Crisis Management Operations: 
European Lessons Learned

Report from the expert seminar
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organized by
The Royal Institute for International Relations (EGMONT)
The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)
Summary of findings

The expert seminar, co-organized by the Royal Institute of International Relations (EGMONT) and the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) with support of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Belgium, was dedicated to analyzing lessons learned from the European Union’s crisis management operations and aimed at formulating findings with regard to the future of EU capability in this domain. The event brought together renowned analysts, scholars and diplomats professionally dealing with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Common Security and Defence Policy. The discussion, conducted under the Chatham House Rule, focused on three key aspects of the Union’s crisis management activities: the practice of implementing a Comprehensive Approach to EU operations, the assessment of the functioning of the EU command-and-control system, and the evaluation of EU Battle Groups. The discussion led to the following observations and recommendations:

- The EU has the distinct potential to implement the Comprehensive Approach strategy in its crisis management operations, but to exploit it fully the EU needs to better coordinate the actions of its institutional actors and improve their cooperation, both civilian-to-military and civilian-to-civilian.

- The EU needs the Comprehensive Approach strategy, which would complement the existing European Security Strategy and finally set the EU level of ambition as regards crisis management operations.

- Given the EU’s ambitions in the security policy domain, its current planning and command-and-control capabilities are far from sufficient – they lack permanency and the ability to plan in advance, and limit communication between the political and military command levels.

- There is a growing need for a permanent EU Operational Headquarters, which would allow overcoming current gaps in the EU command-and-control system and also would help implement the Comprehensive Approach in practice.

- There is a substantial problem with EU Battle Groups (BGs), which have never been used – thus the BGs concept needs reconsideration, which at a minimum should allow for the harmonization of BGs training, capabilities and equipment and an increase in common costs in case of deployment, but which could even lead to redefining the concept, e.g., by introducing brigade-sized BGs and involving considerable civilian components.
Panel 1
The Comprehensive Approach to Operations in Practice

The opening Panel of the seminar was dedicated to the practice of implementing Comprehensive Approach to the European Union’s crisis management operations. To spur the debate, two recent EU missions were presented and discussed in introductory presentations, namely the military operation EUFOR Chad/RCA and the civilian monitoring mission EUMM Georgia. It was generally agreed that both operations were a success, particularly given the EU’s ability to meet unusual organizational and logistical challenges posed by untypical deployment conditions of those operations (a harsh environment in the case of Chad/RCA and extreme time pressure in the case of EUMM). Furthermore, it was also stressed that both operations implemented their mandate tasks successfully and were able to contribute to the stabilization of the situation on the ground. Nevertheless, as regards the practice of implementing Comprehensive Approach, those and other EU missions allow a number of conclusions to be drawn.

To assess the level of implementation of Comprehensive Approach to EU crisis management operations, as one participant argued, one should first try to define what exactly this term means. As he put it, although it is most often understood as reinforced civilian-military cooperation (CIV-MIL), in the case of the EU it should be also linked to rigid civilian-to-civilian (CIV-CIV) cooperation. Thus, Comprehensive Approach should not only involve an array of military, law-enforcement, economic, diplomatic and administrative actions and instruments, but also the coherent engagement of various political- and administrative-level actors of the Union, as well as external organizations. Coherent use of such instruments and the cooperation of such actors should together bring about the eventual success of an operation.

Institutional and procedural problems

During the debate, key shortcomings and problems with regard to implementing Comprehensive Approach were indicated. In the view of many, a distinctive issue was a repeated lack of good working relations between different EU institutions and actors engaged in policies toward states hosting EU missions. For instance, as practice had shown, the European Commission was too often acting without proper consultations with EU Military Staff or, on the ground, EU Special Representatives had not always enjoyed understanding from EU mission commanders. Furthermore, cooperation between EU actors from different pillars (in the pre-Lisbon institutional setting) was strictly dependent on solving competency clashes and related legal issues first. As some suggested, those problems stemmed from the fact that within the EU there were two separate chains of command and financing channels – a military and a civilian one – which were difficult to bring into line. This kind of intra-institutional friction, as some put it, undermined the results of operations, since the uncoordinated actions of different EU actors were sometimes sending conflicting signals.
to local populations and authorities, with the best examples being Chad, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo but also in other theaters.

Another problem highlighted in the discussion was the absence of predefined procedures to harmonize civilian and military planning. As some argued, the EU had been unable so far to create joint plans involving coherent CIV-MIL actions, mostly due to gaps in the overall planning capabilities of the EU, including overly complicated and multi-layered planning procedures scattered over a couple of different political and military actors, who not always had been willing to cooperate intensively. As one participant put it, the EU here followed an ad-hoc logic, which could hardly result in truly comprehensive actions. Finally, it was observed by one of participants that EU staff – both military and civilian – dealing with crisis management operations somehow lack training in CIV-MIL relations, which is also a result of insufficient national efforts by Member States.

The potential of the EU in Comprehensive Approach

Despite those shortcomings, one participant argued, as regards Comprehensive Approach the EU has enormous potential – much bigger than that of NATO, OSCE or the United Nations. The capacity of the EU in this domain is revealed by its achievements. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, as he pointed out, the success in post-conflict reconstruction and state building would not be possible if NATO had remained the sole actor involved. Also current EU policy vis-à-vis Somalia shows how a broad array of instruments — military, civilian and economic – can be used to stabilize the situation on the ground. As it was argued by some, EU civilian and military institutions are increasingly more able to cooperate effectively in a crisis situation. The example invoked was the preparation process for EUMM Georgia, which found more than thirty EUMS personnel working closely with CPCC, despite the lack of formal regulations for such cooperation. Now, most of the legal barriers are lifted and there is a growing practice of discussing Comprehensive Approach and CIV-MIL relations within the EU. Particularly among the relatively new actors, the CPCC and CMPD started to strongly re-shape the practice of CIV-MIL cooperation in the EU. With the EEAS being established there is a further chance to strengthen the implementation of Comprehensive Approach to EU crisis management operations. In response to a voice suggesting that in order to fully implement Comprehensive Approach the EU should be ready and able to provide more boots on the ground when needed, one participant observed that deployment of military force may be harmful in some cases, since the EU had already built a renowned reputation as a “soft,” albeit very effective power. Thus the practice of Comprehensive Approach does not find it necessary to use armed forces in each and every operation.

The EU Comprehensive Approach strategy?

Nonetheless, it was agreed by a number of participants, that what the EU needs to fully exploit its potential with Comprehensive Approach is a dedicated policy or, preferably, a separate strategy in this particular domain. Such a strategy should, first and foremost, set the EU level of ambition in this domain, i.e., answer the question whether the Union is
willing to engage in overarching state-building processes or just minor interventions. Since, as one participant noted, the ultimate solution to a crisis is always a political one, such a strategy would have to allow for setting concrete political goals for each and every mission. With clearly defined political benchmarks, commanders on the ground would have a much better framework for assessing the overall effectiveness of their actions and for planning further activities. The strategy, as another participant argued, could also enable EU-level training in CIV-MIL cooperation and the practice of Comprehensive Approach. Though some voiced doubts whether such a strategy would fit into the existing European Security Strategy framework, it was observed by others that there is room for both strategies, since they would complement each other. One participant also noted, that a basis for the strategy could be a CIV-MIL concept document, which had been adopted a few years ago and seemed to be somehow forgotten.

Nonetheless, some argued, there are slim chances now to establish the Comprehensive Approach strategy, mainly due to divergent policies of Member States with relation to CSDP and CFSP in general. These differences were reflected best by the conflicting views of some participants about the possible role of the EU in the post-earthquake humanitarian disaster in Haiti (while some saw it as a lost chance for the EU to engage, others argued that there was virtually no place for the Union due to extensive UN and U.S. involvement), or about the involvement of Russia in the EUFOR Chad/RCA operation while EU-Russia relations were in crisis due to the Georgia-Russia war (as one participant noted, it was a sign of a lack of a coherent EU strategy toward Russia, but others opposed that view by indicating that the EU-Russia relations have to be flexible and allow for Russian engagement whenever it is needed and applicable).
The second panel of the seminar focused on the issue of EU Command and Control (C2) capabilities. Emphasis in the discussion was put on the assessment of the functioning of the C2 system on the politico-strategic level (involving EU institutional actors) and military-strategic level (involving the Operational Headquarters — OHQ). The performance of C2 at lower levels, i.e., the military operational and tactical level, was not more deeply considered.

At the outset of the debate, one participant presented a thorough assessment of the current capacity of the Union as regards the C2 system at the military-strategic level. He noted that the EU has virtually three tracks of planning, commanding and controlling its operations: the “framework nation” track (involving five predefined national OHQs in UK, Germany, France, Italy and Greece), the “Berlin plus” track (using NATO SHAPE for the purpose of EU autonomous operations) and, finally, a self-dependent EU track, being however a phantom solution that has never been used (it assumes the use of an EU Operations Centre placed with the EUMS had the Council decided to do so, though it is not a fully-fledged standing capability).

EU capability gaps in C2

It was repeatedly noted during the discussion, that the Union’s C2 framework at politico-strategic and military-strategic levels has two key, unfavorable features, which entail subsequent shortcomings – namely, there is a lack of permanency in the system and an artificial division between those two levels. As a consequence, first and foremost, the EU is not able to perform genuine advance and contingency planning, which is, as one participant stressed, a precondition for effective crisis management. Nowadays, he argued further, planning should be a constant, not ad-hoc activity, and any shortcomings in this regard could seriously undermine the Union’s ability to fulfill its ambitions in the crisis management domain. Now, however, the EU is acting rather reactively than proactively: When a crisis occurs, a planning process is started almost from scratch instead of choosing from predefined engagement options, which could be prepared in advance. It was agreed that even though the establishment of the CMPD helped a lot in this domain, advance contingency planning is still a significant gap in the Union’s C2 system. One participant felt, that for all those reasons, there is now a “functional need” of permanency in the EU C2 system.

Furthermore, the existing C2 system is very complex and engages various civilian and military actors from both the EU and Member States, which causes delays and undermines the ability of the EU to produce a maximally customized operational plan. Moreover, plans themselves too often turn out to be prone to political influence, which is an inevitable result of the “ad-hockery” of the EU C2 framework, as one participant put it. The division between politico-strategic and military-strategic levels undermines, in turn, the feeling of ownership.
of the operational plan among the commanders, who must execute it. Consequently, ambiguity appears and lowers the effectiveness of the command and control exercised on the ground. It also weakens the input from force commanders to political-level decision makers, which is crucial when the operational plan is to be altered due to a changing situation. Recalling findings of the first panel, one participant argued also, that the system prevents the EU from implementing fully the Comprehensive Approach, since the CIV-MIL relations seem to be somehow strained by the current C2 framework.

Permanent EU OHQ proposal

Following observations made regarding gaps in EU C2 capabilities, a number of participants suggested creating a dedicated, permanent EU OHQ, which would operate at the military-strategic level and assure its proper integration with the politico-strategic level, i.e., other EU institutional actors. As an input for discussing this concept, some variables were presented that needed to be determined in order to create an effective C2 system able to face challenges posed by modern crisis management operations. First, one has to decide to what extent the command should be integrated – 100 percent integration is not practically possible, but a close solution seems to be plausible given current operational challenges. Next, the number of levels in the chain of command should be deeply considered – multiple layers of command mean delays and can cause ineffectiveness, but they separate force commanders from direct political influence, which is beneficial. Thus, the improved EU C2 system should rather involve intermediate layers as it does now. Finally, credible C2 architecture needs the best professionals to run it – thus, the EU needs to attract more talents and assure their “two-way flow”, i.e., allow them to be able to regularly work for both the EU and home states.

Those findings were followed by another participant, who noted that to make CIV-MIL relations within the EU more effective one could either establish new procedures (which might, however, turn out to be insufficient after a time, would raise administrative costs and would proliferate institutional structures) or simply build a permanent, joint civilian-military OHQ. However, this view was strongly opposed by another participant who argued that the whole discussion should not focus on the OHQ but on the existing capability gaps and the most cost-effective solutions to bridge them. Thus, what the EU needs is a reinforcement of existing procedures and structures, which simply have to learn to work together, rather than an entirely new institution, which will inevitably grow and cost money. An example of some advance planning done by EUMS was made to illustrate this stance.

Nonetheless, some others noted that the EU should focus not on current but on future C2 capability gaps, projected against the background of potential operations in which the EU may engage. Thus, the OHQ indeed seems to be inevitable. It was also suggested, that the EU could approach the C2 system innovatively and abandon the traditional chain of command by also employing a political command at the operational level, the reason being a strong political context of many low-level, operational actions and decisions.
Panel 3

The Battle Group Concept

The final panel of the seminar touched on the issue of the European Union’s Battle Groups (BGs.). The discussion attempted both to identify factors for which the BGs had not been used so far and possible ways to overcome current obstacles and start to exploit the potential of BGs in EU crisis management operations.

The original BGs concept and its limitations

The discussion began with a presentation of key elements of the original BGs concept. As one participant argued, threads of the BGs idea are too often misunderstood, which leads to false assessments of the role and potential of BGs. Participants were thus reminded that BGs are a relatively small force – a battalion-sized force accompanied by necessary combat support and combat service support components (typically 1,500 – 2,000 people). Practically it is the smallest tactical unit, which is self-sustainable, i.e., able to operate without external combat and service support for a longer time (here – 30 to 120 days after which reinforcements are provided). However, their core advantage is their fast reaction capability – two BGs are always on standby, theoretically ready to be deployed on the ground within a maximum of 10 days after the decision of the Council.

Nevertheless, The BGs cannot be seen as a universal military tool of the EU, able to perform any kind of operation. In practice, tasks to be executed by BGs involve only some of the so-called “Petersberg tasks” (in line with the Treaty of Lisbon those are main CSDP tasks: joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilization), civilian evacuation operations, protection of key infrastructures, such as airports or ports, or controlling a given area to create a security sphere. It was observed that those are very complex operations, yet would be performed by a small force. Some also noted that the core reason for the deployment of a Group is to create “breathing space” for the EU, i.e., to quickly stabilize the situation on the ground and have a bigger time frame for preparing a larger operation that would be better adjusted to the character of a given crisis.

Multiple factors that have hampered the use of BGs so far were identified during the discussion. It was broadly agreed, that so far there had been no political consensus, which is a prerequisite for a Council decision on the use of BGs. This lack of consensus is owed not only to the divergent views of Member States on the role of BGs as an EU flagship capability, but also to the EU operations’ financing mechanism (the “Athena”), which puts almost the whole burden on the framework nation. Furthermore, in the EU there is a general reluctance toward foreign deployments, which is caused by governments’ fear of becoming involved in a lasting operation – as one participant put it, once there are troops on the ground one cannot withdraw them swiftly with no financial and political costs. Others argued, however, that BGs are the easiest forces to withdraw due to their predefined short operational time. Finally also technical factors hampered the use of BGs: the EU lacks a credible strategic
 airlift; there are often very specialized Groups on the BGs roster (such as maritime ones), which can perform only limited kinds of tasks; there are no national regulations allowing the use of forces within the BGs swiftly in an overseas operation; and, last but not least, Member States have other operational commitments, both national and within NATO, which compete for resources with BGs.

Refining or redefining the concept of BGs?

During the discussion, numerous ideas were made how to overcome current problems with the BGs. They focused on two options: refining the concept or changing it entirely. The first option, supported by many participants, would involve increasing the coherence of the BGs as regards their training and equipment used, or establishing rigid communication and coordination between each of the two Groups currently on standby; the BGs could also employ more civilian capabilities. More ambitious proposals, presented by some, suggested revising the “Athena” mechanism so that the burden would be shared equally among Member States. Others felt that it could be plausible to leave only one BG on standby, however with the period of coverage extended to one year (currently it is six months) and the BG itself would consist of a larger number of components.

The second option – changing the concept – was presented at the end of the discussion. As one participant argued, it is the only answer to what he perceived as a structural problem of the BGs system, revealed not only by the lack of use of BGs but also because Member States are decreasingly willing to declare their commitments to BGs for the future. Thus, the concept should allow formation of BGs up to brigade size (10,000 people). Such BGs would, however, include force, combat support, combat service support and – most importantly, also civilian components. There would be a core of the BG able to fulfill rapid reaction tasks and additional components of various kinds, which could reinforce the BG later on since they would have a different readiness level. Those components could be also pulled out of the BG and used as force gap fillers in typical CSDP operations. Furthermore, actions of such BGs would be covered from a genuinely common budget (which would mean dropping the “Athena” mechanism in its current form) and there would be only a constant number of predefined BGs in the roster (e.g. 10). This proposal met with an argument, that it would mean duplicating the NATO Response Force. Yet, it was also noted that NRF is a bigger force, and does not involve civilian capabilities, which makes it a different class of military instrument. Finally it was observed, that one of the recent UK-French initiatives involves a Combined Joint Expeditionary Force, which could indicate the most plausible form of joint, multinational “entry force,” which could further inspire the BGs concept.

BY: Marcin Terlikowski, PISM, research fellow