



Analysen und Argumente aus der Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

15/2004

December 2004

European „Battle Groups“:

A New Stimulus for the European Security and Defense Policy?

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On 22 November 2004, under great media attention, the defense ministers of the European Union in Brussels decided in favor of the formation of "Battle Groups". Meant were mobile combat units, which could be ready for action within a few days and would be available for use in crisis situations, especially on behalf of the United Nations. The goal of this initiative is to give the EU a military capacity to act in distant regions of conflict as well as to bolster the project of the "European Security and Defense Policy" (ESVP) militarily.

How should this decision be assessed? Which problems will emerge for EU members? And - above all - can the concept be implemented in the envisioned timeframe?

Contents

1. The Development of Battle Groups

page 2

2. Chances of Realization	page 3
3. Contact Person in the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation	page 5

1. The Development of Battle Groups

At first, the idea of small, highly mobile, combat units with the ability to react to European crises - initially termed "Tactical Groups" - was launched at the British-French summit in Le Tourquet on 4 February 2003. In light of the growing problems of failing states in Africa, it seemed sensible to be able to rapidly employ military force mandated by the United Nations. Nine months later, the concept was put into concrete terms by the two countries at a further summit meeting in London. The past experiences of the EU-Operation "Artemis" in the Congo during the summer of that year had been taken into consideration and had led to the planning of rapidly deployable units with a strength of approximately 1,500 soldiers. These units were to be able to intervene in conflicts far outside of Europe, with their main focus being Africa (but also elsewhere), and to stabilize the situation until sufficient military forces – UN peacekeeping troops or armed forces from other organizations – were on hand to settle it.

Early February 2004, the German Defense Minister Struck expressed interest in Battle Groups during informal talks at the Security Conference in Munich, where-by the project was transformed into a trilateral initiative. A food-for-thought paper formulated the details (www.geopowers.com/Allianzen/EU/akt_eu/RRF_BGConcept.pdf) and was submitted to the Political and Security Policy Committee of the EU (PSC) . Whereas Battle Groups were initially envisaged only as national units, this incentive paper stressed a multinational character. According to it, Battle Groups could either be formed from one country alone or be multinational. A EU-member could also serve as a "framework nation", i.e. as the main component of a Battle Group, while smaller countries would contribute their respective niche capacities. The main criterion for a particular configuration would be the military efficiency of the combat unit. At the informal meeting of the EU defense ministers in April 2004, the concept found broad consensus and was resolved on 16 June 2004 by the European Council. In November 2004, the defense ministers agreed upon the details of the project.

Thus, 13 Battle Groups are planned, each with a force of at least 1,500 soldiers. A core of three to four light combat regiments is to be reinforced by command- and combat support units. Sapper-, antiaircraft-, signal-, or logistical forces are

correspondingly assigned according to the contingency - similarly, if required, NBC-defense, military police as well as air- and naval forces. Battle Groups are to be ready for deployment in 5 to 10 days (after a maximal 5-day decision-making process in the EU). By 2005, a so-called “Initial Operational Capability” is to be created, which, for instance, is to be able to carry out small evacuation procedures. The “Full Operational Capability” is to be reached pursuant to planning by 2007 and the EU is to be in the position to deploy two of these Battle Groups simultaneously in an ambit of 6,000 kilometers (extending out from Brussels). Each Battle Group is to be able to remain deployed for 30 days, and, through reinforcements and troop substitutions, this period could be extended to 120 days.

So far, confirmed commitments for a total of 12 Battle Groups are in existence. Four of them are designated as purely national (France, Great Britain, Spain and Italy) and are thereby politically easier to use in risky operations. The remainder are multinational or are assembled according to the framework model.

Germany has thus far agreed to three Battle Groups:

- A German-French Battle Group with Belgium, Luxembourg and Spain also contributing. By 2006, this alliance is to have already achieved partial operational capability for evacuation and extraction.
- A German-Dutch led taskforce, with cooperation by the Finnish, is to reach its full operational capability by the first half of 2007.
- The third group will consist of Germany, Poland and Slovakia with Latvia and Lithuania also participating. This group is to be functional by 2009, 2010 at the latest.

On 18 November 2004, Austria expressed the wish to establish a further Battle Group with Germany and the Czech Republic. For this fourth unit with German involvement, however, there is still no set time frame, above all because this question is disputed in Austrian domestic politics.

Germany strongly emphasizes to consider the Battle Group concept only in connection with the also projected NATO Response Force (NRF). The EU project is not to constrain the establishment of the NATO force - precisely because an increase in the defense budgets is not anticipated in the foreseeable future. Thus, the NRF, at least from the German perspective, takes priority.

The problem of competition between NATO and the EU appears, however, not only in the construction phase, but also in later implementation. Since both rapid reaction forces can only be formed from existing military capabilities (the so-called “single set forces”), more specific rules for the access rights of both organizations are required.

Yet, the tension-filled relationship between NATO and the EU, in which particularly France often creates frictions, makes an agreement on such regulations difficult.

2. Chances of Realization

The idea of small EU-combat troops, especially for missions on behalf of the United Nations, makes sense. Also, the EU's emphasis on failing states in Africa is understandable, as NATO has another geographical perspective with regards to its response force. Yet, the Battle Group concept raises multiple, particularly military questions, as to, for instance, the degree of multi-nationality or the inter-operational capabilities of the armed forces.

The core problem, however, is whether the EU will find the strength to implement the agreed-upon concept in times of limited financial resources at all. Regarding its claims to deploy Battle Groups far beyond its own borders, the EU presently lacks the requirements for achieving such a goal. For instance, according to the food-for-thought paper, air transportation for the initial deployment of a single Battle Group requires approximately 200 flights by C-130 transport airplanes (or 30 flights of the C-17 Globemaster Transporter, of which Great Britain is the only EU-member to own, with four total and a fifth ordered). The lack of a EU strategic deployment capability, i.e. the possibility to transport large amounts of military equipment over vast distances, is often euphemistically called "bottleneck resource" - to paper over that it is just not available. The circumscription holds also true for military intelligence and secure communication - they are hardly available as well.

Indeed, the EU has already agreed multiple times to remedy blatant deficiencies regarding the deployment of armed forces (strategic transport, logistics, communications). In most cases, however, the necessary means have been provided only rudimentary.

In December 1999, the EU agreed upon the so-called "Headline Goal". It stipulated that, by the end of 2003, a rapid response force composed of 60,000 soldiers was to be kept ready. It should be deployable within 60 days and be sustainable for up to a year. One year later, the EU members committed up to 100,000 men, 400 aircraft and 100 ships to equip the projected force. Although most commitments were recognizable as pro forma from the beginning, the Headline Goal was soon declared

as "initially operational capable". In 2003, the EU asserted that it had achieved the Headline Goal, declaring the full operational capability of the rapid reaction force. Alas, the intended crisis management capability of 60 000 men was a Potemkin's Village. In half recognition of the failure, in June 2004 a new goal was set - this time named "Headline Goal 2010", including the Battle Groups as a one component. It is not to be excluded in view of scarce means that the EU will again follow the same pattern: declare intermediate objectives as reached, although the necessary "hardware" only exists on paper. In that case, in a few years from now the full operational capability of the Battle Groups would be celebrated, even though the rapid reaction force would only consist of virtual units.

Even if budget priorities could be changed for the benefit of military programs, the question of political consensus within the EU on military action still emerges. *For what or against what* should the forthcoming forces be used? Vague declarations of intent to carry out missions in failing states do not necessarily guarantee an agreement on in which state the EU will act and with which political goal. So far, neither the EU nor other security organizations, as witnessed during the recent humanitarian catastrophes in Africa, have an impressive record in timely and decisive political or military action for humanitarian purposes. The fact that NATO has the same problem

of becoming more militarily efficient, but finding ever less consensus politically on the use of this efficiency, does not make the situation easier.

It holds true for the Battle Groups - as for many of the intentions in the ESVP framework: it is a useful concept, which still raises skepticism since the questions of implementation and financing are not answered accordingly.

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