It Important?

- Taken together, these new strategies and cooperation mechanisms form part of a scheme that, if implemented to full capacity, would allow and incentivise individual EU countries to pool their current scattered defence resources in a more strategic and efficient way. This could lead to more cost-effective procurement and development of new, innovative capabilities enhancing the ability of Europe to be a security actor of greater significance.
- If taken seriously by the member states involved, this new ambition could become a game changer in key sectors including counter-terrorism, rapid response capabilities and cyber security and is likely to mark a step-change with regard to Europe's autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.
- Within its new ambitions, stabilisation of the MENA region is taking a prominent role. In this regard, the EU is likely to further strengthen its efforts in the MENA region to cooperate with its respective authorities on border management and border control and launch new initiatives in the area of countering terrorism and countering radicalisation.

The Driving Factors Behind Europe's Renewed Assertiveness

The EU leaders' increased political will to pool and align defence resources reflects an acknowledgment of a changing geopolitical outlook, in which both external and internal developments are compromising Europe's security.

A number of events have vividly illustrated these changes in Europe's geopolitical outlook. These include the UK's decision to leave the EU by March 2019 at the latest, US President Donald J. Trump's election and his 'America First' policies, as well as Russia's assertiveness in the EU's neighbourhood, of which the 2008 war in Georgia, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine are clear examples. Arguably hitting home hardest and providing Europe's wake up call to bolster its own security, have been the consequences of the Syrian refugee crisis as well as a string of terrorist attacks.

The Brexit vote has actually been the most powerful enabler to strengthen European defence cooperation. EU-wide decisions and initiatives around security and defence policy naturally must reflect the 'lowest common denominator' amongst the

member states. The UK has persistently watered down or vetoed EU ambitions in this area, as its national interest has been to keep the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) as the prime arena for Europe's security and defence, as well as to stress the UK-US 'special relationship' that has guided London's foreign and security policy since the Second World War. With Britain no longer actively involved, the remaining key EU member states have quickly started to lift the level of ambition for security and defence cooperation. This has put France and Germany in the driver's seat, outlining a joint vision, including concrete proposals for a European Security Pact.¹ Italy, Spain and others have followed enthusiastically.

Increased uncertainty around President Trump's commitment to Europe's security through NATO has also helped the Europeans come together. For decades, Europeans have relied on the US's security umbrella without having to pay their fair share for it. This 'burdensharing debate' amongst members of NATO has been ongoing since NATO's inception, with the US repeatedly encouraging Europe to spend more on defence.

But President Trump, whose ties with Russia are also making several EU states uncomfortable, has taken this quarrel to a new level, launching direct criticisms of NATO's European partners, singling out the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in particular. This appears to have triggered a change of heart in Germany, long a staunch ally of the US, with Chancellor Merkel stating that 'the times in which we can fully count on others are somewhat over (...) we Europeans must really take our destiny into our own hands.'² Germany's acting foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel echoed this feeling in a December 2017 speech, mentioning that the US' traditional European allies do not only 'remain sceptical about the Trump Administration', but are preparing 'to part ways on significant issues'.³

New EU Strategies and Institutional Arrangements

In the past 18 months, Europe has launched one initiative after the other related to its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Most notably, these include the EU Global Strategy, the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence, the European Defence Fund and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability.

EU Global Strategy

In June 2016, Federica Mogherini, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy put forward the EU Global Strategy, titled 'Shared Vision, Common Action: A stronger Europe'.⁴ Several months later, the strategy was complemented with an implementation plan. In the strategy's foreword, Mogherini states that it 'nurtures the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union'. Further along, one reads that 'as Europeans we must take greater responsibility for our security. We must be ready and able to deter, respond to, and protect ourselves against external threats. While NATO exists to defend its members – most of which are European – from external attack, Europeans must be better equipped.'⁵

This message about growing the security and defence autonomy of the EU resonates throughout the strategy. To underpin this objective, the strategy emphasises the need for the EU to respond to external conflicts and crises, to build the defence capacities of partners, and to protect the EU and its citizens through external action. The language of the Global Strategy reflects once again Europe's feeling that it is facing more serious external threats and of being left increasingly 'on its own' to deal with this new hostile environment.

Box 1: Predecessors to Europe's Common Security and Defence Cooperation (CSDP)

The defence cooperation between EU member states goes back to the end of the Second World War and has gradually grown in intensity and scope. In 1948, following the Second World War, the UK, France, and the Benelux countries signed the Brussels Treaty, aiming at collective self-defence. In 1954, this Treaty was amended to establish the West European Union (WEU), which also incorporated Italy and Germany. One of the core objectives included 'offering mutual assistance to member countries in resisting any policy of external aggression'.

With its membership growing constantly, within the WEU, signatories agreed upon the conditions under which military units could be deployed and by 1999, these principles were integrated into the Treaty of Amsterdam as members agreed to transfer the WEU's capabilities and functions increasingly into the EU. Following the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, all functions of the WEU had effectively been incorporated into the EU, with the Lisbon Treaty now constituting a cornerstone in the further development of the CSDP.

Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)

The EU Global Strategy reignited the debate around PESCO, the so-called 'sleeping beauty' of the EU's Lisbon Treaty. In November 2017, 23 out of 28 EU member states signed up to PESCO. In early December, Portugal and Ireland decided to join as well, raising the total number of participants to 25. Those opting out are Malta, Denmark and the United Kingdom. Of these, Denmark has a long-standing opt-out on all EU defence matters, while the UK cannot sign up due to its intention to leave the EU all together.

PESCO allows participating countries to pick and choose whether or not to participate in individual multinational defence procurement projects falling under this new cooperation mechanism. This 'modular' approach makes PESCO attractive as a model for 'differentiated integration'.⁶ During the December Summit, the participating member states earmarked 17 joint 'PESCO' projects, which will be officially adopted in early 2018.

The significant difference of PESCO between PESCO and previous defence initiatives is that *if* a country decides to participate, commitments will become binding. In particular with regard to the longer-term development of capabilities and strategic assets, the implementation of PESCO can be a game changer. As a start, those binding commitments include pledges to increase defence budgets overall, and to raise the shares for defence investment expenditure towards 20 percent of total defence spending, and of defence research and technology spending towards 2 percent of total defence spending. Participating member states have also pledged to strengthen efforts in cyber defence cooperation and to work towards better interoperability between national forces.

Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD)

As one of the necessities for effective defence cooperation, the Global Strategy mentions the 'gradual synchronisation and mutual adaptation of national defence planning cycles and capability development practices'. In late 2016, the EU announced the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence ('CARD'), as a mechanism for such synchronisation. The objective is to increase information-sharing in order to avoid duplication, find synergies and identify capability shortfalls. Still in its initial stages, EU member states have started to pilot CARD in recent months.

European Defence Fund (EDF)

In his annual 'State of the European Union', on 13 September 2017, Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, announced the establishment of a European Defence Fund.⁷

The fund aims at promoting collaborative research, investing in smaller industries and start-ups in the European defence sector and incentivising capability development and procurement. Through the fund, the European Commission will provide top-down financial incentives to supplement and amplify national investments in defence research. For this, from 2020 onward, the Commission will provide 1.5 billion euros annually, which would make it the fourth largest European investor in defence research and technology.⁸

Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)

Within the CSDP framework, the EU currently runs sixteen ongoing missions, ten of which are civilian in nature and six have a military character.⁹ While a permanent coordinating structure for the EU's civilian missions exists within the European External Action Service, for long there was no equivalent for the military missions within CSDP. This coordination of military efforts at the EU level has been a topic of discussion for more than a decade, but was repeatedly blocked by the UK, which saw such institutionalisation as duplicating already existing NATO structures.

Anticipating Brexit, in June 2017, the European Council finally approved the establishment of an MPCC, which even though limited in scope, will be responsible for the strategic level of operational planning and conduct of non-executive EU military missions. These include missions in which deployed personnel does not engage in combat activities, nor accompanies foreign armies in their operations. For the moment, this means MPCC covers three EU military training missions: in Central African Republic, Mali and Somalia. It excludes for example the operation EUNAFVOR MED Sophia that is deployed off the Libyan coast.

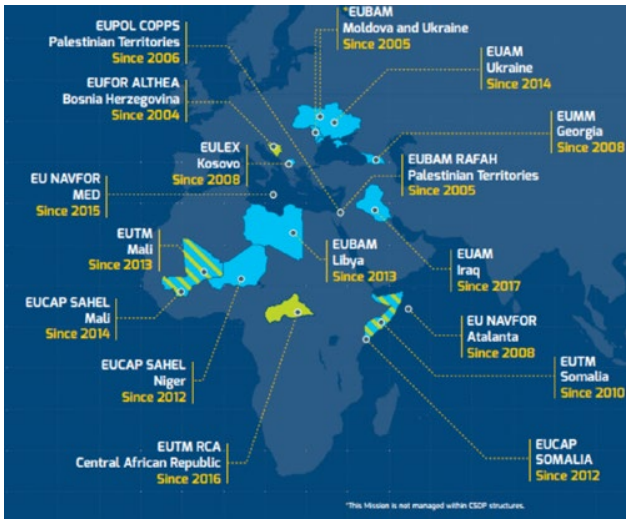
The Wider MENA Region in Europe's Defence Thinking and Engagements

The MENA region has taken up a prominent role in the EU Global Strategy. One of the five key objectives mentioned in the strategy is to work towards 'state and societal resilience to the EU's east and south'.¹⁰ The strategy calls for a peaceful and prosperous Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa, and pledges to address the many dimensions of the crises in Libya and Syria, to enhance anti-terrorism cooperation with North Africa and the Middle East, and to craft a more effective migration policy. In general, it ambitions the EU to engage more systematically on the security dimension of conflicts, urging the Union to be able to respond rapidly, responsibly and decisively, especially to help fight terrorism.

The convergence of threat perceptions throughout Europe has taken place predominantly around issues of immigration, refugees and heightened terror threats. 3

While terror threats are partly home-grown, these issues are intrinsically linked to the stability of the MENA region. The refugee crisis that overwhelmed Europe re-emphasised the link between Europe's security and developments in the MENA region, but also made it painfully clear that Europe has limited capacity to engender change and faces issues working together effectively when confronted with ad hoc crisis.

Current CSDP Missions in MENA



Source: European External Action Service

Of the sixteen current, ongoing missions in the framework of the EU's CSDP, nine are located in the wider MENA region (see map). The overall focus areas of these missions in MENA are fighting terrorism and organised crime, managing migration flows and enhancing border management.

The latest addition has been the EU Advisory Mission in support of security sector reform in Iraq (EUAM), which was established in 2017 in response to a request by the Iraqi government. With an initial one year mandate, a team of 35 EU experts will be deployed to Baghdad by the end of this year. It will focus on assisting with the implementation of the civilian aspects of the Iraqi security strategy, addressing issues including terrorism, corruption, political instability and ethnic and sectarian polarisation.

The CSDP mission receiving the most global attention, is the EU Naval Mission in the Mediterranean (EUNAFVOR MED: Operation Sophia), which started in 2015. Its core mandate is to 'undertake systematic efforts to identify, capture and dispose of vessels and enabling assets used or suspected of being used by migrant smugglers or traffickers, in order to contribute to wider EU efforts to disrupt the business model of human smuggling and trafficking networks in the Southern Central Mediterranean and prevent the further loss of life at sea'.¹¹

EUNAFVOR MED Operation Sophia's mandate is designed around four phases: 1) information gathering (completed); 2) the boarding, searching and seizure of vessels on the high seas and territorial waters, conditional to approval by the United Nation's Security Council (UNSC) and legitimate Libyan authorities; 3) taking operational measures inside Libya against vessels and related assets suspected of being used for smuggling, also subject to international and Libyan approval; and 4) withdrawal of forces. In addition, the mission contributes to the implementation of the UN arms embargo on the high seas, and gathers information on illegal trafficking of oil exports from Libya, supporting a number of related UNSC Resolutions.

A mission which has until recently remained largely still-born but might see more activity in the near future, has been the EU border assistance mission in Libya (EUBAM). EUBAM Libya is a civilian mission launched in 2013, at a time that Libya seemed to be on a path towards stability. The mission was established to support the Libyan authorities in securing the country's land, sea and air borders and to help the authorities with the development of a national Integrated Border Management strategy. But since August 2014, the mission has been forced to operate from Tunis due to the civil war that erupted, thereby negatively affecting its operational abilities.

In the Sahel region, the EU currently has three ongoing CSDP missions: two capability building missions in Mali (EUCAP Sahel Mali) and in Niger (EUCAP Sahel Niger), and a training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali). These missions were launched following the Mali civil war that erupted in 2012 and are linked to a broader EU comprehensive strategy towards the Sahel.¹² Through these missions, the EU provides assistance and advice to national security services regarding the implementation of security sector reform as set out by the new Malian government. In Niger, the EU aims to help develop capacities among security actors in the fight against terrorism and organised crime through the deployment of around 50 security and justice experts.

Counter-Terrorism Cooperation with MENA

In the wake of significant terrorist attacks on European soil, such as the one in Paris in 2015, EU leaders have started highlighting cooperation with partners in the MENA region as an indispensable element of effective counter-terrorism efforts. Indeed, most of the EU-funded projects in the area of counter-terrorism and preventing or countering violent extremism, are geared towards the MENA region.¹³ The EU has also provided Euro 5 million for the Abu Dhabi-based Hedayah, the first International Centre of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism

Tillustrating the increased focus on counter-terrorism cooperation, since February 2015, the EU has started to appoint counter-terrorism and security experts to a number of EU delegations in the MENA region and has initiated 'Counter-terrorism Political Dialogues' with the authorities of several MENA countries, including Tunisia, Lebanon and Jordan. In October 2017, the EU announced stronger cooperation between Europol, the EU's law enforcement agency, and countries in the MENA region, mentioning that 'before the end of the year, the EU will discuss opening negotiations for agreements on the transfer of personal data between Europol and Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey'.¹⁴

Increasing border management and control capacities is also a key focus in these efforts: for example, in addition to the two CSDP border management missions (EUBAM Libya and EUBAM Rafah), the EU runs significant border management programmes in Lebanon and Tunisia. The EU also sees strengthening the rule of law and criminal justice systems in MENA as crucial for counter extremism measures. In addition, the EU puts increasingly emphasis on strengthening MENA authorities' capacities in the area of countering the financing of terrorism and anti-money laundering – with a particular focus on foreign terrorist fighters and their fund raisers. An EU Action Plan to enhance the fight against the financing of terrorism was presented in February 2016 and the EU is currently setting up a related project to support countries in the MENA region in this regard.

Potential Implications of EU's Defence Boost, Including for MENA

Given the emphasis on the stability of the MENA region, it can be expected that the current EU defence boost will impact its operations and initiatives in the region. That said, the EU has seen defence and security cooperation come and go. Touching at the heart of a nation's sovereignty, giving up the slightest control over defence-related issues tends to be a sensitive business. And with different borders, different histories and different strategic cultures, aligning security interests has never really come to fruition.

Still, for the first time, EU leaders seem to be sincere and genuinely driven by a sense that taking care of their own security, including in its direct neighbourhood, by using European partners as multipliers, is crucial. If indeed the member states carry on in the current pace, results are likely to be seen in the following areas:

- More and better coordinated strategic capabilities;
- A more robust rapid response capacity; and,
- A greater willingness to deploy civilian and military missions in the wider MENA region.

In order to have any real autonomous power, Europe will need to upgrade its defence capabilities and acquire the necessary strategic assets. Most of the recently launched initiatives focus on exactly that aspect of cooperation. Through PESCO, member states will not only increase spending on defence, including on research and technology, but also have a mechanism to create economies of scale and invest in strategic assets that would be too costly or risky to develop on a purely national basis.

In addition to creating an incentive for new collaborations, including a pan-European military training centre and a pan-European military medical unit, PESCO can provide an umbrella for existing bottom-up regional defence integration initiatives, such as the Belgian-Dutch naval cooperation, or the European Air Transport Command, a collaboration between France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. In a joint Ministerial Council earlier this year, France and Germany had also announced a range of joint capability projects that they are interested in.¹⁵ Based on that list, future initiatives are likely to include a European maritime surveillance system, a European Medium-Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) drone, the next generation of Tiger helicopters and the development of joint fighter jets to replace the current national versions.

The increased spending on defence, and the development of capabilities and strategic assets, will strengthen the European pillar of NATO and could lead to more autonomous decision-making in Europe's key capitals. As such, it can bolster the EU's ability to act as an international security partner, including in its direct southern neighbourhood and as security partner for the Gulf region.

Another area in which Europeans, without the UK, are to push for rapid progress, is on the deployment of rapid-reaction forces, both with regard to civilian as well as military deployments. As enshrined in the EU treaties, CSDP missions can focus on a range of tasks, including humanitarian and rescue, conflict prevention, peace-keeping, peace-making, disarmament operations, military advice and assistance, and post-conflict stabilisation tasks.¹⁶

With regard to military deployments, the EU has "battlegroups" on continuous stand-by. These small, collective, rapid response forces were declared fully operational in 2007, but so far, have actually never been deployed. In 2013, EU leaders wanted to deploy one of the battlegroups to the Central African Republic, but Britain's hostile reaction meant that EU leaders never even tried to call for their deployment again.¹⁷ Beyond opposition from the UK, the question of 'who pays the bill' has been another factor that impedes the use of the battlegroups. Nevertheless, in the context of current ambitions, EU leaders are reviewing the battlegroup concept and have started to propose solutions for the underlying problems marring the battlegroup initiative, suggesting more flexibility and effective financing.

Many of the current efforts aimed at strengthening Europe's effectiveness in the defence realm will only come to fruition in the medium- to long term, in particular where it involves the development and procurement of strategic assets. However, the current activities are driven by strong perceptions of real external threats, and it is therefore likely that the EU will channel some of its ambition into actual deployments in the geographical areas of greatest concern.

The recent convergence of strategic interests within the EU's Franco-German core is taking place with a focus on North Africa, the Sahel region and the Middle East. As mentioned in the EU Global Strategy, there is a growing concern with regard to the spread of failed states, ungoverned spaces and sectarian conflicts in Europe's southern neighbourhood. The enthusiasm of southern member states including Italy and Spain for EU defence cooperation, reinforces the emphasis on the crises in North Africa and the Sahel in particular, while EU member states also display growing concerns about countering radicalisation in the Horn of Africa.

The EU's increased focus on the external dimension of counter-terrorism have already translated into a substantive number of security-related projects in the MENA region. The growing ambitions and more enabling environment is likely to accelerate this trend. Thus, if any EU deployment comes into realisation, it will most likely entail the strengthening of missions aimed at counter-terrorism, counter-migration and stabilisation of the EU's southern neighbourhood. With regard to geography, North Africa and the Sahel constitute the regions in which the EU can also play a more prominent role, given that places such as Libya and Mali are of lesser strategic interest to the US and Russia, than for example Syria.

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