

Major, Claudia; Mölling, Christian

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The Framework Nations Concept: Germany's contribution to a capable European defence

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The Framework Nations Concept

Germany's Contribution to a Capable European Defence

Claudia Major and Christian Mölling

With the Framework Nations Concept, which it introduced to NATO in 2013, Germany attempted to bring the topic of defence cooperation among NATO countries once more to the foreground. The development of multinational units would, in theory, increase sustainability and help preserve military key capabilities. Smaller armies could plug their remaining capabilities into an organizational backbone provided by a larger, "framework" nation. Politically, the concept represents a step towards transatlantic burden sharing. As the initiator of the concept, Germany must now not only show that the well understood obstacles to defence cooperation can be overcome; it must above all else reduce scepticism among those who would like to cooperate, but doubt Berlin's reliability as a military partner.

The German Framework Nations Concept (FNC) is a key contribution to the European defence cooperation debate: It should allow preserving European capabilities through sustained cooperation, and thus guarantee the continued capacity to act for European militaries.

Three premises build the starting point of the FNC: First, the United States will stick to its announcement that it will only provide 50 per cent of each of NATO's capabilities in the future, the Europeans will have to provide the rest; second, no European state is in a position anymore to carry out military operations alone; and third, most European armed forces will continue shrinking as the effects of the financial crisis on public budgets remain over the coming years. As a result of this last point, the dif-

ference between smaller and larger armies increases even more: smaller armed forces are increasingly forced to specialize in a few areas in which they can still afford to make internationally relevant contributions, such as NBC-defence, but without coordinating these specializations among them. Large states, on the other hand, have reduced their militaries to bonsai armies: while a full range of capabilities is indeed still present, the quantities are far too small to continue operating unilaterally for a longer time. Cost pressures prevent the acquisition of assets like tanker and transport aircrafts, which make armies fast, agile, battle-ready, and sustainable. Step by step, the key capability, the ability to carry out military operations at all, is getting lost, as capabilities in the areas of communica-

tions, logistics, and reconnaissance are increasingly absent, as are so-called “niche” capabilities like air defence and medical support. All of this Europeans can only provide jointly.

It would thus make sense for Europeans to coordinate with each other and plan who specializes in what equipment, in order to have all necessary capabilities available when needed, without having all countries to provide everything. All Europeans recognize – at least rhetorically – the necessity of coordination in times of tight budgets – known as “Pooling and Sharing” in the context of the EU, and “Smart Defence” in the context of NATO – but this recognition has not yet translated into practice.

The Framework Nations Concept

It is this point the Framework Nations Concept aims to address. According to the FNC, European states should form clusters, that is- groups of smaller and larger states, that will henceforth coordinate more closely who will provide which assets and troops on a long term basis. The “Framework Nation” takes the lead of such a cluster. It will provide the group first and foremost with the military backbone, i.e. logistics, command & control, etc. Into this frame, smaller nations would plug their specialized capabilities, such as air defence or engineer units. Thus the entire cluster would become more effective and sustainable, that is, capable of carrying out longer and more complex operations. Further, not every nation would have to provide – and pay for – everything. Thereby more money would be available to procure what the group needs. The various individual clusters together should then provide a more coherent capability package.

The realization of the concept requires European states to organize themselves militarily around the few large states that retain wider capability spectra, including Germany, France, and Great Britain, and possibly Italy and Turkey.

German Objectives

With the FNC initiative, Germany pursues three goals: First, it justifies the maintenance of the spectrum of its capabilities and military structures, retained under the “breadth before depth” philosophy of the recent military reform. The Bundeswehr can regain its depth, i.e. sustainability in operations (which it lost in the course of cut-backs) through the contributions of others. If Germany finds partners willing to join sustained cooperation, Berlin could not further change these internationalized structures unilaterally without political damage.

Second, the FNC would take international defence planning to a new level: Partners would now have to plan in a more detailed, reliable, and coordinated way. Moreover, states could use the lessons learned from cooperating in NATO and EU operations in a more systematic and long-term way. Indeed, European states have worked together for 20 years – in Kosovo and Afghanistan, for example – but up till now the numerous procedures developed among allies during multinational operations have only rarely been adopted in long-term preparations for future deployments. For neither the militaries nor political leaders want to publicly acknowledge the scale of their dependence on partners.

Third, the German government saw an opportunity in the FNC to propose a highly visible German initiative at the 2014 NATO summit, pushing back against its reputation to be an ally mainly interested in maintaining the status quo.

Old Challenges in New Clothes

NATO allies have strongly supported the FNC at their 2014 summit. However, its implementation will raise again those core questions of defence cooperation which the states have not been willing to answer so far.

(Inter)dependence: What degree of permanent dependence are states ready to accept in order to ensure interoperability and retain core capabilities? The answer has a direct impact on the use of capabili-

ties. Already, states are often unable to decide autonomously which capabilities they want to deploy in an operation, as they are dependent upon partners. The FNC, however, explicitly takes this existing dependence as a planning premise: It suggests to generate multinational units, from which national shares can only be withdrawn with difficulty.

Balance of interests: Further moderation is needed between larger and smaller states – that is, the states that shall provide the framework’s backbone, and those that shall plug into it. The larger nations must be able to ensure politically, militarily, and financially the long-term functioning of the framework. In return, they will have a claim to political leadership. For the smaller countries, the question is how to derive political utility from shrinking armies. Thus they are searching for partners that will render it possible for them to shape security policy in spite of dwindling power.

Timelines: It matters whether states reach an agreement on defence cooperation now or in ten years. Precisely because there has thus far been no serious progress in cooperation, time plays an increasingly significant role: Potential partners are constantly losing more of their capabilities, whether tanks or air defence. Cooperation, as suggested in the FNC; will someday be inevitable anyway, as states lose the ability to operate alone – but up until then, valuable capabilities may already be lost, capabilities that could have been retained with timely and successful cooperation.

Depth of cooperation: Furthermore, it makes a difference how intensive cooperation is. First, the gains from cooperation will be greater the higher the number of troops involved. Second, the integration into international structures tends to protect against national backsliding. Should one country only embed a few troops in partnerships, the remaining armed forces might quickly fall victim to the red pencil, as such reductions would not create problems at the international level. To ensure that small contributions can allow for po-

litical and military impact, they must be speedily tied into an international structure.

Reservations about Germany

The implementation of the FNC requires Germany to find partners who want to cooperate in the framework Berlin offers. The first steps have already been taken: the Dutch Air Mobile Brigade has been integrated into the German command structure, and at the NATO summit ten states expressed their interest in cooperation with Germany.

Nevertheless, states traditionally willing to engage in operations ask themselves if they can actually use their abilities to their fullest potential if bound to Berlin. After all, they will de facto be dependent on Berlin’s security policy. The traditional German reluctance about the use of military means (as in the case of Libya in 2011) and the perceived complicated role of the Parliament render these doubts even stronger. Additionally, German caveats have often restricted the mandates of international operations in the past (in the case of EUFOR RD Congo 2006, for example).

The federal government’s clear preferences for training missions, conceptually anchored in the “Enable and Enhance Initiative” and visible in operations such as the one in Mali (2013), seem to confirm these fears: Germany is thus far not willing to create the basis for these training missions to take place, namely to fight together with its European partners in order to produce a stable environment.

Additionally, concerns have been voiced that Germany wants to support its own defence industry through the FNC. What the smaller partners procure or which capabilities they retain will, among other things, depend on what is compatible with the defence industrial interest of the framework nation.

Creating Domestic Conditions

The FNC can become the key instrument to shape Europe's defence structure. As the initiator, it is Germany's responsibility to advance its implementation through good example. The foreign and defence ministries, along with the Bundestag, should provide continuous political support and guidance for the FNC's implementation. Otherwise, it could face the same fate as other initiatives, like the Pooling and Sharing attempt: becoming a short-lived political symbol without any effect on the defence structure.

Politically, Berlin would have to show itself ready to take on the consequences that such close cooperation would require. If Germany wants to credibly demonstrate its reliability, it must explain its decisions for or against operations comprehensibly, and in terms of security policy. The current crises in Ukraine and Iraq, along with the debate on a potential reform of the way the German Parliament authorizes military deployments (Parliamentary Authorization Act), offer the opportunity to explain Germany's security priorities, and where, under what conditions, and with what means German engagement is possible and can be expected.

At the same time, Germany must create the political and legal conditions that will allow it to cooperate this closely with partners. Legally, it has to be clarified whether the acceptance of such close, even irreversible, dependence complies with the opinion of the German Supreme Court regarding the Lisbon Treaty – or if, to retain sovereignty, such cooperation might even be imperative, as it is the only way Germany remains capable of acting militarily. As far as its partners are concerned, Germany must create and sustain the conditions for intense cooperation, and for the resulting pooling of sovereignty. Therefore, regular dialogue in which problems can be solved with political support will be necessary.

Militarily, this means maintaining the original ambitions of the FNC. At the NATO summit, the initiative achieved its hoped-

for visibility. In the course of the now-pending implementation, however, Berlin has already sharply reduced its ambitions: The FNC was declared a long term project, one that would only show results in the distant future. Besides, Berlin concentrates only on a couple of proposals, rather than tackling the "coherent capability package" it suggested itself. The current implementation steps were restricted for the moment to a few individual bilateral projects. In view of the challenges described above, one can already see that the full implementation of these selective goals will neither kick off structural change, nor increase military efficiency.

In order to reach the core goal of the FNC – the retention of capabilities through co-operation – the efficiency principles of the FNC need to be applied to a significant share of European forces. Germany should support this by increasing its own contribution. It could commit itself to lead four FNC brigades within three years as the framework nation, but only contribute a maximum of 60 percent of capabilities, with the rest to come from partners. In that way Berlin would increase the acceptance of FNC-mechanisms by leading by example.

Finally, Berlin should introduce the FNC concept into the EU. The current focus on NATO implies that the possibility to define military capabilities within the context of civilian instruments and industrial capacities in the EU is going unused. Eventually, however, it is up to the European states: they must be ready to organize themselves in a way that is more militarily efficient and economically effective.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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