

‘Is the European Defence Integration the answer for Europe’s security concerns?’

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by Elena Broekman and Zach Lambert*

The global security environment is changing rapidly and in ways that are proving challenging liberal democratic societies and global governance systems and institutions. These changes have resulted in key challenges for States to address, both independently and together, including: information warfare, cyber, big data, terrorism, mass migration, transnational crime, and rapid technological changes (i.e. hypersonics, information systems, robotics, genomics and biotechnology). Changing demographics are also a challenge to nations’ economic and social security, with falling birth rates most prevalent in western countries. Members of a Close Session panel focusing on European defence integration, hosted on the first day of the GLOBSEC Bratislava Forum, emphasised the immediacy of these challenges. Together, they outlined that the world is changing, that it is changing right now, and that in order to face these challenges, the European Union (EU) needs greater coordination and defence capabilities.

Europe has been called on, now with a sense of increasing urgency, to do more in its own defence. The consensus during the session was that the EU needs a more structured approach to defence and must place more emphasis on developing its complementarity with NATO. However, a number of internal challenges were identified that currently contribute to the slow pace of development on this issue. Historically, the EU was presented with greater, both in number and impact, security issues than defence issues. In more recent times, it has learnt how to successfully manage both issues and deal with new and emerging challenges by using soft-power, in addition to its hard power. The panel outlined that the EU now needs to shift its current national defence approach towards a more integrated EU approach, while identifying that there is a distinct lack of political consensus on how to do this.

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) treaty-based framework presents a potential solution to this challenge. The panel outlined that PESCO can have an impact because it is legally binding, unlike other EU commitments. They emphasised the role that PESCO can play in changing the EU’s thinking on capability development and increase its focus on high-end warfighting capabilities.

In addition, this change of scope will not come at the cost of neglecting the civilian-side of defence that the EU has spent so many years advocating for, including its humanitarian assistance and disaster relief commitments. PESCO can be a vehicle to increase the EU’s research and development (R&D) and facilitate better coordination between member countries, in both burden sharing and identifying gaps still left to fill. This would help improve the EU’s ability to respond to security issues and augment its contributions to NATO and in broader global operations. All of the panellists agreed that PESCO would help strengthen NATO, by enhancing European coordination and capabilities.

The panel emphasised the importance of NATO as the cornerstone of Europe’s security architecture and highlighted that the capabilities developed through PESCO will enhance the EU’s contribution to

NATO missions and operations. Furthermore, there will be elements of complementarity between the institutions, as NATO is not well placed to respond to some defence and security issues that the EU is. For example, in its responses to security threats resulting from mass migration, economic sanctions and protecting critical infrastructure.

According to the panel, a key method to establishing greater European defence integration is to take a design-based approach, thus identifying the goal and the primary ways to achieve it. To do so, the EU needs to identify the effect PESCO is trying to achieve by developing capability that is complimentary between European nations and within NATO.

The panel also discussed the need for strong leadership in order to move ahead with greater European defence integration. Leadership from France and Germany was identified as being very important, but not at the expense of smaller member countries. The topic of leadership was discussed with a focus on burden sharing and identifying gaps to fill, as well as increasing innovation on R&D.

Overall, the panel agreed that coherence and complementarity was essential in developing the kind of European defence integration that enhances EU defence and security, as well as its capacity to contribute to NATO. Nevertheless, domestic political hurdles, such as faulty leadership and political consensus, would need to be prioritised and overcome before this could ever be achieved.

About the authors:

Elena Broekman is a Policy Officer, Strategic Policy Division within the Department of Defence. Elena provides policy advice to Government and senior Defence leaders on defence and national security matters, focusing specifically on Australia's engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Her biggest professional achievement to date has been her significant contribution to the Whole-of-Government 'Step-Up' in Australia's engagement in the Pacific. This initiative was announced by Prime Minister Morrison in November 2018 and builds on development assistance to the region of \$1.3 AUD billion. Elena moved to Canberra to join the Defence Graduate Program in 2017. Before this, she was located in Melbourne, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts (International Studies) at RMIT. During her studies, she completed a student exchange program to Sciences Po Toulouse and undertook internships at both the US Consulate-General Melbourne and the Global Foundation. Elena grew up in the pristine coastal city of Warrnambool, Victoria.

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