

### **'Battle Groups' to strengthen EU military crisis management?**

*The Franco-British duo has once more stepped up a gear on European defence with a new concept for rapid deployment 'battle groups'. The concept is at the heart of a renewed impetus to implement the defence aspects of Solana's EU Security Strategy, which includes a new Headline Goal (HG 2004-2010) being adopted at the European Council in June 2004. It thus forms an important link between the previous 'quantitative' approach to improving European defence capabilities and the new 'qualitative' emphasis of the Headline Goal 2010.*

#### **The Process**

The idea of developing such a concept was floated at the Franco-British summit at Le Touquet (4 February 2003) and was made more explicit in the 24 November meeting, in London. At that meeting the two countries referred to the need for joint tactical groups – of about 1,500 soldiers each – to be created so as to strengthen the EU rapid reaction capability to support United Nations' operations. The experience of Operation Artemis in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) – the first EU-led military operation launched in June 2003 at the request of the UN Security Council – is a typical scenario for which the battle groups may be deployed.

The Franco-British proposal – referred to as 'Battle Groups' by the British or 'Tactical Groups' by the French – was endorsed by Germany in February 2004, and, on February 10, was submitted to the Political and Security Committee, which, in turn, asked for a Military Committee's opinion on the technical aspects of the concept (February 18). It subsequently gained further support at the Brussels informal defence ministers and Chiefs of Defence Staff meeting, on 5/6 April. A target date of 2007 was set for achieving the first operational Battle Groups (expectations range from 6 to 10), although the EU could have two or three of them available much sooner based on existing capabilities and voluntary contributions under the Headline Goal Force Catalogue. It is expected that the formal endorsement of the Franco-British-German concept will occur at the 17-18 May Joint Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministers' Council and then form part of the new Headline Goal 2010, to be adopted at the June 2004 European Council.

In principle, the battle group proposal is open to all EU member states, although France and Britain stressed that a high degree of interoperability in terms of training, equipment, command and planning is required. It would therefore be one way in which the bar is set for the soon 25 member states to join in the newly emerging European defence club, by setting criteria for structured co-operation.

#### **The Battle Group Concept**

The trilateral proposal for EU battle groups consists of highly trained, battalion-size formations (1,500 soldiers each)<sup>1</sup> – including all combat and service support as well as deployability and sustainability assets. These should be available within 15 days notice and sustainable for at least 30 days (extendable to 120 days by rotation). They should be flexible enough to promptly undertake operations in distant crises areas (i.e. failing states), under, but not exclusively, a UN mandate, and to conduct combat missions in an extremely hostile environment (mountains, desert, jungle, etc). As such, they should prepare the ground for larger, more traditional peacekeeping forces, ideally provided by the UN or the Member States.

Not surprisingly, the development of the battle group concept implies the availability of strategic lift and combat support capabilities. In this respect, the concept is linked to the Helsinki Headline Goal process and its ambitions to make up key identified capability shortfalls.

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## Building on the original Helsinki Headline Goal (HHG)

The original Helsinki Headline Goal (1999) was a 'start up' process for ESDP capability development, setting out quantitative targets for military capability for 1999-2003. It aimed to develop an EU rapid reaction force consisting of 60,000 troops available at 60 days notice and sustainable for up to one year. The HHG process led to a review of the available capabilities (documented in three catalogues: the Headline Goal Catalogue, the Headline Force Catalogue and the Headline Progress Catalogue) which helped identify remaining shortfalls, particularly in the key areas of strategic lift and sustainability.

A key feature of the original HHG was the 'voluntary' nature of member states' commitments. This led to the cataloguing process, which helped identify the remaining shortfalls. But this process was limited in so far as the catalogues provide no guarantees regarding what assets, troops and resources are actually available or really operational. Furthermore, most analysts agree that the defence capability generation process (specifically under the European Capabilities Action Plan - ECAP) slowed down in late 2002/2003 and had not prevented the considerable waste of resources spent on inefficient generation of military capacity throughout Europe (amounting to 160 million Euro)<sup>2</sup>.

Although the Helsinki Headline Goals were declared formally met in 2003, the Thessaloniki European Council, in June 2003, acknowledged that the EU operational capability across the full range of Petersberg tasks was still limited and constrained by recognised shortfalls. In December 2003, the EU Security Strategy prompted the institutions to revisit the original Headline Goal and capability generation process. The November 17 GAERC conclusions confirmed that the Petersberg Tasks would be revisited and 'defined' by the June 2004 European Council, under a new Headline Goal to be met by 2010. Beyond the continued efforts to make up key capability shortfalls, the new HG 2010 will focus on the need for qualitative improvements to put existing EU defence capabilities at the service of the whole range of crisis management operations, included in the revised Petersberg Tasks<sup>3</sup>.

## Implementing the defence aspects of the EU Security Strategy

If France, Britain and Germany manage to build consensus around their proposal, and if the Headline Goal 2010 is adopted by the end of the Irish Presidency, the battle group concept could be developed in the second half of this year. A commitments conference will be convened in order to make the concept real and fully operational by 2007, although a limited capability based on existing formations in the UK, Italy and France, for example, could be made available earlier.

### Will it deliver new capabilities?

Crucially, the Battle Group concept is not just about re-arranging existing capabilities but is rather a tool to produce new ones. A key benchmark for measuring the value of the concept will be in seeing which countries offer to provide or create new Battle Groups at the commitments conference likely to be held this autumn. The EU Military Staff (EUMS) will also need to develop the concept through realistic scenario-based work to promote readiness, sustainability, concurrency and follow-on forces, as well as co-operation with and transition to civilian operations. It remains to be seen, however, if this work takes place within the EU Military Staff, in the new planning cell for civilian and military operations, or as part of the Armaments/Capabilities Agency's remit. The civil-military planning cell provides the obvious location for discussions relating to how Battle Groups might be deployed in complex conflicts and peacebuilding processes. There is little evidence, however, that the proposed cell will be robust enough to bridge the crucial 'security gap' known as the 'civil-military divide' and ensure an integrated and comprehensive approach to the planning of military and civilian EU interventions.

**Gerrard Quille**

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<sup>1</sup> A battle group is the smallest self-sufficient military-operational formation that can be deployed and sustained in a theatre of operations; The concept draws upon standard NATO doctrine, for instance the NATO Response Force (NRF) 'land component' is a land brigade tactically configured with 5 Battle Groups.

<sup>2</sup> See Jocelyn Mawdsley and Gerrard Quille, "The EU Security Strategy: a new framework for ESDP and equipping the EU Rapid Reaction Force", joint ISIS-BICC Report, December 2003. Available on <http://www.isis-europe.org/ftp/download/reportdefence.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The Petersberg Tasks were also revised in the context of the Convention and the Intergovernmental Conference negotiations, yet to be concluded.