THE (DIS-/)INTEGRATION OF THE EU'S RAPID RESPONSE CAPABILITIES: THE CASE OF THE EU BATTLEGROUPS

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Abstract: *The post-Cold War circumstances challenged Europe in terms of security and defence. The European states realised that they had to share the responsibility for global security in order to ensure their own integrity. In other words, a common strategic culture was sought to be developed as an expression of an articulated intercultural communication aimed to act as a binding element between the EU member states formerly belonging to the Eastern and Western Blocs. The EU's rapid response capabilities in general and the EU battlegroups in particular were chosen as the best answer to this strategic demand. Despite the EU battlegroups being considered the cornerstone of European 'expertise' in terms of crises management operations, this rapid response capability proved to be a disillusion. For a better understanding of the current status of the EU battlegroups concept, this paper is going to assess its feasibility. Special considerations will be offered regarding its itinerary, the strategic and operational challenges that this concept is facing and, not ultimately, regarding its prospects.*

Keywords*: EU battlegroups; rapid response; security*

1. INTRODUCTION

A coordinated (Western) European defence was certainly a political chimera in the Cold War era. The situation changed dramatically immediate after the fall of Berlin Wall as the stability of the bipolar world was replaced by the incertitude of the globalised one. Despite the European states were rarely more secure from military threats originating within the region, salient high security threats emerged from the 'near abroad'. Frozen conflicts such as in Balkans or Transnistria, WMD proliferation, energy insecurity, cyber-attacks or Islamist terrorism posed fundamental challenges.

Facing this new strategic context, the EU member states' military forces amounting a total combined forces of over two millions troops - theoretically, the largest in the world- were, however, "unable to continue to provide the whole range of capabilities in their army, navy, and air force, and could not maintain certain capabilities unless in cooperation with others" (S. Biscop 2005:29). As R. Gates put it, "the demilitarization of Europe has gone from a blessing in the 20th century to an impediment to achieving real security and lasting peace in the 21st" (cited in Council on Foreign Relations, February 2010). As a consequence, the capitals of Europe became aware that absence of war is not synonymous with security and the newly-emerged challenges cannot be addressed unless they pool and share assets. Under these circumstances a reorganisation of Europe's military forces became a priority.

However, building trust among the EU member states for achieving a recalibration of their national armed forces from territorial defence to expeditionary operations could have been a major obstacle. Therefore, a common strategic culture aimed to act as a binding element between the EU member states formerly belonging to the Eastern and Western Blocs was sought to be developed. According to C. Gray, a "strategic culture can be defined as the beliefs, attitudes and norms towards the use of force, held by a security community which has had a unique historical experience" (cited in L. Chappell 2009:419). In fact, the EU can fit only partially into this definition as its 'unique historical experience' can be discussed only since the democratisation of the Eastern Bloc.

This post-Cold War status quo was surprisingly a foundation for the EU battlegroups (EU BGs) which came as a test bed for reaching a common European strategic culture that would ultimately lead to a coordinated European defence. But how and why the EU BGs were chosen as the best answer to this strategic demand?

2. THE (DIS-/)INTEGRATION OF THE EU'S RAPID RESPONSE CAPABILITIES

Despite the EU's structured interest in shaping a coordinated defence can be traced back to the Cold War period, a modern approach emerged through the Maastricht Treaty. Signed on 7 February 1992 and entered into force on 1 November 1993, the Maastricht Treaty established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as initial premises for developing a common strategic culture. However, the wars in the Balkan throughout the 1990s revealed that "CFSP would only be credible if it was backed up with the possibility to use military power" (B. Schmitt, 2004:89) and as a consequence, the EU member states were forced to place the development of military capabilities at the centre of their national policymaking. This necessity, as K. Keulman put it, "resulted in intensifying motivation on the part of the European Union members to strengthen military collaboration among themselves" (2006:46-47).

Probably the first response to the issue of comparative military inadequacy and to the necessity of a better cooperation in terms of military capabilities was agreed at the Franco-British summit in St. Malo in 1998. In fact, the paragraph 2 of the joint declaration set a clear strategic perspective for the EU "the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises"(in M. Rutten 2001:8), meanwhile article 4 was visionary and outlined for the first time in an official EU document the demand for rapid reaction capabilities: "Europe needs strengthened armed forces that can react rapidly to the new risks" (in M. Rutten 2001:9). As a consequence, at the Cologne European Council of June 1999 all EU member states agreed to transform this bilateral initiative into a European reality by creating European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) - EU's own security brand. Indeed, ESDP - later updated and renamed Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) - became an integral part of the CFSP and was responsible to deal with all the issues regarding EU security and defence, including to set common capabilities goals, to shape common strategic objectives or to conduct joint crisis management operations. According to K. Keulman, "the ESDP marks a movement away from the civilian nature of the EU and its institutional connection with NATO" (2006:47). Another important event not only in the crystallisation of the EU's integrated military capabilities but also in determining European propensity for rapid reaction happened six months later at the Helsinki European Council Summit of December 1999. Apart from establishing the Headline Goal 2003 and the commitment of EU member states for the European Rapid Reaction Force (ERRF) of 50,000-60,000 troops in the mission spectrum of *Petersberg tasks* (military tasks of humanitarian, peacekeeping or peace-making nature), the Helsinki European Council Summit created the political foundation of the future EU BGs by offering special attention to rapid-response capabilities

> the Union will improve and make more effective use of resources in civilian crisis management (…) special attention will be given to a rapid reaction capability (in M. Rutten, 2001:83).

The idea was reiterated and further developed at the Franco-British summit of Le Touquet in February 2003 (see in A. Missiroli, 2003:39).

Another important document urging the need for rapid reaction forces was the European Security Strategy (ESS). Being adopted in December 2003, it retained in terms of rapid response that "active policies are needed to counter the new dynamic threats. We need to develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention (Council of the European Union 2003:11). As revealed by S. Biscop, despite its severe criticism, the ESS was quite relevant regarding the EU BGs as its 'sermon' was connected to the further creation of the rapid-response capabilities (2005:31).

2.1 A recipe for the development of the EU rapid-response capabilities. The successful outcome of the *Operation Artemis*, the first autonomous EU military mission outside Europe, had a major influence on the crystallisation of the EU rapid-response concept. Launched in June 2003 as a bridging operation for the United Nations Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), *Operation Artemis* achieved its objective of stabilising security conditions in parts of the Ituri region of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

This first EU success in terms of crisis management operation underlined the EU's high efficiency to operate with a small force and "provided EU policy-makers and planners with a real-life template for future rapid response deployments" (G. Lindstrom 2007:10). Subsequently, *Operation Artemis* became a "reference model for the development of a BG

sized rapid response capability" (R. Hamelink 2005:8), affecting in several ways the formation of the EU BGs.

Firstly, *Operation Artemis* influenced the force structure of the EU BGs. In fact, the usage of small scale units of approximately 1500 soldiers proved to be efficient in the Democratic Republic of Congo and EU found it as ideal in the context of limited resources provided by its member states towards a military operation under common framework. Secondly, the mission spectrum of the EU BGs was shaped according to the above-mentioned operation. For instance, as J.Y. Haine remarked, both of them were purposed for Africa – at least, initially in the case of the EU BGs (2004:21). Thirdly, the objective of *Operation Artemis* was to stabilize the situation until sufficient military forces were on hand to settle it; this aspect of force's sustainability was included initially in the BG concept (M. Hatzigeorgopoulos, 2012:2). Fourthly, as G. Linsdstrom noticed, the EU BG concept incorporated the rapid response nature of the 2003 operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2007:11).

Overall, as J. Kaitera and G. Ben-Ari put it,

> without the positive experience of *Operation Artemis*, it is questionable whether the political process for accepting and shaping the battlegroup concept would have been as smooth and swift as it has been (2008:2).

2.2 The enactment of the EU BGs and the 'fratricide'. The EU BGS came into being officially on 10 February 2004 when *The Battlegroup concept* food for thought paper was released by France, Germany and the United Kingdom. This document envisaged the defining features of the EU BGs by containing proposals regarding its mission spectrum, deployability, sustainability and command and control (Institute for Security Studies, 2005:10-16). The final version of the EU BG concept was agreed in Brussels on 14 June 2004 by the EU Military Committee and in November same year the first thirteen EU BGs were formed. The EU BGs reached Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in January 2005 as one EU BG was on stand-by for a period of six months before it was replaced. Subsequently, the EU BGs reached Full Operational Capacity (FOC) in January 2007 as EU had the theoretical capacity to undertake two concurrent single BG-size rapid response operations and to launch them nearly simultaneously.

The EU BGs capability was also introduced in the Headline Goal 2010 as 'a key element' (Council of the European Union, 2004:3). Initially, EU assumed a dual capacity in terms of rapid response comprising ERRF for 'high-intensity' operations and EU BGs for 'low-intensity' ones in what L. Cladi and A. Locatelli called "a long march to catch up with Washington" (2012:275). However, the EU policy-makers understood that a common European strategic culture was still underway and large military projects such as the ERRF conducted *ab initio* would have constituted a chimera. As a consequence, the EU member states stopped the formation of the ERFF and its area of competence was meant to be fulfilled by the EU BGs. Indeed, this decision was favoured by the rising popularity of the EU BG concept among the EU member states which perceived it as requiring the minimum concession towards a deeper military integration, meanwhile representing an ideal safe haven for advancing domestic priorities on the common European agenda of security and defence. Overall, as R. Gowan remarked, "rapid reaction, and the battlegroups in particular, are no substitute for a strategy" (2005:14); however, the pretext of a possible integration of the national armies under a common European framework was the most plausible excuse of the pragmatic EU member states for justifying the defence expenditures on their national armies.

3. THE FEASIBILITY OF THE EU BG CONCEPT

For a better understanding of the feasibility of the EU BG, it is important to proceed to an analysis of the concept by firstly illustrating its main features; secondly, indicating its subsidiary roles; thirdly, revealing the strategic and operational challenges; and not ultimately, highlighting its prospects.

3.1 Main features. The EU BG concept is defined in the EU's partial declassified document *EU Battlegroup Concept* as:

> the minimum military effective, credible, rapidly deployable, coherent force package capable of stand-alone operations, or for the initial phase of larger operations. It is based on a combined-arms, battalion-sized force, reinforced with combat-support and combat service-support elements (…) In their generic composition, but depending on the mission, Battlegroups are about 1,500 personnel strong (Council of the European Union, 2012b).

In addition, the EU BGs need to be "associated with a deployable force headquarters

and pre-identified operational and strategic enablers, such as strategic lift and logistics" (Council of the European Union, 2012b).

In terms of decision-making, the ambition is that the European Council should be able to take the decision to launch an operation within 5 days and that forces start implementing their mission on the ground no later than 10 days after that decision. This requires that EU BGs are to be built on assets and capabilities held at a readiness of 5-10 days (Council of the European Union, 2012b). Concerning their duration of deployment, EU BGs are on standby for a six-month period, or multiples of it, and should be initially sustainable for 30 days, extendable to 120 days if resupplied appropriately (Council of the European Union, 2012b; Council of the European Union, 2013b:2).

The EU BGs need to be based "on the principle of multinationality and could be formed by a framework nation or by a multinational coalition of Member States" (Council of the European Union, 2012b). Even though the EU BG concept allows for national BGs as well, it is rather considered to be an exception or an emergency solution. Indeed, as of now, the EU BG roster was fulfilled to a high extent by all EU member states - excepting Denmark and Malta - and invited non-EU states (for more details regarding EU BGs and commitments, see *for 2005-2012* European Union Military Staff, June 2012; *for 2013-2018* Council of the European Union, 2013a; *for 2019-2024* Council of the European Union, 2018b:2).

In addition, the EU BGs are expected to be employed in the mission spectrum of Article 17(2) of the Treaty of European Union - known as the *Petersberg tasks* (Council of the European Union 2004:4). Indeed, the EU BGs can be used under three specific situations: in bridging operations (in support of troops already in the ground such in the Artemis case), in initial entry rapid-response operations (in advance of a larger follow-on force) or in stand-alone operations (in limited scale crisis that require rapid response) (G. Lindstrom 2007:19). Clearly, these situations are not comprehensive or mutually exclusive as a potential EU BG mission may have its own unique features that are hard to be incorporated solely under one or another category.

Taking aside these conditions of employment, where should EU BGs operate? The theatre of operations for the EU BGs is frequently referred to a deployment radius of 6,000 kilometers. However, as shown by L. Chappell, the planning assumption of 6,000 km from Brussels is still an important-but not exhaustive- guidance (2009:427). It is worth mentioning though that the operational planning process of this rapid response capability can be hardly forecast as no EU BG has been deployed until now.

The headquarters are also important stakeholders in the operational planning process due to their role as primary structures that form the EU's generic command and control (C2). In general terms, a EU military action has to be led by a Force Headquarter (FHQ) at the operational level and a Component Headquarter(CCHQ) at the tactical level; both under the supervision of an Operational Headquarter (OHQ) at the strategic level. However, in the case of the EU BG only the FHQ and OHQ are compulsory, meanwhile the emergence of a CCHQ depends on the decision of the framework nation. To date, six countries (France, UK, Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece) have made available their national OHQ for EU military missions. EU can also use NATO's OHQ under the 'Berlin Plus' arrangements or the EU Operations Centre – both located in Belgium – as a substitute for a national OHQ (see Council of the European Union, 2012a:1). Concerning the FHQ, the contributing nations has to provide it as a prerequisite for the formation of a EU BG.

In terms of EU BGs' performance, EU developed a system of validation that comprises: standards and criteria, common training and certification. However, this system of validation should be perceived as a general guide because the EU places the responsibility of delivering efficient forces on the contributing countries meanwhile the responsibility 'as a whole' belongs to the leading nations (see Council of the European Union, 2012b).

The whole process of forming a EU BG and its possible deployment involves a high-stake burden. In fact, how is the EU BG system financed? In terms of financing, the EU BGs are not distinctive from other CSDP military operations. Under this framework, two categories of costs can be determined: common costs and individual costs. Common costs - including incremental costs associated with operational headquarters, local administration, transportation within the OHQ area and lodging infrastructure - are covered by the *Athena mechanism* which is formed by member states' contributions according to their gross national income. In the meantime, individual costs – including transporting troops from participating countries to the theatre of operations as well as other costs related to the formation of the EU BGs and placing them on standby - are the responsibility of the contributing nations according to the principle of 'costs lie where they fall'. G. Lindstrom summarizes

very well the financial dimension of the EU BGs: "the more personnel and equipment a participating country contributes, the higher its expected contributions costs to be" (2007: 25-26).

3.2 Subsidiary roles. Apart from offering EU a specific tool in the range of rapid response capabilities - as discussed above - the EU BG concept was planned to assume other interrelated roles.

For instance, the EU BG concept was designed as a driver for the national armed forces of the EU member states in terms of capability development, interoperability and rapid long-range deployments (see EU Council Secretariat, 2007:3). In addition, taking into account their wide-ranging scope and 'low-intensity' mission spectrum, the EU BGs attracted for the first time the engagement of neutral EU member states in collective 'hard power' endeavors. So far Austria, Finland, Sweden and Ireland contributed to the formation of EU BGs.

Furthermore, taking into account that the EU member states are allowed to invite non-EU countries to participate in EU BGs as long as "this will be done without prejudice to the rights of any member state" (Council of the European Union, 2012b), some non-EU states have also contributed to the formation of EU BGs – i.e. Turkey, Ukraine, Norway, Serbia and North Macedonia; meanwhile Albania has also committed to join an EU BG in the second semester of 2024.

As a consequence, the EU BGs have the potential to represent at European level a 'forum' for the expression of the strategic interests of the EU member states independent of NATO; meanwhile at global level, the EU BG concept could represent a 'strategic identity card' for Europe by reinforcing its military identity in a concrete manner.

3.3 Strategic challenges. This section attempts to indicate the strategic challenges posed to the EU BG concept by its inter-organizational relations with the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the United Nations (UN).

Firstly, when analyzing the relation of the EU BG with the NRF, there is always the dilemma between their duplication and complementarity. On the one hand, there are critical voices that sustain that the EU BGs duplicate the efforts of contributing nations towards the NRF. In this sense, Y. Reykers indicates that

> when one simultaneously puts troops on Battlegroup standby and NATO standby, questions of prioritization seem inevitable. Considerations on financial and political costs of deployment, as well as evaluations of which mechanism best reflects one's political and economic interests then become increasingly decisive, inherently creating competition (2017:10).

On the other hand, there are some voices that highlight the complementarity of the EU BGs with the NRF. For example, A. Mathewson gave the example of Swedish input to the Nordic BG:

> It has entered into arrangements [within the Nordic BG] to provide strategic lift. This is capability which did not exist before the Battlegroup existed. This is an example of a formerly neutral country with previously a focus on territorial defence generating capacity which is usable for the sort of expeditionary operations that both NATO and the EU want to undertake (The Defence Committee of the House of Commons 2008:77).

Taking aside these opinions, the EU and NATO have agreed to coordinate development plans to avoid duplication and redundancies. The most known mechanism is the 'Berlin Plus' agreement meanwhile the most visible are the joint exercises. Are these arrangements enough? Certainly not as the identity crisis between these two military capabilities is still seeking a resolution.

Secondly, as the EU BG concept was designed as an ultimate mean of cooperation between EU and UN, an analysis of the evolution of UN prerogatives over the former is very relevant in emphasizing the strategic disconnect of the EU BGs. Recalling the *The Battlegroup concept*, it is worth mentioning that the EU BGs were designed to be employed in crisis management operations in response to a request by the UN and under a UN mandate (Institute for Security Studies 2005:10-16); however, EU stated subsequently that the BGs would remain under its political control and strategic direction (Council of the European Union, 2005). In fact, EU signalled the potential disconnect at the end of 2005 when UN requested EU BGs in support of the Congolese elections of 2006. EU refused to deploy them and preferred to support UN through an ad-hoc force formed by the EU member states. Finally, in a note of the Policy Department of the European Parliament of September 2006, it is admitted that the EU BGs can undertake missions "under, but not exclusively, a UN mandate" (in G. Quille 2006:5). Therefore, the EU reasserted its autonomy in the decision-making of deploying EU BGs and as a consequence, this rapid-response capability could not be considered anymore at the UN's exclusive disposal. Finally, everything culminated in 2008

when UN requested military support for the MONUC UN mission (DR Congo) with a bridging operation. Despite the mission offered 'ideal conditions' - similar to *Operation Artemis* -, EU refused the deployment of its BGs (for a more specific analysis of the reasons behind this decision of non-deployment in DR Congo, see L.M. Balossi-Restelli, 2011). In addition, subsequent calls of UN or its members of the Security Council to deploy EU BGs in Libya (2011), Mali (2013) or Central African Republic (2013) were further neglected by the European Council – it is worth mentioning though that some authors argue that the non-deployment of the EU BGs should not be explainable only from the perspective of the decision-making within the EU, but rather from that of those taking the initiative to tackle the above-mentioned crisis (for details regarding the "demand-side" of the EU BGs deployment-debate in Libya, Mali and Central African Republic, see Y. Reykers, 2016:346-365).

As a consequence, it is important to highlight the repercussions of this strategic disconnect on the feasibility of the EU BGs. R. Gowan argued that "ultimately, the battlegroup system's flaws have retarded EU-UN cooperation in crisis management by diverting both institutions' hopes an energies into a mechanism that consistently fails to deliver troops" (2009:58). In addition, the commitment of the EU member states to contribute to the formation of the EU BGs without a clear perspective over the connection between this EU military capability and UN provoked massive internal debates in certain countries (see G. Lindstrom 2007:52; L. Chappell, 2009:426-427). Adding insult to injury, the possible employment of the EU BGs in a Kosovo scenario - in other words, without UNSCR - would definitely not only blow up this EU military capability, but also would impact severely the EU's international reputation as a security provider. Thus, the EU sermon stating that the EU BGs are designed 'specifically, but not exclusively' to be used in response to a request from UN requires an immediate resolution.

Overall, the EU BG system is required to clarify its role in the international framework. If relating to the NRF the EU BG concept should solve immediately the identity crisis, in the UN case it has two options: either drawing a clear separation or making sure that the EU-UN cooperation works as well on ground as it does on paper.

3.4 Operational challenges. Firstly, the EU BGs' capacity of deployment poses some practical challenges that not ultimately affect their feasibility. EU BGs should be based on rapid response and as a consequence, the challenge relies on the ability of the military planners to mobilise sufficient transport capacity at short notice. The strategic transport of the EU BGs is based on a combination of airlift and sealift: most of the equipment is planned to be transported by sea meanwhile the initial presence in the theatre of operations should be assured by airlift. Occasionally, some military analysts highlighted the fragility of EU's strategic transport (see G. Lindstrom, 2007; C. Major and C. Molling, 2011; Y. Efstathiou, 2019). Indeed, EU's limited access to strategic airlift coupled with the limited utility of the strategic sealift - even though is more accessible compared to the airlift, it is slow and lacks applicability in case of landlocked operations - place a doubt on the EU's capacity of strategic transport. As a consequence, the EU member states have sought solutions to the deployment challenge – i.e. pooling, joint acquisitions and leasing.

Pooling sources in the case of strategic airlift could have been the best solution; however the progress is slow due the lack of consensus over assuming the burden. To date, one initiative seems to offer good prospects though for the EU BGs' capacity of deployment: the planned acquisition of 170 Airbus A400M Atlas by seven countries contributing to the EU BGs (Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain and Turkey). As of 27th February 2019, 61 Airbus A400M were delivered and entered in operation meanwhile the rest are expected to be delivered in the next decade (Airbus, 2019:1); however, as UK is scheduled to leave EU this year, Brussels will see its heavy transport aircraft total reduce by around a third (Y. Efstathiou, 2019).

Joint acquisitions can also constitute a solution. Indeed, the EU BGs could be provided since 2009 with access to strategic airlift through the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC). This is a multinational initiative transcending NATO and EU that provides its participating nations - excepting US, the remaining 11 SAC members are also contributing states to EU BGs - assured access to military airlift capability though three common-procured Boeing C-17 based at the Hungarian Defence Forces Pápa Air Base. Even though SAC has a limited capacity due to the reduced number of aircraft available, its successful history (see Strategic Airlift Capability, 2018) calls for replication at a larger scale.

Leasing could be the ultimate solution. Indeed, it was shaped through initiatives such as Strategic Air Life Interim Solutions (SALIS) – that have

provided since 2004 the EU BGs with a potential access to six Antonov (An) 124 through a joint EU/NATO leasing agreement of 10 participating states with a consortium formed by Russia-based freighter aircraft group *Volga-Dnepr* and Ukrainian-based *Antonov Airlines.* As revealed in recent news, the former announced at the end of December 2018 that it quits the contract meanwhile the latter even though announcing at the beginning of January 2019 a contract extension with SALIS up until end of December 2021, it supplies under the new terms only two An-124 and as a consequence it is not clear how or from where the resulting shortfall will be made-up (G. Jennings, 2019).

Overall, the capacity of deployment seems to be a long-term challenge for the EU BGs unless EU member states reach a consensus over common acquisition and fair share of burden. Indeed, as proposed by the leader of the German party CDU, the next step could be to start on the symbolic project of building a common European aircraft carrier (A. Kramp-Karrenbauer, 2019).

Secondly, as illustrated in the case of the strategic transport capabilities, an important deterrent is the cost of deployment because most of the burden for the formation and the potential deployment of the EU BGs is supported by the contributing nations. A direct repercussion is highlighted by C. Major and C. Molling:

> since the member states contributing to a battlegroup bear the bulk of the burden when an operation takes place, they tend to favour Battlegroup deployments in principle but not the deployments of their own unit" (2011:22).

Therefore, even though one of the primary roles of the EU BGs was to act as an incentive for the transformation of the member states' defence, it seems that the financing system of this rapid-response capability is still blocking this attempt. However, as it will be further discussed, the *Athena mechanism* is currently under revision and the lack of deployment can be paradoxically a window of opportunity.

Thirdly, there are certain EU BGs' features associated with the requirements of rapid-response that can act as a double-edged sword. Indeed, the size and the timeframe of the EU BGs can represent a major operational deficit. For instance, if acting in support of a bridging operation, the vicissitudes of this type of mission can require a wider timeframe or larger size of troops and so far there is no consensus on how it would be dealt with such a situation. This issue resides in the lack of clarification on the need for a strategic reserve or follow-on force and their usage (see G. Lindstrom 2007:54; F. Kappen et. al., 2015:5).

Fourthly, another important operational deficit of the EU BFs resides in the process of certification which presents some clear drawbacks. For instance, the autonomy of the contributing nations in certifying their own forces within the EU BGs can affect the interoperability and the effectiveness of the force package. In addition, the methodology of checking whether the standards applied to a certain EU BG are in concordance with the EU criteria is not defined and as a consequence, this process is a pure exercise of subjectivity. Not ultimately, another potential drawback can be as well the optional character of the EU-led exercises. As a consequence, the certification process needs definitely a revitalisation. Even though the EUMC agreed last year a *Revised EU Battlegroup Preparation Guide* (see Council of the European Union, 2018a), EU has not delivered so far the widely-expected centralised certification process figuring the European Defence Agency as an independent authority. This target would offer objectivity to the certification process and it would eliminate the potential doubts over the quality of the force package. However, this is a matter of how far the EU member states are willing to cooperate in terms of military projects and as a consequence, reaching this target can be only plausible in the near future.

Fifthly, the decision-making process can be in some circumstances an operational deficit. For example, balancing EU's institutionalized bureaucracy with the requirement of having an EU BG on the ground within ten days after the decision to launch an operation might represent an operational challenge than can be addressed only through exercises simulating the planning process and accelerated decision-making. In addition, the relationship between the domestic decision-making procedures of the contributing nations and its impact on deployment timeframe can be as well very demanding. For instance, some countries need an on-time informing of the decision-makers as any military deployment must be authorized in advance by the Parliament (e.g. Germany), meanwhile other countries do not put a high stake on informing as the deployment is decided by the president (e.g. France). Even in the case of the latter, it is a current trend that emphasizes the requirement of public consultations in case of deployment (see Y Reykers, 2017:8-9). However, some EU member states depending upon a prior

parliamentarian approval such as Lithuania have already harmonized the national decision-making procedures with the rapid-response necessity of the EU BGs (see The Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, 2018). Overall, the rapid decision-making is certainly a major danger; however, the progress achieved so far and the good prospects revealed both at EU level and at national level reveal that this challenge is the most approachable.

Finally, a crucial deterrent for the deployment debate and not ultimately for the feasibility of the EU BGs is the lack of credibility. Despite being envisaged as the cornerstone of European 'expertise' in terms of crises management operations, taking into account that no EU BGs have been used so far, one could easily argue that the EU BGs are nothing else than 'paper armies'. The price is very high if they are not used in the near future because the interest of the member states in maintaining and further developing the concept could greatly diminish – indeed, a 'rarefied' EU BG roster is to be expected for the period 2019-2024 (see Council of the European Union, 2018b:2). In addition, the pressure of taxpayers on the reduction of military spending can be more and more visible and, as a consequence, it can have a detrimental impact on the EU BGs, especially due to their lack of records linked to deployment. Therefore, all these challenges discussed above are not only important stakeholders in the deployment debate, but also can affect to a high extent the prospects of the EU BGs.

3.5 The way forward - shape it or lose it. The Treaty of Lisbon attempted to offer an impetus to the development of the EU BGs. Being the first EU official document stipulating the Union's role in maintaining peace (2009, Art. 42.1) and assuming the missions stipulated in the ESS of 2003 (2009, Art. 43.1), the Treaty of Lisbon reiterated EU's ambition to become a global actor (2009, Art. 21.1). However, it could not fully-act in the benefit of the EU BGs as it could not resolve the deliberately preserved - but often not declared – dilemma of the EU member states: national sovereignty vs. EU collective defense and military decision-making.

The newest EU Global Strategy (EUGS), launched on 28th June 2016 by the current EU HR Federica Mogherini, highlights not only EU's civilian role, but also for the first time its military one (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016:4). It also proposes the development of EU's rapid-response capability by resolving the EU BG's emerging obstacles in terms of decision-making, funding and political will (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016:47). However, as M. Drent and D. Zandee warned, "the Global Strategy process should not remain limited to a paper exercise, but should be the catalyst for much needed delivery" (2016:78). Indeed, a window of opportunity arises as the Brexit may have removed some obstacles towards a deeper EU military integration. The effects of the EUGS on the EU BGs seem to be so far positive as long as it has already delivered some initiatives aimed to tackle their above-mentioned obstacles – i.e. the establishment of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Fund, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability. In addition, EUGS created the premises for the EU member states' approval of increased and more diversified 'common costs' in support of the EU BGs – including those associated with deployment – under the on-going negotiations on the revision of the *Athena mechanism* (see Council of the European Union, 2017; Council of the European Union, 2018c). Indeed, according to a recent recommendation of the EU Parliament, the *Athena mechanism* might be incorporated into a newly-established European Peace Facility (see European Parliament, 2019) that is expected to expand significantly the 'common costs', from 10 to 15 per cent of total costs at present to a maximum of 45 per cent of costs (UK Parliament, 12 September 2018).

Overall, a successful outcome for the feasibility of the EU BGs is going to be determined in the near future by the ability of the EU member states to address the strategic and operational challenges that this concept is facing. Otherwise, as M. Gahler put it, "at some point you have to wonder whether another way to do this is not better" (in C. Hasselbach, 1st of June 2013). As a consequence, the current post-Brexit context calls for the EU policy-makers to take a clear decision on the fate of the EU BG concept: shape it or lose it!

4. CONCLUSIONS

The post-Cold War context was clearly hostile to Europe as the newly-emerged global challenges threatened its integrity meanwhile NATO's security umbrella could not be considered anymore a guarantee. Finding a balance between the necessity of cooperation and the ambition of advancing domestic priorities on the common European agenda was certainly a difficult task for the EU member states. Hidden under the mask of a

chimeric European strategic culture and encouraged by the *Operation Artemis*' positive result, the development of the EU's rapid response capabilities in general and the EU BGs in particular were chosen as the best answer to this strategic demand. Despite the EU BG system being considered the cornerstone of European 'expertise' in terms of crises management operations, it has proved so far to be a disillusion.

Firstly, various strategic challenges emerged when the EU member states attempted to gain legitimacy by placing the EU BGs in the international frame on the basis of 'effective multilateralism'. This subterfuge was divulged by the evolution of the EU BGs' relationship with NATO and UN. Indeed, the potential duplication between the EU BGs and the NRF revealed that their relationship is so far a 'marriage of convenience' rather than a beneficial construction. This is the case as well of the EU BGs' connection with UN which proved to be not only a compromise, but also a potential deterrent for an effective provision of international security.

Secondly, despite the EU BGs were designed as panacea for EU's several capability gaps, their assignment with low potential features revealed many operational challenges. Indeed, M. Kerttunen et. al. illustrated very well this fiasco: "what does it tell about the political ambitions and the military reach of this economic giant of ours if we are deploying expeditionary forces here and there for minor duties and for a relatively short period of time?" (2005:48).

As a consequence, unless these strategic and operational challenges are addressed in a coherent manner, the future of the EU BGs will be dim, if not dismal. As one EU official explained it, the EU BG system is like "having a fantastic Ferrari in the garage. It is there but you just don't know how to drive it" (in H. Hardt 2009:400). In this sense, the post-Brexit context might be a window of opportunity for the EU policy-makers to show they know how to 'drive' it. However, taking into account the well-known pragmatism of the EU member states, it would be reasonable to say that EU BGs have a minimal chance of survival. Indeed, it is rather probable that the EU BGs will have the same fate as the ERRF: a Potemkin village for virtual units.

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