

Berlin and PESCO: German priorities in developing military cooperation within the EU

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On 18 October Germany's acting government adopted guidelines for the country's participation in permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) in the EU. PESCO is a Treaty-based framework aimed at enhancing defence cooperation among capable and willing EU Member States and is one of the latest initiatives within the common security and defence policy (CSDP), besides the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). According to the government's guidelines, PESCO should support the closing of capability gaps, the development of the EU's autonomous crisis management capabilities, and more effective coordination and accessibility of resources. In line with Protocol No 10 on PESCO added by the Lisbon Treaty, Germany wants participating EU Member States to adopt binding commitments on: increasing defence expenditure for closing gaps in strategic capabilities, developing capabilities jointly, improving the deployability of multinational formations, elaborating on a joint approach in closing capability gaps, and using the European Defence Agency for big defence procurements. The defence minister, Ursula von der Leyen, also mentioned projects that Germany would like to develop under PESCO: a coordination centre for medical services, a logistics network, joint training for military officers, a centre of excellence for EU training missions, joint helicopter and transport aircraft units.

Commentary

- The guidelines for Germany's participation in PESCO which have been adopted by the federal government are not only meant to be a negotiation mandate but also a sign of the strong commitment of the foreign and defence ministers in the outgoing government to develop the CSDP. Since the decision of the European Council in June this year on the need to launch PESCO, the EU Member States interested in joining the framework have been discussing the aims, areas, specific projects, and the conditions of participation in the initiative. EU Member States who want to participate in PESCO will present a common notification to the Council of the EU and the High Representative on establishing PESCO, most likely during the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on the 13 November. This notification will probably be adopted during the council's meeting on 11 December in a qualified majority vote.

- There is currently a gap between political rhetoric and military reality in German security and defence policy. On the political level, Berlin has since 2015 called for military cooperation in Europe to be enhanced and for a European Defence and Security Union to be created. This has also become one of the flagship projects of defence minister Ursula von der Leyen. In Germany the European rhetoric was meant to increase popular support for strengthening the Bundeswehr and increasing defence spending. In the EU these postulates have become more relevant since demonstrating progress in European integration gained importance after the Brexit referendum. On the military level, however, the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP), which places the emphasis on enhancing collective defence capabilities, has determined the direction of the development of the German Armed Forces.
- Different tendencies impact this twofold development. On the one hand, Germany is aware of its military dependence on the US, of the importance of NATO and the need of German allied engagement to maintain the European security order. On the other hand, Berlin wants greater political emancipation from the US (especially under the Trump administration) and feels the need to (partly) meet the French arguments for more European military engagement in the southern neighbourhood of the EU. European rhetoric is also being used to promote the structural integration of the Bundeswehr as a core of cooperation and to enhance the German political, military and industrial position. However, the German projects within PESCO are not far-reaching. Most of them have been put forward for years. They aim to strengthen non-offensive capacities based on German structures (medical service, logistics) and support the German arms industry (by the multilateral purchase of NH90 helicopters and A400M transport aircraft). However, in the long run PESCO as well as the EDF and CARD, if developed solely for the purpose of crisis management operations in the southern neighbourhood, may become an increasingly problematic alternative to developing the capabilities needed for collective defence within NATO.
- In the long run, developing far-reaching military cooperation within the EU and creating multinational integrated military structures will become an increasing problem for Germany (and its partners) due to internal German legal constraints. The German parliament has to approve every external military engagement of the Bundeswehr, which will make the use of highly integrated multilateral structures in the future dependent on the decision of the Bundestag. At present Berlin claims that the PESCO projects currently being discussed do not diminish German sovereignty in security policy, nor that of any other nation. Hence there is no need to change the law in order to adjust the role of the Bundestag to the new realities of European cooperation. It is highly unlikely that the new Jamaica coalition in Berlin will raise this topic, since the Green party in particular is against any changes. The 2015 attempt by a parliamentary commission led by Volker Rühe to limit the role of the Bundestag (in order to make Germany a more reliable partner in multilateral military cooperation) was not successful.