

EURO-BASES AND BEYOND: TACKLING EUROPE'S EAST-SOUTH DILEMMA

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ABSTRACT

The East-South geostrategic dilemma is a notorious source of tension in Europe, undermining defence cooperation within both NATO and the EU. This paper offers a proposal, seeking to address this dilemma through a new Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project. The Euro-Bases project would involve permanent arrangements and a sustained scheme to regularly rotate forces to shared military infrastructures located in the eastern and the southern neighbourhoods of Europe. Its primary aims would include signalling political solidarity in both directions, solidifying a 360-degree approach to threats and helping alleviate fears of abandonment among European partners. In the long term, through joint training in the field, the Euro-Bases project could contribute to the formation of a shared European strategic culture. Besides, by politically linking NATO's territorial defence to the EU's crisis management, it could contribute to EU-NATO convergence. The project could be prepared in 2020 by the three Weimar Triangle states – Poland, Germany and France – and remain open to all other interested states participating in PESCO. It could be launched with the fourth round of PESCO projects.

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INTRODUCTION

The East-South geostrategic dilemma is a notorious source of tension in Europe, undermining political cohesion and the effectiveness of various initiatives undertaken in NATO, the EU or regional formats. The blame can be pointed to the divergent threat perceptions of European states. Because of natural differences in history, geography, economy and demography, some states regard the politico-military threats posed by Russian policies as priorities, while others are more concerned about asymmetric and non-military security challenges that are primarily rooted in Europe's unstable southern neighbourhood. These differences make it difficult to reach consensus in cases where new actions are agreed upon in multilateral forums. Even if threat perceptions are mutually recognised as legitimate, the allocation of scarce resources and limited political bandwidth remain issues, which hamper the implementation of the agreed-upon steps.

Many attempts have been made to mitigate the effects of the East-South dilemma. Most recently, NATO introduced the '360-degree' principle, intended to ensure that the Alliance, as part of its process of adapting to a rapidly changing security environment, will develop the capacity to address threats coming from every geographic direction and almost any domain. Additionally, the EU's European Global Strategy emphasises the EU's role in helping defend its member states against all forms of threats, including those posed by state actors in their neighbourhood, such as Russia. The European Intervention Initiative (EI2), the most recent attempt to streamline defence cooperation in a mini-lateral European format, also considers both the South and the East with respect to scenarios for future operational engagements.

Nonetheless, there is ample room for improvement. The current security environment in Europe requires further action to address the East-South dilemma. One such step could be a new Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project, which would involve permanent arrangements and a sustained scheme to regularly deploy rotations of forces to shared military infrastructures located in the eastern and the southern neighbourhoods of Europe. This Euro-Bases project would help boost military cooperation among participating states at the technical level, with interoperability in mind, while contributing to solidifying the 360-degree approach as a fundamental principle of security policy in Europe in the strategic dimension. The project could be prepared in 2020 by the three Weimar Triangle states – Poland, Germany and France – and remain open to all other interested states participating in PESCO¹.

THE EAST-SOUTH DILEMMA IN PERSPECTIVE

The East-South dilemma is not a new issue; Western Europe was previously confronted with a geostrategic dilemma in the early 1950s in the context of what was then a flagship European defence project: the European Defence Community (EDC), which involved a fully integrated European Army within NATO. The Soviet threat and the US pressure on West

1. It could also include third states, such as the UK after Brexit, provided that the agreement on the conditions and the framework for the third states' participation in PESCO would be adopted by the EU.

Germany's rearmament pushed France to propose the EDC. However, the rise of overseas colonial conflicts – first in Indochina and then in North Africa – soon forced France into a strategic dilemma. Should it integrate most of its troops into the EDC and the European Army to match the level of German forces and cope with the Soviet threat, or should it keep more troops under national command to ensure their availability for overseas conflicts? Starting in 1953, Stalin's death and the brief détente that followed, alongside the outbreak of violence in North Africa, led military leaders and members of the French parliament to arbitrate in favour of the southern crises and national autonomy. The EDC eventually fell, and defence was driven out of the European integration project – a clear effect of a strategic dilemma left unaddressed.

In the contemporary context, the East-South geostrategic dilemma resurfaced in full strength in 2014. Following the Russian aggression in Ukraine, an imminent need arose to respond to both the Russian revisionism in the East and the security challenges from the South, following the unprecedented rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) and the wave of irregular migration caused by the state and security breakdowns in the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel. Ardent debates ensued, particularly within NATO. Eastern flank countries, such as Poland, called for quick and deep reforms of NATO's strategy, planning, capabilities, force and command structures so that the deterrence and the defence against Russia could be increased in the context of Article 5 contingencies. However, these ideas were curbed by allies who did not perceive the Russian threat in the same way and who, in contrast, directly experienced the adverse effects of the security breakdowns in the southern neighbourhood of the EU. Heavily engaged in stabilising the Sahel by means of the military operation Barkhane, it was France that perhaps most vocally expressed its feeling of abandonment by its allies. Indeed, the majority of EU members were reluctant to deploy troops to Africa and provided limited practical support, following the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks and France's invocation of Article 42.7 of the Treaty on EU.

THE 360-DEGREE APPROACH AND ITS LIMITS

Nevertheless, some encouraging signals of Europeans' willingness to tackle the East-South dilemma have been observed since 2014. In the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, Poland provided approximately 100 troops to EU military operations in Mali and the Central African Republic. Despite its traditional focus on Africa, France was one of the first countries to actively contribute to NATO interim reassurance measures in the eastern flank, for instance, by deploying four Rafale fighter jets to Poland in 2014. Since 2014, approximately 4,000 French soldiers have been deployed annually to the eastern flank to carry out various missions and exercises, including, since 2017, participation in NATO's multinational battlegroups, deployed in the framework of the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) (France typically contributes a company-size force of approximately 300 troops).

Despite its traditional focus on the European continent, Germany also deployed substantial forces to Mali, making Germany one of the few countries that operationally responded to France's 2015 invocation of Article 42.7. With approximately 700 German soldiers on

the ground in 2018, Mali became one of the Bundeswehr's most important deployments, despite the fact that Germany had also assumed the role of the framework nation of the Lithuania-based NATO battlegroup, with more than 550 troops. Similarly, in 2018, the Estonian parliament approved the deployment of 50 soldiers to the Barkhane operation in Mali. These examples demonstrate that East-South solidarity can contribute to overcoming the geostrategic dilemma. However, there is ample room for new initiatives and cooperation formats that could contribute to addressing the East-South geostrategic dilemma.

EAST AND SOUTH INTERLINKED

It is increasingly acknowledged that the East and the South are interlinked by similar threats, even if those threats encompass different scales and forms or affect Europe in divergent ways. One example involves the radicalised foreign fighters who travel to Syria and Ukraine to take part in the conflicts there. Irregular migration tests European border control in both the Mediterranean and the East. Economic roots of conflicts, along with corruption, weak state structures and poor governance, follow similar patterns in both post-Soviet spaces and many African and Middle Eastern countries. Finally, Russia, the key source of threats and security challenges in the East, has also been expanding its military presence to the South of Europe. In addition to Syria, where Russian troops peaked at 6,000 in 2018 and played a decisive role in helping Assad's regime, the Central African Republic and Libya also have Russian military presence, and Russia aims to establish another base in Eritrea.

EURO-BASES: CORE PARAMETERS

To help solidify the 360-degree approach to security in the long term and thereby contribute to alleviating the East-South dilemma, a new project could be proposed within PESCO. The Euro-Bases project would follow the existing logic of military cooperation in Europe regarding the deployment of troops to an allied state's military infrastructures and take it one step further.

This kind of cooperation has recently been developed in Europe. In the East, NATO's multinational battlegroups are based in Tapa (Estonia), Adazi (Latvia), Rukla (Lithuania) and Orzysz (Poland). As the framework nation in Rukla, Germany decided to invest €110 million in shared infrastructures and practice grounds by 2021. In the South, French and German forces share a French airbase in Niamey (Niger) and have established closely connected military camps. Two Spanish tactical transport aircrafts are stationed at French bases in Dakar (Senegal) and Libreville (Gabon). The French base in Gao (Mali) hosts an Estonian force protection unit and three British heavy-lift helicopters, which are expected to be joined by Danish helicopters by the end of 2019. Furthermore, a couple of PESCO projects are already devoted to sharing military infrastructures: Co-Basing and Network of Logistic Hubs in Europe and Support to Operations (LogHub). Led by France, the Co-Basing project seeks to simplify and standardise procedures to enable participating states to use one

another's military bases overseas, with the final objective of facilitating and accelerating deployments to joint military missions. In parallel, the German-led LogHub project aims to improve strategic logistic support and force projection in EU missions.

The proposed Euro-Bases project would differ from the existing initiatives as its essence would be the members' binding commitment to regularly rotate troops to predefined military locations in the East and the South. The rotations would be enabled by permanent arrangements regarding broadly understood host nation support and the status of force issues and follow a sustained, albeit flexible, scheme of contributions.

At the operational level, the primary purpose of the rotations would be to engage forces in joint education activities, as well as exchange of lessons learned, training and exercises, including live drills, with the host nation. Thereby, the project could be viewed as a practical step towards increasing the interoperability of European armed forces; fostering a better understanding of national training curricula, tactics and doctrines; facilitating cooperation in future missions; and enabling the establishment of a European strategic culture in the long term.

However, at the strategic level, deployments to the East and the South would have very different functions. The regular presence of increased number of allied forces in the East – along with NATO's EFP and the US deployments within the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) – would complement the credibility of deterrence and defence against Russia by adding a further reassurance measure. Because the troops deployed there would focus on education, training and exercises regarding territorial defence scenarios, these troops would be perceived as means of signalling the participating states' commitment to defending the flank countries in case of a crisis with Russia. In this way, the Euro-Bases would mirror – to a considerable extent – the steps taken by the US within the EDI and more specifically, the framework of the American bilateral cooperation with Poland.

In the South, in turn, the project's focus would be on crisis management. Increased multinational presence in Africa, primarily the Sahel, would help build better situational awareness and broaden the understanding on regional security issues in Europe. The learning-by-doing principle would be applied through subsequent deployments, so various obstacles (e.g., legal, administrative and logistic) to moving troops abroad could also be identified and solved. This way, potential future crisis management operations would be facilitated, as both the regional security environment and practicalities regarding deploying and sustaining forces there would be better known and handled. Where possible and applicable, the deployed forces could also help with capacity building by engaging the local security and defence forces in education, training and exercises. Thus, the proposed Euro-Bases project would complement the efforts undertaken by the EU, as well as coalitions (e.g., the Sahel Alliance) and individual countries (e.g., France), increasing the region's stability in the longer term.

To meet these goals, the rotations should follow a sustained albeit flexible scheme. On the one hand, there should be a guiding assumption that forces should remain deployed for at least six months in a year so that an enduring – if not continuous – presence in the East and the South is assured to underwrite the core political dimension of the Euro-Bases

project. On the other hand, the subsequent deployments should be tailored to the resources available at the moment, taking into account training needs and unexpected operational requirements in other theatres. Consequently, the rotations' sizes and compositions could be scaled up or down. Rotations could involve entire battalions, companies or even smaller force elements. Moreover, different units or even different services could rotate in a mixed scheme. For instance, an air squadron deployed to the East for a joint training session could be followed by a mechanised company that would be tasked to participate in a live exercise or a command element that would be invited to engage in table-top exercises or doctrine-related discussions.

The forces would be deployed to existing military bases in the East and the South and rely on the currently used infrastructure, such as ranges and ports of debarkation. To further strengthen the project's key political aspect – the goal to help solidify the 360-degree principle and tackle the East-South dilemma – some of the costs related to supporting the deployments could be shared. In principle, sustaining the project's deployment locations would remain a national responsibility, as these bases and other infrastructures would remain national. However, a special financial mechanism could be developed to share some of the logistics costs among the project members. This would also provide an opportunity to test the possibility of wider capability mutualisation in the long term.

Permanent arrangements and a sustained scheme for regular rotations of forces could be established more easily if the Euro-Bases project would be developed within PESCO. The project could draw on the stable political governance and administrative framework designed for PESCO, including legal and financial issues. Moreover, using the PESCO framework would keep the proposed project under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) umbrella, adding weight to its strategic dimension and contributing – by its very nature – to EU-NATO cooperation. Finally, Euro-Bases could be closely related to existing PESCO projects, including Co-Basing and LogHub.

EURO-BASES: A TASK FOR WEIMAR

To become a PESCO project, Euro-Bases would have to be negotiated and prepared in 2020 so that it could be proposed formally within the expected fourth round of PESCO projects, which will most likely occur in 2021. The project would be open to all interested PESCO member states, but a number of reasons make the three Weimar states – France, Germany and Poland – fit for launching it first.

At the political level, France is the most vocal about the need for European solidarity in addressing security challenges and threats coming from the southern neighbourhood. Conversely, Poland is considered the most active in calling for reinforcing deterrence and defence against Russia in the eastern flank. In turn, Germany plays a peculiar political role with regard to both the eastern and the southern strategic directions, being relatively heavily engaged in both theatres by being the framework nation for the Lithuania-based NATO battlegroup and having a large contingent in Mali.

At the military level, the three countries are among Europe's strongest states – they possess a relatively wide spectrum of military capabilities, with France being the only continental European nuclear power. Furthermore, all three countries are involved operationally in NATO's EFP in the eastern flank. At the same time, Poland boasts a record of significant operational engagements in Africa since the 2006 EUFOR RD Congo operation. Moreover, in terms of their defence budgets, the three countries stand out in the EU, particularly after Brexit. While Poland has the lowest military expenditure among the three countries, its military budget has been increasing at a fast pace and is expected to reach 2.5% of its GDP by the end of the 2020s, a figure unprecedented in Europe.

The three Weimar states signalled their willingness to make defence a key element of their cooperation. In 2011, they led a joint initiative to reinvigorate the CSDP and established a joint EU battlegroup, which went on standby in 2013. Simultaneously, a robust framework for bilateral military-to-military cooperation between France and Poland on one side and Germany and Poland on the other was established.

Cooperation among the Weimar states has been dormant in recent years; their political differences in a number of European policy areas are to blame. However, a reboot of relations is possible and plausible, not only because France, Germany and Poland together have enough political clout to jointly shape the security policy in Europe, but also because they have a shared interest in preventing the adverse effects of the East-South dilemma. The Euro-Bases project could be a long-sought flagship of the Weimar defence cooperation, thereby providing an impetus for potential cooperation among the three states in other areas.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

While the Euro-Bases project is not a silver bullet that can resolve the East-South dilemma once and for all, it could offer a number of benefits if taken up seriously.

In the East, Euro-Bases would demonstrate greater European solidarity in the face of the Russian threat and contribute to alleviating fears of abandonment from northern and eastern European states. This objective fits perfectly within the logic of NATO's approach to the eastern flank and complements the increased US rotations in the region, which are conducted under the EDI and fall within bilateral Polish-American cooperation. Euro-Bases could thus complement NATO's defence and deterrence against Russia in the eastern flank by adding a further reassurance measure. Furthermore, if Euro-Bases were a PESCO project, it would signal the EU's commitment and new role in strengthening its member states' security against politico-military threats stemming from Russian policies.

In the South, the Euro-Bases project would signal a common strategic interest in jointly solving security challenges coming from this geostrategic direction. It would additionally help alleviate France's fear of abandonment in the face of future African crises and, perhaps more importantly, contribute to setting the groundwork for potentially facilitating deployments to regions in crisis situations, an issue that France has continued to press in its agenda for European defence.

In the long term, through regular joint education initiatives, exchange of lessons learned, common training and joint exercises, the Euro-Bases project could help stimulate convergence among member states' threat perceptions and strategic cultures. The project would thus facilitate the development of common European strategies, doctrines and scenarios for all relevant frameworks and cooperation vehicles.

Finally, the project could contribute to EU-NATO convergence by helping develop practical support for both the EU and NATO and by politically linking NATO's territorial defence missions to the EU's crisis management missions. The launch of Euro-Bases as a PESCO project would signal the EU's ability to complement both NATO's and national efforts of defence and deterrence against Russia. In turn, this would contribute to the debates on the limits and the parameters of the political concept of European strategic autonomy.

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