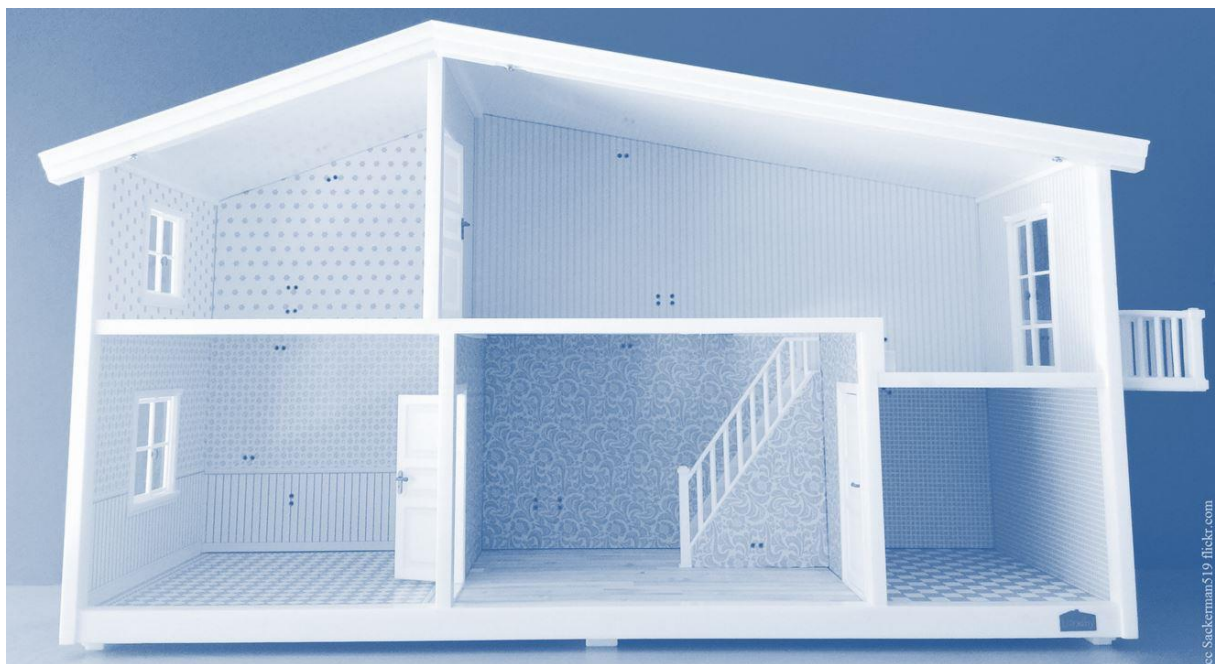


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The European Intervention Initiative: A look behind the scenes

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On 25 June 2018, nine European member states signed up to the French-led European Intervention Initiative. The initiative was broadly welcomed as complementary to EU-level defence initiatives, but doubts about its added value as well as the potential for duplication and fragmentation persist. This blog post offers a look behind the scenes and asks: What is the initiative really about? Are concerns about duplication and fragmentation justified? What should and could be the next steps?

1 Introduction

While all eyes were on the approaching European Council and on divisions surrounding migration policy and Eurozone reform, the defence ministers of nine EU member states signed a [Letter of Intent](#) to establish a European Intervention Initiative (EI2) at the margins of the Foreign Affairs Council on 25 June. The French-led initiative should allow a group of willing and able European states to foster a common strategic culture and consolidate European strategic autonomy. These objectives sound quite similar to the ones of the permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) on defence that 25 EU member states activated in late 2017.

At a press conference following the Foreign Affairs Council meeting, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini [emphasized](#) the complementarity of the EI2 and PESCO. “I do not think we should be worried about any possible fragmentation or duplication of effort”. In June, and after months of hesitation, Chancellor Angela Merkel had also [welcomed](#) the initiative. Together with French President Emmanuel Macron, she [declared](#) that it “will be linked as closely as possible with PESCO”. These political endorsements have to be seen in the broader EU context. The message between the lines is: we might be struggling with migration and the Eurozone, but we remain united on security and defence.

Drawing on insights from interviews with European and NATO officials this blog post goes beyond political messaging and offers a look behind the scenes of the EI2. What do we know about the initiative? Are fears of duplication and fragmentation truly ungrounded? And what should come next?

2 The EI2: Why, What, How, and Who?

When President Macron announced a European Intervention Initiative in his Sorbonne speech in September 2017, many observers were puzzled. Nine months later, there are still open questions, but there is some more clarity on the rationale, scope, modus and participants:

Why? The EI2 is generally seen as a French response to an overly inclusive and under-ambitious PESCO. In the first half of 2017, France was pushing for an exclusive and ambitious PESCO allowing the able and willing member states to prepare for the most demanding military operations. Germany preferred a more inclusive PESCO with lower entry criteria to prevent new dividing lines in the EU. The German vision largely prevailed.

The French preference for a more ambitious and exclusive club is not purely ideological. In recent years, France has often been overstretched when intervening in crises in the EU’s Southern neighbourhood. The idea of the EI2 is rooted in experiences such as the French intervention in Mali in 2013. France had been warning its European partners of the Islamist threat in Mali throughout 2012, but without much effect. It was only after a last-minute French intervention to prevent an Islamist takeover of the capital that EU partners agreed to collective action. The French overstretch was also apparent when the country invoked the mutual assistance clause (Art. 42.7 TEU) in response to the terrorist attacks in November 2015 and asked EU partners for operational support in Africa (notably Mali) and the Middle East.

What? Beyond the meta-goals of a common strategic culture and European strategic autonomy, the EI2 is essentially about preparing the group of the willing and the able for joint military crisis management in the EU's neighbourhood. It [aims](#) to “foster our capacity to better anticipate, prepare, plan and act together when and where necessary”. Cooperation will thus focus on four fields:

1. strategic foresight and intelligence sharing
2. scenario development and planning
3. support to operations
4. lessons learned and doctrine

The Letter of Intent also clearly states what the EI2 is *not*. Importantly, it is not a new rapid reaction force and will not earmark national forces for its crisis management activities.

How? The EI2 is supposed to be flexible, pragmatic and non-binding. It is without prejudice to any particular institutional framework. It can thus serve the EU, NATO, the UN as well as coalitions of the willing. The Letter of Intent also underlines that the EI2 will be “resource-neutral”. It should be steered by a “light” Permanent Secretariat in Paris based on French personnel and the existing network of national liaison officers in the French Defence Ministry.

Who? France sent invitations to nine European countries it considered to be amongst the willing and the able. They included seven EU and PESCO members: Germany, Spain, Italy, Estonia, Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal. However, they also included Denmark, which has an opt-out on European defence cooperation and the UK, which is about to leave the EU. On 25 June 2018, all except for Italy signed the Letter of Intent.

The French definition of the ‘able and the willing’ caused tensions within the EU. Including Denmark and the UK was seen as a way of keeping the EI2 separate from PESCO and to circumvent EU decision-making procedures. Member states such as Poland or Lithuania might have wanted to join but they were not invited. German officials thus described the initiative as divisive. The Letter of Intent suggests that a concession was made: the EI2 should be open to other European states willing to share its strategic objectives and to demonstrate commitment as well as an adequate level of operational capabilities.

3 Added value, duplication and fragmentation

The fact that the EI2 will not be a rapid reaction force, not create new structures and be resource-neutral has certainly appeased fears of duplication. The same goes for the promise that it should serve “the objectives and projects of PESCO to the maximum extent possible”. The promise of openness assuaged concerns about fragmentation. And yet, doubts remain. The Italians postponed their signature [arguing](#) that they first want to understand how complementary the EI2 really is to NATO and PESCO. In May 2018, a German official described the EI2 as “a daft idea” and “a total non-starter”. In June, a senior NATO official warned that “the EI2 could be a real showstopper for PESCO”.

Questionable added value: A German official dismissed the EI2 saying: “Someone proposed the EI2 to Macron last year and now that it is linked to his name there is no face-saving way out of it.” Germans argued that most of the measures could have been implemented within the EU and under PESCO. Article 44 TEU allows the Council to delegate a task within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) to a group of willing and able member states, which can then agree among themselves on its management. The EU's crisis

management structures are already dealing with early warning, strategic foresight and lessons learned. These aspects could have been strengthened.

The overarching question is: Why foster a common strategic culture outside the EU if we could have done it at 27 and with greater accountability? The French answer is twofold. First: to engage Denmark and particularly the UK. Second: speed and flexibility. The second argument can however be questioned. Germany, for instance, would not be more likely to join France in a military operation if it is prepared outside the established systems of mutual collective security. In May, a German official said: “The French are interested to have us join the EI2 for political and financial reasons. But we will inevitably run into old conflicts. When there is a crisis in North Africa we will not be able to react as quickly as the French might want”.

Potential for duplication: There could be a degree of duplication in terms of projects. There is already an overlap between the EI2 and the German-led PESCO project Crisis Response Operation Core. The latter aims at quicker and more effective deployment of joint military operations and includes five of the EI2 participants as members or observers. In the Letter of Intent, there is a commitment to identify areas of cooperation in the EI2 that can be merged with existing PESCO projects or constitute new ones. Forging close links and synergies would indeed be sensible.

However, the link between PESCO and the NATO Framework Nation Concept (FNC) shows that duplication cannot always be avoided when membership differs. As an EU official explained, there are two projects, the European Medical Command and the Logistics Hub, that have largely been transferred from the FNC to PESCO. However, as non-EU member Norway participates on the NATO side, they are now run in both frameworks with dual meetings and reporting efforts.

In addition, there could be a degree of duplication in terms of structures. The Permanent EI2 Secretariat in Paris that should oversee policy and objectives sounds like a French version of the PESCO Secretariat in Brussels. To what extent this similarity entails a duplication of effort will depend on its size, governance mode and ties to the PESCO Secretariat.

Risk of fragmentation: The EI2 could have a divisive effect if it led to a ‘beauty contest’ with PESCO in terms of political capital and projects. In a worst-case scenario, this would divide the French and the Germans, fostering mutual distrust and leaving both initiatives half-baked. In June 2018, an informed EU official noted that the French were “already withdrawing a little bit from PESCO”. The French, in turn, would likely be frustrated if the Germans only participated in the EI2 on paper and as a face-saving measure.

Beyond the Franco-German engine, the question is how open the EI2 will really be. The Letter of Intent outlines the broad criteria mentioned earlier, but we know from the PESCO context how controversial their more concrete definition can be. If a large group of EU member states feels permanently excluded from a European hard core of defence they might be tempted to turn to national initiatives or bilateral cooperation. The recent Polish offer to pay \$2bn for a permanent US military presence can be seen as a foretaste of that.

There is thus a risk that the multiplication of multilateral frameworks with similar aims but different membership weakens the CSDP and the European pillar within NATO.

4 What's next?

The defence ministers of the nine EI2 members were tasked to draft a Foundation Memorandum of Understanding as soon as possible to outline the modalities of participation. Meanwhile, the 25 PESCO members are to present the second set of PESCO projects by November 2018. In parallel, they will be working on the conditions for third state participation in PESCO projects. The next five months thus represent an important window of opportunity to reduce risks of duplication and fragmentation while maximising synergies. This window of opportunity should be used to:

1. Fill PESCO with substance

In particular in military circles, the first 17 PESCO projects are seen as lowest common denominator outcomes. They were assembled under time pressure and, as an EU official said, “there was some recycling and we ended up with a rather random mix”. The next round of projects should be more ambitious and aligned with the EU’s capability gaps as identified by the recently updated Capability Development Plan. France and Germany should co-sign some of these ambitious new projects. This is not only important in terms of substance but will also send an important signal to others that both remain committed to PESCO.

2. Spell out the ‘closest possible link’

The ‘closest possible link’ between PESCO and the EI2 needs to be specified further. The PESCO and EI2 Secretariats will be an important linchpin in this regard. There could be regular joint sessions, cross-briefings and an exchange of liaison officers. The aim would be ensuring full transparency, avoiding duplication and enhancing synergies at the level of projects. A good starting point would be defining the link and delineation between the EI2 and the PESCO Crisis Response Operation Core. Ideally, the EI2 could, in the future, also bring new initiatives into PESCO and act as a catalyser.

3. Mutually open up

A precondition for synergies and close links is a degree of mutual openness. There are red lines on both sides. The EU said that third countries would only be invited exceptionally to PESCO projects and without prejudice to its decision-making autonomy. France, in turn, is unlikely to allow for a ‘PESCO-isation’ and potential dilution of the EI2. Both sides could establish an associate status for the respective non-members to facilitate the establishment of joint or at least closely linked projects in those perhaps not so ‘exceptional circumstances’ that it would be of mutual interest. This will require pragmatism on all sides.

Behind the scenes of political unity, Europeans are debating the balance between deepening and widening; between a multi-speed defence Europe and an inclusive Security and Defence Union. The aim should be to combine both by consolidating PESCO as a key foundation of this Union while allowing a more ambitious defence avant-garde to lead the way without excluding others. Considering the manifold challenges in Europe’s neighbourhood and the intensified pressure by Americans to get real about NATO’s European pillar, there seems to be no alternative.

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