

## NATO AND EU RAPID RESPONSE: CONTRADICTIONARY OR COMPLEMENTARY?

With the establishment of rapid response forces, the EU as well as NATO aim to address future security challenges and to support their internal force transformation. Given the ongoing rivalries between NATO and the EU and the shortage of deployable forces, the added value of such standby forces and their apparent duplication is increasingly questioned. Recent cutbacks in the force size underline this trend. While they share similar origins and purposes, the NATO Response Force and EU Battlegroups not only display different characteristics, but also have different effects.



Evacuation of foreign citizens during the 2006 Lebanon War

Reuters / POOL New

In early 2000, the EU and NATO began to set up the EU Battlegroups (EUBG) and the NATO Response Force (NRF), respectively, as rapid response capabilities. For both organizations, the 1990s marked a turning point: their approach to the strategic environment changed and their awareness regarding new types of conflict grew. Both drew strategic and military lessons from the Balkan wars and crisis spots elsewhere: First, an intervention at a late stage is often more casualty-prone, long winding and more expensive than early involvement. Second, besides missing political will, Western states lacked the ability to deploy their existing large quantities of forces rapidly and effectively.

Thus, rapid response became a strategic necessity. Contrary to the principle to use military force as a last resort, rapid response implies an early or even preventive deployment. The aim is to avoid further escalation thanks to a timely and resolute use of

military means. Hence, both organizations aimed to achieve two interacting objectives: To create capabilities ready to meet the anticipated future security challenges, and to leverage these forces as drivers for the necessary transformation of the armed forces.

### Basic characteristics

The NATO countries agreed at their Prague Summit in 2002 to establish the NRF as a key element of NATO's transformation agenda. It comprises land, maritime, and air elements and operates as a multinational force without geographical limits. Overall, the modular composition of the up to 25,000-strong NRF should allow selecting mission-specific capabilities from the various elements of this force. Since the end of 2006, NATO has always had one NRF unit on standby. Initial units can be deployed within five days and be sustained for 30 days. The NRF has been activated in 2005 for the provision of humanitarian aid and disaster consequence management.

In June 2004, the Council of the EU agreed to set up the EUBG as rapid response elements. These units are intended to enable the EU to react more rapidly and flexibly in a broad range of crisis scenarios. The core of a BG is a combined-arms, battalion-sized force reinforced with combat support and combat service support elements. While the core units are pre-defined, the BG can still be tailored for specific mission requirements. Thus, maritime, air, logistical, or other special enablers can be attached. These elements constitute the "force package". Depending on the mission, a BG can comprise around 1,500–2,200 troops. Since January 2007, the EU has two of these formations at its disposal. The EU's ambition is to be able to decide on a deployment within five days. Ten days after the decision to launch an operation this should commence on the ground.

### Security political framework and objectives

One of the main differences between NRF and EUBG concerns the strategic context in which NATO and the EU may act. Originally established for the military defense of Western Europe, NATO today has discarded its geographically defined scope for a more functionally defined one. Crisis management and stabilization operations outside of NATO's territory have become the main task of the alliance. Nonetheless, NATO remains primarily a military organization. No consensus has been reached so far on developing civilian capabilities.

As to the EU, it sees its main added value in its comprehensive strategic approach that integrates civilian and military

elements. Originally the EU had focused on civilian instruments to promote peace and democracy. The EU recognized that its room for maneuver was curtailed by the lack of a military dimension. This shortfall was addressed with the inception of the European Security and Defence Policy in 1999. Under this umbrella, member states agreed to provide military forces for crisis management operations.

The NRF and the EUBG reflect the different approaches and levels of ambition of the EU and NATO. The EUBG add an important instrument to the EU's comprehensive toolbox, whereas the NRF is more appropriate in situations where major conflicts require the deployment of larger-scale forces.

**Similar range of missions**

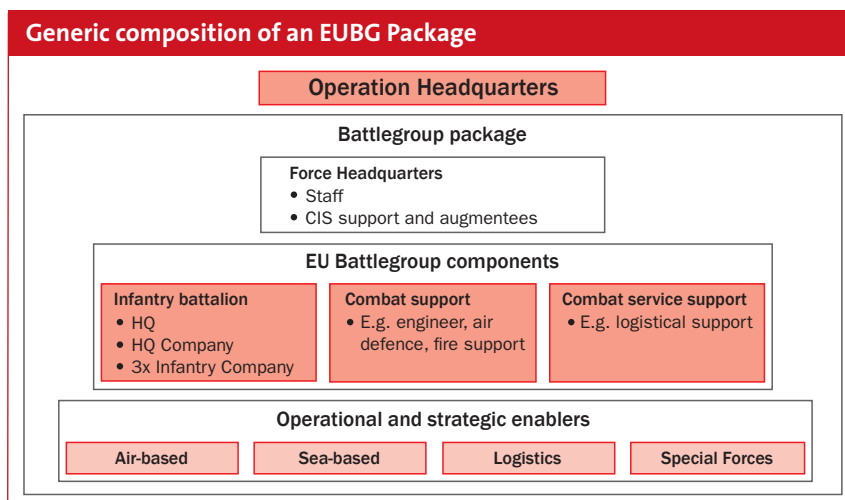
EUBG are employable within the full range of the so called Petersberg-Plus tasks. These encompass assistance within humanitarian aid, evacuation operations, peace-keeping and peace enforcement. Moreover they can be deployed within disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration missions in the broader spectrum of security-sector reform. Additionally to the EUBG's mission portfolio, the NRF's range includes deployment for collective defense (NATO Article V tasks) as well as for disaster consequence management. Moreover, the NRF can be used for show of force in the context of crisis diplomacy or deterrence.

Both units can be deployed either as a stand-alone force for autonomous operations or as an initial entry force facilitating the arrival of larger follow-on forces. Especially the EUBG are conceived as a bridging capability for other organizations (especially the UN). They should allow completing the force generation for a subsequent larger operation, while having first "boots on the ground".

While both formations share a range of missions, their size differs considerably. The NRF will be able to manage more comprehensive tasks at a higher intensity level than the EUBG. In turn, the EUBG's assertiveness risks to be limited by their relatively smaller troop numbers and capabilities. It may be best used for preventive tasks in a geographically limited area. Nonetheless, the EUBG can have a strategic impact.

**Political control and military command**

The decision-making structures of NATO and the EU are similar at both the politi-



Source: Gustav Lindstrom, *Enter the EU Battlegroups* (Paris: Chaillot Paper 97, February 2007, p. 16)

cal and the military levels. The principle of unanimous decisions in both organizations guarantees the sovereignty of their member states. Operations can only be launched if all members agree. While this may in itself be cause for delay in the context of rapid response, those countries that need parliamentary approval for the deployment are under additional pressure.

In the conduct of operations, the political strategic control is exercised by an inter-governmental body. In the case of the EU, this is the Political and Security Committee (PSC) – at NATO, it is the North Atlantic Council (NAC). However, even at this stage, the national force contributions ultimately remain under control of their respective capitals. NATO disposes of a unique military command structure. The NRF is under permanent command of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE). Operational headquarters are generated from one of NATO's joint forces commands. This standing structure not only ensures a rather smooth campaign management, from the initial planning to its conduct. It also permits the systematic introduction of military issues into political decision-making. The commander of a given operation has the ability to influence the mission from its planning phase on, and can thus ensure its coherence.

The EU lacks such permanent command structures. There is no supreme command level. An operations headquarter is provided through national command structures offered to the EU by its member states. Alternatively, the EU can access NATO capabilities at SHAPE via the "Berlin Plus" agreement. Under certain circumstances, the OpsCenter within the EU military staff can also be activated. However, these

options, as well as an operations commander, can only be officially chosen after the EU has decided to launch an operation. Initial planning can only take place to a limited extent through the EU Military Staff, especially its civil-military cell. The operations commander has a considerably weaker position vis-à-vis the political level than his counterpart at NATO. His ability to define or influence the nature of the operation is limited. In the past, this has caused frictions during the preparation phase.

**Force generation: Different approaches, same problems**

The NRF and the EUBG are not standing formations. They are only assembled for their six-months standby phase from national contributions. Forces are generated through different procedures. In the case of the NRF, the allied supreme command defines its necessary capabilities as well as which units correspond to these capabilities. This top-down approach results in a very detailed roster, which has to be filled by national contributions.

Regarding the EUBG, the necessary force characteristics are defined by a capability catalogue comparable to that of NATO. However, in contrast to the NATO procedure, the forces are generated via a bottom-up process. A EUBG is based on the initiative of member states. They agree among each other upon their contributions and then offer the full force package to the EU. It is thus up to the member states how they will generate the necessary capabilities defined by the catalogue. The main responsibility vis-à-vis the EU lies with the so-called "framework nation". It has to ensure the overall effectiveness of the force package as well as command&control arrangements and the deployability.

The NRF's formation-oriented approach should ensure a rather homogenous offer of capabilities and forces for every NRF. However it demands qualities and quantities of national contributions which are difficult to meet. The much smaller EUBG with their capability-based approach constitute a rather heterogeneous corps. Thus doubts have been raised regarding their effectiveness. The context of the EU approach is that troop contributors desire to remain flexible given their already earmarked commitments, e.g. for NATO or national tasks.

Eventually, both formations face the same problems: As forces are increasingly committed in ongoing operations in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and elsewhere, member states are reluctant to offer scarce high-value capabilities for potential crisis management tasks. This constitutes the background for the recent decision to re-shape NRF's size. Thus, NRF's conceptual strength – an assured, comprehensive pool of capabilities, transfers into its actual weakness. Recent plans may drive the NRF's force generation process towards the EUBG style: core-units plus ad-hoc enablers. Yet, to what extent this may limit NRF's utility still depends on the precise shape of a mission. For EUBG, this issue may become apparent on the eve of an operation, as their enabling forces have to be selected on an ad-hoc basis from the available capabilities.

### Transformation - one way or another

As a driver for force transformation, the NRF has introduced changes especially to the forces of bigger countries. Many smaller states do not possess those high end capabilities in the quantities needed to fill into a roster. Therefore participation in NRF has become rather unattractive.

Thanks to the flexibility regarding contributions as well as their smaller size, EUBG became very attractive for smaller and middle-sized states. The EUBG concept explicitly offers participation with niche capabilities. Thus, the concept enables states to show their flag through a limited effort. Moreover, participation in the EUBG enables them to keep up with the transformation process of Western forces. Therefore, their transformation effects mainly apply for the Central and Eastern European countries, but also for non-NATO members such as Ireland, Finland, and Austria. Sweden represents a special case. Here the EUBG have been used to initiate a quite comprehensive transformation

of the national posture from territorial defense towards flexible crisis response.

Generally, transformation implies not so much the modernization of weapon systems, but rather the introduction and implementation of concepts and standards as well as cooperation within multinational forces. This interacts with the successive conversion of force structures into smaller and more mobile units. Their capabilities are based less on weapon platforms, but increasingly on their integration into a network structure.

NRF as well as the EUBG have strengthened defense cooperation among the troop contributors. Adaptations to the challenges of rapid response were required not only in terms of technical standards, but also where political decision-making was concerned. Also, at the conceptual level, these changes have induced a rethinking of role conceptions and scenarios from territorial defense towards multinational expeditionary operations. However, here still an East-West divide exists. While Western European states have changed their focus towards crisis management operations within the frameworks of the EU, NATO, or the UN, territorial defense remains a central element of the security concept of Central and Eastern European states.

As most of the EUBG framework nations are also NATO members, they can use their special position to disseminate NATO standards and concepts, thereby ensuring mutual reinforcement of the initiatives. This is also necessary because EUBG are certified according to the same criteria as the NRF.

### Contradictory or complementary?

From a military point of view, these apparent interactions of NRF and EUBG do not necessarily lead to contradictions. NATO and the EU have attempted to create these formations as mutually reinforcing, as exemplified by the common standards for certification. The above examples support the impression that force transformation has been somewhat successful.

Both formations depend on the contributions of the member states. De facto, NRF and EUBG are constituted by nearly the same forces wearing different hats every six months. This also reflects the potential for conflicts between the organizations: the competition for rare capabilities. Especially special forces and assets like strategic transport and communications

infrastructure are only available to a limited amount. As only a single set of forces exists competition or double hatting can only be alleviated through coordination. Therefore, NATO and the EU strive to "deconflict" the rotation of the national capabilities earmarked for EUBG and NRF.

However, the character of interaction is ultimately decided on the political level and by its utility in actual operations. While the latter has not taken place, there certainly are prospects for division of labor. While, due to historical and political sensitivities, NATO operations are difficult to imagine in some regions, the scope for EUBG is much broader. Their use is, however, limited in terms of intensity. Current rivalry at the political level does not so much take place between the organizations as such but between some particular member states. The conflict between Turkey and Cyprus became a hostage of a Franco-US dispute over strategic issues. Consequently, a security agreement that is vital for NATO-EU cooperation cannot be signed. Therefore, important instruments for cooperation like the EU-NATO capability group or EU-NATO exercises (MILEX) lie idle. The competition for capabilities between NRF and EUBG may become a further hostage of such "beauty contests", especially if more forces are tied up in operations. Thus, the reinforcing and complementary military potential of NRF and EUBG is jeopardized by political interests of individual member states that impede both organizations, by insufficient defense procurement and a limited availability of forces.

These issues have already begun to undermine the effectiveness as well as the legitimacy of both organizations and thus the security of their members. Abandoning or reforming one or the other of the two initiatives would only provide alleviation of symptoms.

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