



OCTOBER 2021

European defence Specialisation by capability groups

In many professions specialisation is regarded as a virtue. In a hospital the surgeon, the anaesthetist and the nurse have specialised skills. Together they engage in teamwork to cure patients. Yet, when it comes to defence, specialisation has a negative connotation. Contrary to the hospital's operating theatre, dependency on each other's armed forces is regarded as a serious, if not unacceptable risk, as a country has to be able to defend itself without relying on capabilities to be provided by other states. In reality, however, interdependence is a fact: European countries have relied on the nuclear deterrent of the United States since the 1950s and with regard to conventional forces, no single European country can provide all necessary capabilities. The question is how European interdependence can be made more effective. The answer must partly lie in specialisation.

This Policy Brief addresses specialisation in security and defence from the perspective of the 'Team Europe' approach of distributing tasks and operating with varying coalitions of European countries in order to make the EU (and in this case also NATO) more effective. It presents a model of structuring European armed forces in specialised groups – an idea that has been proposed in a Clingendael report published earlier this year.¹ First, the Policy Brief lays out the playing field by explaining the model of European capability groups. Next, several options for European capability groups will be proposed. It concludes with listing the implications for the Netherlands.

The specialisation playing field: from default to design

No agreed definition of specialisation exists. On the NATO website, one has to go back to the Secretary General's initiative on Smart Defence, launched almost ten years ago, to find a reference to the topic:

With budgets under pressure, nations often make unilateral decisions when shaping their equipment plans. When this happens, other nations can fall under an increased obligation to maintain certain capabilities. Such specialisation “by default” is the inevitable result of uncoordinated budget cuts. NATO should encourage specialisation “by design” so that members concentrate on their national strengths and agree to coordinate planned defence budget cuts with the Allies.²

1 Dick Zandee, Adája Stoetman & Bob Deen, [*The EU's Strategic Compass for security and defence. Squaring ambition with reality*](#), (The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, May 2021), pp. 42-43.

2 NATO, [*Smart Defence*](#), Last updated: 20 February 2017.

The distinction between specialisation by default and by design reflects reality versus desirability. In many cases, specialisation has meant “that a government focuses its defence resources on the provision of a limited set of capabilities and therefore abandons others.”³ In 2004, a majority in the Danish Parliament decided to close down the submarine fleet. Unilaterally, the Netherlands gave up its maritime patrol aircraft in 2005. Six years later, the government disbanded the Dutch army’s last two tank battalions.⁴ The result of specialisation by default “greatly limits the choices that EU and NATO countries will have with regard to the use of armed forces, be it in defence or crisis management.”⁵

As a result, specialisation has become a ‘dirty word’ or a theme to be avoided. In the last decade, new buzzwords have appeared, such as ‘smart defence’ in NATO and ‘pooling and sharing’ in the EU. Both initiatives were launched when defence budgets were cut after the financial crisis in 2008–2010 in order to maintain capabilities through multinational defence cooperation. Two examples are: NATO’s Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) with a Heavy Airlift Wing of commonly procured and operated C-17 aircraft based in Hungary; and the European Multi-Role Tanker and Transport (MRTT) fleet of Airbus A-330 aircraft based in the Netherlands and in Germany. Both SAC and the MRTT fleet have contributed to solving European capability shortfalls through multinational arrangements. However, specialisation has another aim, that is focusing the defence efforts of a country or several countries more on specific capability X while other countries

concentrate their investment and output primarily on capability Y.

Specialisation may sound frightening as the dependency issue immediately comes to mind: how sure can we be of assured access when relying on the capabilities of others? In reality, specialisation already exists. A limited number of European countries have missile defence capabilities at their disposal. The same applies to large drones for reconnaissance and/or combat missions,⁶ to amphibious capabilities or to air assets for neutralising the opponent’s air defence systems.⁷ Historic factors, geographical location and other reasons can explain why countries have specialised capabilities. For example, amphibious capabilities are limited to predominantly former colonial empires with overseas deployment experience or even existing obligations. Expensive, high-tech weapon systems cannot be afforded by each and every country. Last but not least, the threat environment and national security interests come into play. Countries in eastern Europe are primarily exposed to the threats from Russia. Predominantly, they invest in strengthening heavy land forces. In southern Europe the spin-off from instability and conflict in the Middle East is the main security concern: illegal migration, religious extremism, human smuggling, drugs trafficking and so on. As a result, in the defence planning of Mediterranean nations naval assets and rapidly deployable land force capabilities have a more prominent position.

The different capability profiles of European nations should be taken into account when investigating the potential for structuring their forces in a coordinated way – an approach that is so far lacking in Europe. In recent years many initiatives have been launched to improve military capabilities. The EU and NATO have a broad range of

3 Dr. Claudia Major & Dr. Christian Mölling, *Synergies between the EU and NATO? Specialisation as the litmus test for “Smart Defence” and “Pooling and Sharing”*, note no. 12/13, (NORDIKA Programme, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, May 2013), p. 2.

4 Later on, an innovative solution was found to retain a limited capability by embedding a Dutch tank company (with 16 Leopard-2 tanks leased from Germany) in the 414th German tank battalion.

5 Major & Mölling, *Synergies between the EU and NATO? Specialisation as the litmus test for “Smart Defence” and “Pooling and Sharing”*, p. 2.

6 MALE-UAV = Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance – Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, such as the (American) Predator/Reaper. These unmanned aircraft are referred to as RPAS=Remotely Piloted Aircraft System in the EU.

7 Known as SEAD=Suppression of Enemy Air Defences.

available tools and processes which the member states can use for improving their armed forces. These tools lack direction for channelling defence planning and investment in order to bring more order in the European landscape of military capabilities.⁸

Gameplay for Team Europe: constructing European capability groups

A system of multinational capability groups can optimise defence capabilities by steering multinational defence cooperation and channelling investment in a more efficient way. Such an approach could be based on two levels of specialisation:

- The first level would consist of groups of European countries specialising in capabilities such as in missile defence, amphibious forces, heavy land forces, rapidly deployable initial-entry forces and others. This would constitute *specialisation at the European level*.
- The second level would consist of countries specialising their contributions to the group, for example by being the provider of schools and training facilities or having responsibility for maintenance. This would constitute the *specialisation of countries* within the capability groups.

Countries belonging to specialised capability groups at the first level will not be exempted from having other capabilities, but they would do less in one or more of the other capability areas. For example: countries with amphibious forces could contribute less land-based infantry than countries without

naval infantry. Naturally, such an exchange cannot be carried out on a one-to-one basis. The size of the country and its armed forces, its defence budget and the existing capabilities have to be taken into account. Larger countries that contribute more forces to the specialised capability group would have to compensate more in quantitative terms than smaller countries.

With regard to the second level, it is important to note that the optimum potential for national specialisation within the group requires its contributors to operate the same equipment. In that case countries can use each other's training and exercise facilities, repair & maintenance infrastructure and logistical support structures. Also, the mutual use of equipment during operations becomes possible when circumstances would leave no other option. Examples of specialisation in enabling capacities already exist. The Netherlands provides the education/training and maintenance facilities for the M-frigates for Belgium, while the latter country hosts the same infrastructure for the minehunters of both countries. The Hague and Brussels are now fully coordinating their defence acquisition plans for replacing the M-frigates and minehunters. This form of specialisation should be considered when multinational defence equipment procurement programmes have been launched in order to optimise life-cycle management and to avoid duplication and unnecessary extra costs in training, logistical support and maintenance.

Trust and confidence are essential prerequisites for deepening defence cooperation, in particular for the acceptance of dependency on others and, in applicable cases, their leadership. Comparable organisational cultures and structures as well as past experience, geographical proximity and – last but not least – speaking the same language are also important conditions for success.⁹ However, there is

8 The most important instruments are the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) and, in the EU, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence and other capability planning tools of the European Defence Agency. But lacking is overall direction and coherence. For a further explanation, see: Michael Simm, 'What the Strategic Compass can do for defence capabilities: advancing clarity, commitment, consistency', in: Dick Zandee e.a., *The EU's Strategic Compass for security and defence – Squaring ambition with realism*, Annex 2, (The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, May 2021), p. 60-65.

9 For a more extensive analysis of success and fail factors in deepening multinational defence cooperation, see: Dick Zandee, Margriet Drent & Rob Hendriks, *Defence Cooperation Models. Lessons learned and usability*, (The Hague: The Clingendael Institute, October 2016).

no golden rule as to which criteria have to be met for which situation. For example, geographical proximity is less important for 'what flies' than for 'what drives'. Maintaining Finnish vehicles in southern Europe is an unattractive option, but in the future the engines of Italian F-35 aircraft will be maintained at Woensdrecht Air Force Base in the Netherlands.¹⁰ Transport aircraft or helicopters of one nation can fly soldiers from another nation without any problem. Language mainly becomes an issue at the lower unit level when soldiers, airmen and sailors have to carry out their duties side-by-side.

The model of European groups of countries with specific capabilities is not new. A major step was taken in 2014 when NATO Defence Ministers agreed on the Framework Nation Concept (FNC), which had been proposed originally by Germany.¹¹ Three European Allies took the lead in launching FNC groupings under their leadership:

- The UK-led grouping resulting in the *Joint Expeditionary Force* which is a multinational formation "made up of like-minded, northern European nations coming together as a coalition of the willing: the UK – as the framework nation – the three Baltic States, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway. The JEF is a rapid reaction or initial-entry force that can be deployed

for operations below the threshold to the high end of the force spectrum.

- The grouping led by Germany, which encompasses about 20 European countries, that either contribute with brigade-sized formations to heavy German divisions or with smaller and specialised capabilities. Due to the growing importance of strengthening NATO's collective defence posture, the German-led FNC structure has developed into a key European component in *NATO's follow-on forces* to be deployed in case of a large-scale attack.¹²
- The grouping led by Italy, focusing on mission-specific capabilities for *post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction operations*, mainly consisting of infantry and gendarmerie-type forces. The Multinational CIMIC Group¹³, a combined and joint regiment led by Italy with contributions from Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania and Slovenia is specialised in these types of operations.¹⁴

In addition to those which already exist, the following groups could be considered:

- *A Maritime Surveillance group*, focussing on long-range maritime surveillance capabilities for which countries could contribute different capabilities such as maritime patrol aircraft, unmanned systems and patrol vessels/corvettes. A regional approach (the Baltic Sea, the North Sea/Norwegian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea) would be a logical subdivision. This model can build on already existing cooperation formats, including with civil actors in the various regions.
- *A Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Military Support group*, within which countries could contribute with specialised capabilities (engineers,

10 The Netherlands and Italy have agreed to carry out engine maintenance of all their F-35 aircraft in the Netherlands, while The Hague has accepted the assembly of its F-35 aircraft in Italy.

11 FNC fits within the Alliance's transformation process after the peak of out-of-area deployment in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The concept "seeks to combine 'breadth' and 'depth' (with larger Allies addressing with their own forces a wide warfare spectrum – breadth – while the smaller Allies providing depth by contributing additional and/or specialized capabilities) as well as enhanced operational effectiveness and optimized resource efficiency." See: Diego A. Ruiz Palmer, [The Framework Nations' Concept and NATO: Game-Changer for a New Strategic Era or Missed Opportunity?](#), Research Paper No. 132, (Research Division, NATO Defence College, July 2016), p. 4.

12 For a further explanation, see: Rainer L. Glatz & Martin Zapfe, [Ambitious Framework Nation: Germany in NATO – Bundeswehr Capability Planning and the "Framework Nation Concept"](#), SWP Comments 35, (SWP, September 2017).

13 CIMIC stands for Civil-Military Cooperation.

14 Multinational CIMIC Group, ["Multinational CIMIC Group conducts training for deployments in NATO-led operations"](#), 8 March 2018.

medical personnel, support ships, helicopters, etc.). A start has been made with the successful coordination of France, the Netherlands and the UK (supported by Spain and Germany) in the context of first responder activities when natural disasters have occurred in the Caribbean area in recent years (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.). The increasing number of natural disasters in Europe itself argue for creating a wider European group.

- An *Integrated Air and Missile Defence group*, within which contributors could specialise in e.g. land- and sea-based missile defence systems. The number of countries operating land-based missile defence systems has grown to nine in the last decade¹⁵, while the sea-based capacity is rather limited. Countries operating both types of systems could perhaps focus on one of the two, in consultation with all other missile defence contributors in order to balance European capabilities across the continent.
- A *Special Forces group*, to which countries can provide specialised capabilities, such as maritime special operations forces, land-based special forces, para commandos and gendarmerie special forces. Such specialisation could also include means of delivery, such as transport aircraft, helicopters, submarines and vehicles. The Benelux countries and Denmark have already created a Composite SF Command, but this still falls short of specialisation between them and of coordination with other European countries operating special forces.

For each of these groupings the long-term aim should be to standardise weapon systems and equipment in order to maximise the potential for specialisation at the second level, in particular education/training and maintenance facilities.

15 Six European countries operate the land-based Patriot missile defence system (Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania and Spain, while Sweden is about to join) and two others the MBDA Aster 30-SAMP/T (France, Italy).

Implications for the Netherlands

The Dutch government has taken a bold step in labelling specialisation as one of the ten ‘design principles’ of the Dutch Armed Forces in the future. The Hague argues for “further specialisation within NATO and the EU”, building on the member states’ “natural leaning towards certain capabilities and type of deployment.” The text provides no content on the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of specialisation, but states that it “ultimately means that there are some things we will no longer do – that will be possible if these tasks are taken over by our partners, and vice versa.”¹⁶ The last five words of this quote are essential: no unilateral action but a coordinated approach by European countries is required in order to ensure that together they strengthen the capabilities which the EU and NATO need to have. In other words, the specialisation of defence capabilities has to serve the purpose of solving European military shortfalls and reducing dependency on the United States. It fits in the security and defence policy of the Netherlands to increase the European contribution to NATO while at the same time underpinning the EU’s foreign and security policy with better coordinated and improved military capabilities.

Still, the Dutch armed forces have become thinly stretched across almost all capabilities. Since the middle of the last decade the defence budget of the Netherlands has been on the rise – from € 7.6 billion in 2014 to € 12.5 billion in 2022 – but this still falls far short of the amount of money that is needed to modernise the Dutch armed forces across all three services (naval, land, air) and to adapt to future requirements such as in the cyber realm and for information-led operations. The result is a small air force, a small navy and an army that is not capable of contributing to NATO collective defence at the high end of the spectrum. Thus, the Netherlands is losing credibility and this undermines the prerequisite of trust and confidence for deepening defence cooperation with European partners.

16 Ministry of Defence of the Netherlands, *Defence Vision 2035. Fighting for a safer future*, October 2020, p. 37.

Specialisation in European capability groups will help to concentrate the Dutch defence effort by investing in and modernising the military capabilities of choice, but based on coordination with other European countries. At the same time the Dutch contribution to more effective European defence capabilities in a Team Europe approach will require The Hague to make choices. Taking into account the proposed European capability groups and dependent on agreed arrangements with partner countries, specialisation at the European level could mean for the Netherlands for example:

- To concentrate its missile defence contribution on a sea-based component within the Integrated Air and Missile Defence group.
- To concentrate its land forces' contribution on a heavy, modernised brigade within the German-led Framework Nation structure, which also allows for the further integration of the Dutch army with the German land forces.
- To reduce the infantry capabilities of the land forces while the naval infantry (marines) would be strengthened, including with helicopters to contribute to expeditionary capabilities (connect to the air mobile brigade).
- Special forces should be concentrated in the land forces within the Special Forces group.






These are just a few examples. For the Dutch government, breaking with the past policy of 'no choices' is one prerequisite. Another prerequisite is to replace decision-making based on merely national considerations by consultations, negotiations and agreements with other European countries on how to improve European defence capabilities together in order to contribute to a more effective and efficient European foreign and security policy. The third prerequisite is to invest in defence and not to consider specialisation as a way to cut the budget. Sharing costs has to be an integral part of European specialisation and this may often imply spending more initially in order to realise cost savings later on.

Capability groups based on specialisation by varying groups of European countries, open to EU member states and non-EU (NATO) nations, will strengthen the military underpinning of that policy. Furthermore, the model of specialising European military capabilities could serve as an example for the Team Europe approach in other areas.

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