

# The Parliamentary Dimension of Defence Cooperation

Anne Bakker  
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Clingendael Report



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# The Parliamentary Dimension of Defence Cooperation

## Introduction



The role of parliaments is a neglected factor in the development of European defence cooperation. This is clearly in need of rectification as parliaments have a crucial role in making deeper defence cooperation a success. In most of the EU member states, the elected representatives decide about planning, procurement, the deployment of troops and the budget allocated to defence. The 2016 Netherlands EU Presidency therefore devoted a seminar to this issue, organised by the Ministry of Defence in cooperation with the Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' on 14-15 March in Amsterdam. High-level panels and a mixed audience of parliamentarians, national and European officials, members of think tanks, the military and academics discussed 'The Parliamentary Dimension of Defence Cooperation'.

This Clingendael Report addresses a number of issues discussed at the seminar. The first section reflects the crucial role that parliamentarians have in bringing politics back into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). They are key to creating a political narrative on the importance of defence, defence cooperation and sovereignty understood as 'the ability to act'. The second section is devoted to the need to defend defence in parliament and towards the general public. Besides a small circle of dedicated parliamentarians, knowledge about and support for defence are not widespread in the European and national parliaments. The third section underlines

the need for more transparency from governments towards parliaments on defence cooperation. The Report's final section is devoted to the interparliamentary dimension that needs strengthening and looks into the workings of the Interparliamentary Conference and the parliamentary dimension of cluster cooperation.

This Clingendael Report highlights the main topics that were debated at the seminar, but does not attempt to reflect all points of the discussion. It is therefore neither a verbatim record nor a summary of the debate. Rather, it lists key issues which need to be addressed for parliaments to play a role in the deepening of defence cooperation. The Report concludes with a number of recommendations for the way forward. The Clingendael Institute bears sole responsibility for the contents of this report.

## **Bring politics back into CSDP**

Despite its ambitious origins and despite the repeated underlining of the importance of the EU as a security provider, CSDP has in recent years lost its political appeal. CSDP has become an almost impenetrable and technical policy area that is discussed in increasingly smaller circles of 'insiders'. While de-politisation is a well-known phenomenon in the process of European integration, for CSDP to move forward it first needs to be brought back to the political arena. Security and defence are issues at the heart of the European integration process and a core responsibility of member states. Treating them only as a policy which needs technical tweaking will result in CSDP and defence cooperation further losing political guidance and momentum. First and foremost national parliamentarians, but also the members of the European Parliament, have to play a role in creating a trans-European politics of defence. The Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy and its implementation provide an ideal opportunity to put the EU's security and defence role high on the political agenda. Parliamentarians should clarify the strategy in public debates and defend the political choices that arise from it to their own electorate but also cross-border in other member states.

## **A political narrative**

A trans-European politics of defence should breed a political narrative to communicate the importance of defence and European defence cooperation. It should also integrate defence with other areas such as maritime policy, border security, industry, research and technology and so forth. Such a narrative can be structured around three observations on European defence. First, while development, preventive engagement and diplomacy are at the forefront of the European approach to security, they must be backed up by credible military forces in order to be effective in a world where power politics and the use of force are a reality. This comprehensive approach combines internal and external civilian and military elements from across sectors, making defence not a separate policy silo but one of many policy areas that are highly intertwined.

Second, Europe is too dependent on the United States for its defence. The message from Washington is clear: Europe's free-riding party is over. Europe therefore requires a more credible and autonomous defence capacity, regardless of whether one is motivated by keeping the trans-Atlantic relationship alive or by having the ability to form policies independently of the United States.

Third, while there has been under-investment in defence in most European states, the major obstacle to a credible collective European defence output is the lack of cooperation. Europe's combined defence spending is considerable, but fragmented and nationally-oriented defence efforts have led to only a marginal collective capacity with shortfalls and little 'bang for the buck'. In fact, capabilities have fallen to critically low levels, putting into question Europe's ability to conduct the operations vital to its territorial and societal security. Opposing defence cooperation by arguing that it leads to a 'loss of sovereignty' is unhelpful: having full authority over national forces means little if they are too small to address the security challenges at hand.

In fact, being unable to act would constitute a much greater loss of sovereignty than having to consult with partner countries on planning and procurement or relying on some of their capabilities for deployments. How to structure European defence cooperation can be decided on a case-by-case basis – and there are a number of models and approaches to choose from – but in any case the three observations on European defence make clear that we need significant steps forward in defence cooperation.



## Defend defence

There is a great need to engage the general public and members of parliament outside of the defence committees. Other members of parliament tend to have limited awareness of defence issues and little sympathy for defence. Defence has been isolated from other policy areas and is often the first to see its budgets cut, typically without adequate consideration of the implications for the capabilities and effectiveness of the armed forces. Convincing these MPs of the importance of defence, defence cooperation, and stable budgets is not easy, but needs to be done. One way to do this is to increase the interlinkage between various committees touching upon aspects of defence by holding joint meetings with committees on, for example, the economy, budgets, home affairs, transport or intelligence. This would expose other parliamentarians to defence issues and can generate broader support for policies.

**A politics of defence should not be limited to the defence-minded**

In the national context, such consensus can be further capitalised upon by setting up multi-year agreements on the purpose, policy direction and budgets for defence – as has already been done in Sweden and Denmark. These national agreements should be based on a broad consensus between stakeholders, encompassing coalition and opposition parties, governmental and non-governmental experts. Multi-year defence agreements are foremost tools to improve national defence policy, but the clarity and stability they provide also help governments to become more reliable partners for European defence cooperation.

While defence is the prerogative of the national parliaments, the European Parliament has a role to play in support of CSDP, stimulating defence research and innovation through the EU budget and through flanking EU policies. In the European parliament, the importance of defence as being broader than just a subsidiary to foreign affairs should be acknowledged by upgrading SEDE to a fully-fledged committee. This would increase SEDE's capacity to issue its own reports, arrange contacts with national parliaments, and engage with the plenary. However, the active role of the EP in supporting European cooperation should not be taken for granted; with the rise of EU-sceptic parties the EP may take on a more adverse stance. It is therefore crucial that these MEPs are engaged in debates on the need for CSDP and European defence cooperation. In addition, long-term support can be secured through the formation of a broad coalition-based agreement – across parliamentary groups – on the principal need for European defence cooperation.

Parliamentarians also need to defend defence towards the general public. Parliaments play an important role in interfacing between the necessities pointed out by policy experts and the general public. Although public polls generally show high support for the armed forces, championing defence and European defence cooperation does



not translate well into electoral votes. This problem is compounded by the rise of Euro-scepticism. Governmental and non-governmental experts can advocate European defence cooperation, but politicians need to explain its relevance to the general public. In some cases, it will require that politicians show statesmanship and defend decisions that are in the long-term interest of the nation despite being unpopular in the short term.

## Increase knowledge within parliaments

Having a political narrative is not enough to create a viable politics of defence. Parliaments need a higher level of knowledge about defence in order to make, or call for, the right decisions for an effective defence capacity. Short-term decisions on defence budgets, procurement, and international cooperation in particular need to be based on an understanding of the long-term implications they have for the armed forces, the kind of operations they can perform and the threats they can address. Since European cooperation is needed to create an effective defence capacity, parliaments need to increase their knowledge in this area. This requires a more intimate knowledge of, for example, missions, procedures, programmes and benchmarks of the EU and NATO. As armed forces are increasingly being deployed in the context of multinational operations, it is also important that parliamentarians are more aware of the implications of national decision-making for these operations, especially when caveats are imposed. It is therefore important that members of parliament pay working visits to the EU institutions and national representations in Brussels, as well as to CSDP operations. The European Parliament, because of its more intimate knowledge of CSDP, should be actively sharing information and insights with national parliaments in a structural manner. Parliaments involved in clusters or bilateral defence cooperation should regularly meet up, organise joint working visits and engage in structural information-sharing. These activities are important to generate a better understanding of mutual dependencies, increase trust in the partnership, and lessen worries about assured access to shared capabilities. Inviting commanders from partner countries to give their views should also be considered.

**Parliamentarians need to be more aware of the implications of national decision-making for operations**

## Increase transparency

Governments, as well as the European Commission, EEAS and other EU agencies, need to increase the level of information provided to parliaments and involve parliamentarians from the outset of new cooperation initiatives. Increased transparency and being

frank about the implications of defence cooperation are needed to build trust between governments and parliamentarians and to build a bridge to the general public. Following the proposal by the German Rühle Commission, governments should provide regular overviews of the implications of and the obligations that come with deeper defence cooperation. These reports and the parliamentary discussions that will be held on them will contribute to a heightened understanding of the commitments and mutual dependencies that follow from deeper defence cooperation. When involving parliamentarians more and at an earlier stage of defence cooperation it is important to guard the constitutional division of roles between the parliament and the government. At the end of the day, it is governments that have the authority and expertise to shape policies and operations.

To support the independent oversight function of parliaments, members of parliament need readily available, readable and politically salient information and analysis alongside what the government supplies. Parliaments should have access to either in-house research expertise on defence or be able to commission research externally. Many parliaments have some research service in place, but often lack the funds to commission the necessary research. Budgets should be allocated to support this vital function.



## Annual progress meeting

Holding governments to account is one of the core tasks of parliamentarians. Consecutive European Councils that dealt with defence were not, or only partially, followed by other ministerial meetings holding member states responsible for living up to their promises. While more peer pressure from Ministers of Defence among themselves is to be welcomed, parliamentarians should step up the pressure on their governments for deeper defence cooperation. While a 'Eurozone-type' semester on defence would be the optimal option, a yearly 'Progress Meeting on Defence' could be a good interim measure. At such a meeting, parliamentarians would be able to enter into a debate with both the High Representative Federica Mogherini and possibly the Defence Minister of the country holding the EU Presidency. They would discuss the progress, or the lack thereof, in achieving the promises that the ministers have made themselves at the various Council meetings. While the Defence Minister can of course not represent all 27 Ministers, he/she could report back to the next Defence Ministerial. Such a Progress Meeting would considerably up the political stakes for ministers and help in bringing politics back into CSDP. The Progress Meetings can be a useful tool to ensure political commitment to the Global Strategy. Parliamentarians should use these meetings to make sure that the strategy is implemented and translated into actionable proposals.

## An improved Interparliamentary Conference on CFSP/CSDP

The format of the Interparliamentary Conference on CFSP/CSDP needs to evolve. The biannual meetings are useful as a regular meeting place for national and European parliamentarians from Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees. However, discussions at the IPC biannual meetings tend to be rather general in nature, also due to the large and formal setting. In the case of smaller and ad hoc work sessions, there is a lack of follow-up. Therefore, the IPC format needs more flexibility, more focus and more concrete deliverables. Various flexible formats are thinkable, such as joint national and European parliamentarians' working visits to CSDP operations. Ad hoc formats, such as, for example, task forces of parliamentarians from member states and the European Parliament in which they work together on specific issues and deliver reports with concrete proposals would also be advisable. Such smaller, focused settings would be able to tackle pressing issues and produce more concrete deliverables. Moreover, it enables the involvement of a wider and varied group of parliamentarians. This improved and more effective IPC also needs a stronger institutional set-up.

## Functional and cluster interparliamentary cooperation

In a majority of the EU member states national parliamentarians have a key role in the deployment of troops. Working in multinational formations and contributing to rapid response mechanisms complicates decision-making, particularly when there is no time to lose. A very concrete measure is to not only engage in political exercises ahead of, for instance, an EU Battlegroup, where ministers are involved, but also to devise exercises in which parliamentarians get to practice their role. A case in point is the seven-nation EU Battlegroup that will be on call from July 2016. The seven parliaments should get in touch and organise such an exercise to be optimally prepared for possible deployment.

Deeper defence cooperation in small groups or clusters requires a parliamentary dimension. Modular operational cooperation or even integrated standing troop formations bring along mutual dependencies. The increasingly close cooperation between, for example, the Netherlands and Germany or between France and the United Kingdom are cases in point. These parliaments should share information on these dependencies in a systematic manner. They should consider joint defence committee sessions to bring the parliamentary dimension into line with the extent of their defence cooperation. We not only need interoperable armed forces in Europe, but also interoperable politicians.

## The way forward

Distilled from the foregoing, we have identified a number of concrete and actionable recommendations. The first recommendation is an exception in that it is not 'concrete', but it is the prerequisite for the ones that follow.

- **Foster a trans-European politics of defence**  
Parliamentarians are politicians, which makes it their job to create political narratives and to package the options and dilemmas of European defence in such a way that there is a buy-in from the public at large.
- **Organise an annual 'Defence Progress Meeting'**  
An annual meeting where the promises of governments about strengthening defence cooperation are discussed with the High Representative and possibly the Defence Minister of the country holding the EU Presidency.
- **Provide regular overviews to parliaments on defence cooperation**  
Governments should supply their parliaments with regular overviews of the implications of and the obligations that come with deeper defence cooperation.

- **Create an independent parliamentary research capacity**  
This is a condition for the independent oversight function of parliaments and for parliaments to be able to play their critical role in bringing European defence cooperation forward.
- **Organise a parliamentary exercise ahead of the EU Battlegroup for semester two of 2016**  
In addition to military preparations, political readiness across the troop-contributing countries is important for EU Battlegroups to be deployed in time or even at all.
- **Build the parliamentary dimension of defence cooperation in clusters**  
Organise regular joint defence committee meetings and start structural information-sharing with defence committees of partner countries.
- **Improve the IPC on CFSP/CSDP**  
Allow various formats with changing compositions of parliamentarians; prioritise a number of issues that result in concrete deliverables and strengthen the IPC's institutional ability to facilitate this.