



EU Integration and Differentiation
for Effectiveness and Accountability

Policy Briefs

No. 6

March 2022

Flexible Defence Cooperation in Europe: FNC, JEF and EI2

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The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822622.

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Abstract

Defence cooperation between European Union member states has long been characterised by a high level of fragmentation. To manage, and potentially overcome, some of the existing divides, differentiation has been recognised as one way forward, exemplified by the activation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and discussions about the use of Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union. However, beyond treaty-based forms of differentiation, EU member states have also joined extra-EU frameworks for defence cooperation such as the Joint Expeditionary Force, the Framework Nations Concept and the European Intervention Initiative, which embody different levels of formalisation, diverse memberships and foci, as well as varying links to the EU and NATO. This Policy Brief analyses whether this kind of differentiated cooperation outside the EU structures contributes to the long-term prospects of European integration in security and defence, or whether it adds to the existing fragmentation within the EU and European defence more broadly. The paper argues that the flexible defence frameworks bear some potential for enhancing defence cooperation among EU member states, but also present challenges. Moreover, their ability to manage diversity in European defence remains largely unproven.

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Introduction

Defence cooperation between European Union member states has long been characterised by a high level of fragmentation. Of the 27 EU member states, 21 are members of NATO, which forms the bedrock of European (collective) defence, whereas six are not. Furthermore, one member state, Denmark, has a formal opt-out from EU decisions and actions with defence implications.¹ And while all member states must agree to missions and operations under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), in practice their contributions to the CSDP differ significantly (see e.g., Meyer 2020). At the same time, also some non-members participate in CSDP missions and operations (e.g., Aydın-Düzgüt et al. 2021).

The fragmentation of EU defence efforts – and European defence more broadly – reflects profound differences between European states in terms of size, geography, history, threat perceptions, strategic culture, defence spending, armed forces and defence industrial interests (see e.g., Howorth 2019: 263-264). To manage, and potentially overcome, some of the existing divides in the area of security and defence, differentiation has been recognised as one way forward. In 2017, the EU activated Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), a treaty-based mechanism for enhanced defence cooperation. To date, altogether 25 EU member states have joined PESCO. Within PESCO, the participating member states cooperate on different capability projects in varying constellations (Blockmans and Macchiarini Crosson 2019). More recently, the idea of differentiation has also gained traction in the context of EU missions and operations, with some member states currently calling on the EU to use the potential of Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union (e.g., Carter 2021), which allows the Council to entrust the implementation of a specific security and defence policy task to a group of willing and able member states.

However, differentiation – understood as “any modality of integration or cooperation that allows states (members and non-members) and sub-state entities to work together in non-homogeneous, flexible ways” (Lavenex and Križić 2019: 3) – is not limited to the cooperation models anchored in EU treaties. Instead, many EU member states have also joined different extra-EU frameworks for security and defence cooperation. These frameworks feature diverse memberships and foci, different levels of formalisation, and varying links to the EU and NATO. The importance of these alternative “islands of co-operation” (Valasek 2011) has arguably increased over the last ten to 15 years, as EU member states have sought to respond to budgetary pressures, to their changing security environment, and to global power shifts (Fägersten 2020: 5-6).

While differentiation is increasingly recognised as an important aspect of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies, research concerning differentiation in the defence realm has mostly focused on PESCO and other treaty-based mechanisms of differentiation (Siddi et al. 2021). By contrast, very few scholars have analysed the informal, flexible forms of differentiation in the security and defence field

¹ Following Russia's February 2022 attack on Ukraine, the Danish government announced that it will organise a referendum on Denmark's defence opt-out on 1 June 2022 and called for repealing it.

(for notable exceptions, see Rieker 2021a, 2021b). This paper contributes to the existing literature by concentrating specifically on the three major European defence frameworks that have emerged outside or at the margins of EU and NATO structures during the last ten years: the German-led Framework Nations Concept (FNC), the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2). While European, extra-EU defence cooperation also takes place bilaterally and in smaller regional groupings, the FNC, JEF and EI2 count as the key European defence cooperation initiatives beyond the EU and NATO. The aim of the brief is to analyse and discuss whether these flexible frameworks contribute to the long-term prospects of European integration in security and defence, or whether they strengthen the existing fragmentation within the EU and European defence more broadly. The paper also discusses their potential for managing existing diversity among EU member states.

1. Heterogeneous frameworks: FNC, JEF and EI2

Since the late 2000s, attempts to foster European defence cooperation have been driven by several factors: budgetary pressures, primarily caused by the global financial crisis and the ensuing eurozone crisis; a changing security environment, ranging from instability in the Middle East and Northern Africa to the Russian-initiated war in Ukraine; and major power shifts, including the rise of China, the changing focus of US foreign and security policy as well as Brexit (Fägersten 2020: 5). Most of these challenges are common to all European states regardless of whether they are part of the EU or NATO. At the same time, efforts to deepen cooperation within both the EU and NATO have faced similar obstacles stemming from the persistent differences between European states (Glatz and Zapfe 2017, Howorth 2019). Against this backdrop, differentiation in the form of cooperation within smaller groups of states had implicitly emerged as a feasible option for European defence cooperation already long before the launch of PESCO (see Valasek 2011, Arts and Keil 2021). Indeed, two of the three European defence initiatives analysed in this paper were developed at the margins of NATO. However, all three are highly relevant from the perspective of the EU as well, considering that most of their participants are EU member states.

The FNC was born out of an initiative introduced by Germany in 2013 and adopted by NATO at its summit in Wales in 2014. The idea is for European states to form military clusters, with larger states constituting their military core and smaller states “plugging in” by providing specialised capabilities (Major and Mölling 2014). The FNC can thus be described as a model of flexible cooperation under the umbrella of NATO, but also extending to non-NATO partners (Arts and Keil 2021). In 2014, three different FNC groupings were formed: a German-led group, a UK-led group and a smaller Italy-led group (see Glatz and Zapfe 2017). However, since then the FNC label has become almost synonymous with the German-led FNC group – and will be used in that sense also in this paper.

From the outset, the German FNC has aimed to develop and preserve key military capabilities by increasing cooperation between European military forces. It thus pursues aims similar to those of NATO's Smart Defence initiative and the EU's Pooling and Sharing initiative before it, but also seeks to remedy some of their shortcomings (Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2019: 16). The FNC focuses primarily on addressing capability gaps identified in NATO's Defence Planning Process – but also seeks to contribute to the EU's efforts in security and defence (Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2019: 18, Jarowinsky 2020). It encompasses 24 capability clusters, within which the participating states try to enhance interoperability, strengthen existing capabilities and develop new ones. At the same time, the FNC also aims at building multinational force structures in the air and land domains and improving the command and availability of multinational forces in other domains (German Federal Ministry of Defence 2017, Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2019: 18-20). At present, altogether 21 states, including members and non-members of the EU and NATO,² and the European Defence Agency (EDA) participate in the FNC, but involvement in individual FNC activities is voluntary.

The JEF was also launched at NATO's Wales Summit in 2014 and follows the FNC model, with the UK as its "framework nation". While the FNC concentrates on capability development, the JEF is a multinational rapid response force. Its core consists of British rapid response forces, with nine other Northern European states – the five Nordic states, the three Baltic states and the Netherlands – also participating. Like the FNC, the JEF thus brings together both members and non-members of the EU and NATO³ that together are seen as a group of "like-minded, Northern European nations" (UK Ministry of Defence 2021). The geographic focus of the JEF is the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic Sea region, although deployments in other regions are not excluded (UK Ministry of Defence 2021). The JEF should be able to deploy a force of up to 10,000 troops that can be used across the full spectrum of military activities – ranging from humanitarian assistance to combat operations (Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2019: 29-31). It can act independently or in support of UN, NATO or other multinational operations. Its constellation can also vary, as the participating states are not obliged to contribute forces to any JEF activities or deployments (UK Ministry of Defence 2021).

The EI2 was announced by French President Emmanuel Macron in 2017 and launched in 2018 as a "flexible, non-binding forum of European participating states which are able and willing to engage their military capabilities and forces [...] to protect European security interests, without prejudice to the chosen institutional framework (the EU, NATO, the UN or *ad hoc* coalitions)" (Letter of Intent 2018: point 5). The declared aim of the EI2 is to work towards developing a shared strategic culture between participating states, thereby improving their ability to carry out military operations throughout the full spectrum of crises. Unlike the JEF, the EI2 itself is not a rapid reaction force, although it seeks to enable joint efforts by the participating states (Bel 2019). Interaction between participating states is to be reinforced in

² Of the 21 participating states, Norway is not a member of the EU, Finland and Sweden are not members of NATO, and Switzerland belongs to neither the EU nor NATO.

³ Of the eight participating states, the UK and Norway are not members of the EU, whereas Finland and Sweden do not belong to NATO.

four main fields: strategic foresight and intelligence sharing, scenario development and planning, support to operations, and lessons learned and doctrine. Nine states, including France, Germany and the UK, signed the E12 Letter of Intent in 2018 and four other states have joined later. As with the FNC and the JEF, the group includes both members and non-members of the EU and NATO.⁴

To assess the contribution of these three heterogeneous frameworks to enhancing defence cooperation between EU member states, this paper examines them in light of three different aspects: their agenda, membership and linkages with the EU and NATO. The choice of these topics mirrors general fears about flexible defence cooperation: the possibility of duplicating efforts already made elsewhere, the potential for amplifying existing divisions, and the risk of undermining more established structures, above all the EU and NATO (see Koenig 2018, Arts and Keil 2021).

2. Agenda: To complement, not duplicate?

The FNC attempts to strengthen European cooperation in terms of capabilities, thereby also responding to the lack of progress achieved by previous EU and NATO efforts. However, since the introduction of the FNC in 2014, the importance of capability development has notably increased also in the EU with the introduction of both PESCO and the European Defence Fund. Key questions hence include how the EU's capability projects align with those of the FNC and, since the FNC is mainly driven by NATO's planning process, how NATO and EU efforts more broadly are coordinated. In the past there have been some cases of duplication between FNC and PESCO projects (Koenig 2018), but the merger of one FNC project (Multinational Medical Coordination Center) with one PESCO project (European Medical Command) is also seen as proof of existing synergies (Jarowinsky 2020). Moreover, the inclusion of the EDA in the FNC is an interesting attempt to enhance coordination with the EU's defence efforts (Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2019: 43).

The JEF's core focus is rapid intervention, an area where the EU has sought to become more capable since at least 2004 when the EU Battlegroups were created. However, the Union's attempts have been largely unsuccessful, as the Battlegroups have never been deployed. After the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, strengthening rapid response capacity is again high on the EU's agenda and will be addressed in the Strategic Compass. In addition to modifications to the EU's existing rapid response concept, the Compass is likely to endorse the use of Article 44 TEU, allowing the Council to entrust the implementation of CSDP tasks to a group of willing and capable member states. However, from the EU's perspective, the JEF is of limited relevance here. Centred around the UK, whose future ties to the EU's foreign, security

4 Of the 13 participating states, the UK and Norway are not members of the EU, whereas Finland and Sweden do not belong to NATO.

and defence policies remain undefined (Bond 2020), a direct use of the JEF under the EU umbrella seems unlikely. Nevertheless, the JEF increases the interoperability of the participating states, thus improving the potential for joint action in other frameworks, including NATO.

The EI2 has a broader and more abstract aim than the FNC or the JEF. Although the EU also strives towards common strategic culture, the EI2's explicit focus on this topic largely adds to the EU's security and defence agenda, thus potentially complementing the work done at the EU level. The EI2 also aims at improving the conditions for joint action in crisis situations, including in CSDP missions and operations. It could also foster the EU's rapid response capacity, at least over a longer term. However, being the most recent of the three initiatives, the eventual outlook for cooperation in EI2 remains open to some extent.

The JEF, FNC and EI2 have different foci, so excessive overlaps between them are not imminent. At the same time, all three cover elements that are already present on the EU's security and defence agenda – although in different forms and to a different degree. At best, the frameworks could contribute to EU defence by deepening cooperation in their respective fields beyond what is achievable at the EU level. However, without proper coordination with EU structures, duplicating EU efforts continues to be a risk.

3. Membership: Balancing between inclusivity and effectiveness

Ideally, flexible forms of cooperation offer a way to overcome persistent obstacles to enhancing defence cooperation by reducing the size and heterogeneity of the participating group. However, striking the right balance between inclusion and exclusion remains a difficult question. At worst, exclusive forms of cooperation could cement existing differences between those participating and those left outside.

Flexible cooperation formats have developed varying solutions to the equation between effectiveness and inclusivity. When PESCO was initially planned, France was hoping to limit the number of its members by introducing high criteria, whereas Germany prioritised inclusivity, emphasising the EU's unity (e.g., Koenig 2018, Major and Mölling 2019). In the end, the German preference for inclusivity prevailed. Many interpreted the subsequent introduction of the EI2 by France as an attempt to compensate for the potential loss of effectiveness in PESCO, even though the EI2 had already been planned for some time (e.g., Koenig 2018, Major and Mölling 2019).

However, a level of inclusivity has been crucial also for the EI2. Importantly, it is the only one of the three frameworks in which Western Europe's three strongest military powers (and the leaders of the three frameworks), France, Germany and the UK, are all present. The participation of the three adds credibility to the EI2 and could help create cohesion between the different frameworks. The UK's involvement signals

continuity regarding its role in European defence and its bilateral relationship with France after Brexit. Unlike the UK, Germany was not an obvious participant in the EI2 due to its culture of military restraint (Baumann and Hellmann 2001). However, including Germany was crucial for France to increase the EI2's legitimacy (Zandee and Kruijver 2019: 4) and to support the Franco-German bilateral axis.

The composition of the FNC, for its part, testifies to Germany's preference for inclusive defence cooperation. With a total of 21 states and the EDA, the FNC is only a little smaller than PESCO. It is thus questionable whether it serves to overcome the challenges of heterogeneity. On the other hand, like in PESCO, the participating states can freely decide on their engagement in different clusters and formations, creating additional flexibility and differentiation to this format. The membership of the JEF reflects both geography and the perceived "like-mindedness" of the participants. Above all their broadly shared view of the security of Northern Europe has become a unifying factor for the group. Compared to the broad and inclusive FNC, JEF represents a more exclusive club, whereas the EI2 is located somewhere between these two.

Finally, it is noteworthy that all three frameworks unify both EU members and non-members as well as NATO members and non-members, thus bridging the institutional divides. In that sense, they act not only as vehicles of differentiation, but also as a means of integration.

4. Relations to the EU and NATO: Outside, yet coordinated?

While emphasising openness towards and cooperation with the EU and NATO, the flexible defence arrangements aim to avoid bureaucracy and blockages typical of EU decision making. Especially France has favoured flexible forms of cooperation over institutionalised ones, a vision that shines through in the EI2. However, while detached from both the EU and NATO, the EI2 seeks to benefit cooperation in both (Zandee and Kruijver 2019).

Similarly, the JEF, born in NATO but separate from its structures, declares as its aim to support operations of NATO or other coalitions. Finally, the FNC, also originating from NATO, is linked to planning within that framework, but Germany has tried to develop it so as to create synergies between NATO and EU cooperation, as exemplified by the involvement of the EDA (von Bonsdorff 2018).

Experts have called for better coordination between the different flexible cooperation formats, as well as between them and the EU and NATO. One suggestion is that the EU and NATO would act in a coordinating role to ensure the cohesion of European defence efforts. Moreover, the use of NATO standards across the different frameworks remains essential to secure interoperability (e.g., Hagström Frisell and Sjökvist 2019: 41). However, at present coordination between the formats remains

non-systematic and links to the EU, including PESCO, limited. Much seems to depend on the commitment of the participating states and, above all, the three group leaders. The different initiatives, and European defence more broadly, would also benefit from closer cooperation between the EU and NATO, which is still a work in progress.

Conclusions

Considering that deep, unified EU defence cooperation remains out of reach, flexible cooperation formats can ideally facilitate the emergence of the necessary preconditions, providing an opportunity for closer cooperation within smaller and less diverse groups. However, instances such as the introduction of the EI2 almost simultaneously with PESCO have also created concerns about duplication, fragmentation and detachment from existing structures (Koenig 2018). A level of inclusivity, as was the case with both the UK and Germany joining the EI2, as well as coordination between the cooperation formats and with the EU and NATO structures, as attempted in the context of the FNC, can serve as mitigating factors.

At the same time, the potential achievements and risks of the different cooperation arrangements should be interpreted with caution, as their nature, level of maturity and time horizons vary. While the JEF is already operational, it has never been deployed. Meanwhile, the EI2 is only at the beginning of its journey towards a common strategic culture and the FNC pursues long-term defence cooperation and integration. Thus, the potential of the three frameworks remains largely unproven. So far, the key achievement of the arrangements has been to tie European actors across existing institutional divides and increasing interaction between them.

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Differentiation has become the new normal in the European Union (EU) and one of the most crucial matters in defining its future. A certain degree of differentiation has always been part of the European integration project since its early days. The Eurozone and the Schengen area have further consolidated this trend into long-term projects of differentiated integration among EU Member States.

A number of unprecedented internal and external challenges to the EU, however, including the financial and economic crisis, the migration phenomenon, renewed geopolitical tensions and Brexit, have reinforced today the belief that **more flexibility is needed within the complex EU machinery**. A Permanent Structured Cooperation, for example, has been launched in the field of defence, enabling groups of willing and able Member States to join forces through new, flexible arrangements. Differentiation could offer a way forward also in many other key policy fields within the Union, where uniformity is undesirable or unattainable, as well as in the design of EU external action within an increasingly unstable global environment, offering manifold models of cooperation between the EU and candidate countries, potential accession countries and associated third countries.

EU IDEA's key goal is to address **whether, how much and what form of differentiation is not only compatible with, but is also conducive to a more effective, cohesive and democratic EU**. The basic claim of the project is that differentiation is not only necessary to address current challenges more effectively, by making the Union more resilient and responsive to citizens. Differentiation is also desirable as long as such flexibility is compatible with the core principles of the EU's constitutionalism and identity, sustainable in terms of governance, and acceptable to EU citizens, Member States and affected third partners.



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The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 822622.

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