

The Irish Presidency of the Council of the EU has shown that serious decisions on European security and defence still need to be made.

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Europe as a region has 1.7 million troops, and the second highest level of regional defence spending in the world. Yet it lacks the capacity to manage and coordinate these forces as a whole. Ben Tonra looks at how Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU has helped to move forward the discussion on European security and defence, ahead of the European Council summit in December. He argues that, in light of the need for Europe to take a larger role in international security, Member States' national defence ministries should be better connected to EU policy and decision making.



As the Irish European Council presidency draws to a close at the end of June, all eyes are on the big ticket items the Irish Government pledged to address: substantive progress on economic governance and banking union; jobs, growth and the single market; the Multiannual Financial Framework; EU-US free trade; fisheries and agriculture reform and a host of others. Somewhat overlooked has been the issue of security and defence. The Irish presidency has worked tremendously hard to contribute to a positive momentum in the run-up to the dedicated European Council discussion on security and defence at the December 2013 summit. The prevailing mood in advance of that discussion seems to be one of anticipation tempered by apprehension.



Credit: The Council of the European Union

The anticipation is generated by the fact that major forces seem to be converging which make substantive decisions on security and defence a necessity. First, European defence budgets are under pressure as never before and member states are desperately seeking means by which they can maintain military capacity at reduced overall cost. Pooling and sharing between EU partners appears a no-brainer in this regard; whether it is an [Anglo-French agreement to share an aircraft carrier](#) so as to maintain their global strategic reach or whether it is a Belgian-Dutch agreement to base a Belgian helicopter and crew on a Dutch naval vessel to combat narco-trafficking in the Caribbean. Second, if jobs and growth are an overriding European priority, the defence sector (already employing 600,000) has tremendous potential; whether it is from the 'prime' multinational behemoth EADS or the tiny Reamda based in Tralee, County Kerry. Thirdly, the world is changing and for arguably the first time in two generations,

Europe is going to have to supply its own security and will have to make a much larger contribution to international security. Europe's decades' long dependence on the United States is ending – it may end with a bang or a whimper – but it is ending. Long after the end of the Cold War, Europe still depended on the US to address security crises in the Balkans, in Libya and most recently in Mali. Even with 1.7 million troops and with the second highest regional defence spending in the world, Europe does not have the basic capacity to manage and to direct even comparatively small-scale military operations. Gaping holes exist in European air, land and sea forces which make even apparently modest military missions problematic.

The apprehension in advance of the summit is based on the fear that the Heads of Government will roll up to their December meeting with a set of pre-cooked summit conclusions liberally dressed with high-minded generalities and garnished with platitudes but devoid of protein. Worse still, they might well then depart with no intention of discussing security and defence for another five years.

The Irish EU Council presidency has worked seriously to focus minds and to direct attention to the challenges ahead. Three 'baskets' of issues are due to be discussed in December: the effectiveness, visibility and impact of the EU's security and defence policy; the development of civilian and military capabilities in support of that policy; and the strengthening of Europe's defence industrial base. In each basket a range of EU, national and independent actors are compiling reports, papers, reviews and analyses all of which need to be digested and synthesised in advance of the summit. Over the last few months, the Irish presidency has hosted the standard complement of meetings of EU foreign, security and defence bodies in Dublin. They have also, however, run two dedicated seminars: the [first](#) in February on inter-institutional cooperation in crisis management and the [second](#) in May dedicated to the defence agenda of the December summit. These seminars were serious and substantive attempts to put shape on Europe's defence agenda and they feed directly into forthcoming ministerial meetings over the next six months. Nonetheless, the outstanding question remains the same: Does there exist the political will necessary to take serious decisions on European security and defence? Can Europe's 'shameful incapacity' be successfully addressed?

The experience of the Irish presidency has raised again an intriguing set of institutional questions. Security and defence is an odd fish in the EU sea. The policy area is directed (ostensibly) by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, and it has its own dedicated planning and management infrastructure within the EEAS including the Military Committee and the Military Staff Committee to which the member states send their military representatives. At the same time, however, there is no ministerial council of defence ministers in the same way that there are councils for other EU policy areas from fisheries to finance. The logic here is that the High Representative's job description directly encompasses EU security and defence and that she then works with her EEAS staff and national foreign ministers in the Foreign Affairs Council to determine the Union's foreign, security and defence policy and reports directly thereon to the European Council. One might reasonably think that national defence ministries – the very people that need to develop, mobilise and account for security and defence nationally – should be directly plugged into EU policy and decision making? Perhaps that might be a modest line item for discussion at the December summit?

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