

## EU defence: Present and future challenges

Written by Rajnish Singh on 25 November 2019 in Interviews  
Interviews

European Defence Agency (EDA) Chief Executive Jorge Domecq talks to Rajnish Singh about the progress the EU has made in the realm of security and defence and what challenges lie ahead.



Jorge Domecq | Photo credit: EDA

In 2016, Jorge Domecq was into the first year of his term when he told *The Parliament Magazine* that the EU can no longer afford to ignore defence policy. This was in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015, and the extraordinary security lockdown in Brussels, when the capital of Europe was rocked by suicide bombings in March 2016.

Now in 2019, as he comes to the end of his term, the EU has made security and defence a key policy area. Reflected not only in expanding defence budgets of Member States, but also the possible establishment of a new European Commission DG for the 'defence industry and space'.

According to Domecq, what has brought about this greater emphasis on security and defence in the last three to four years has been "a total change in the security environment in and around Europe."

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He adds, "This changing security environment has made citizens look more towards the EU and its leaders, to make their protection and the protection of Europe's territory a priority."

He points out that current and future defence challenges are becoming more hybrid, cyber and technological in nature. As such, the EU is now becoming more focused on dealing with them, and possesses the tools to handle these security issues, since they could not be tackled in an isolated manner by a single Member State.

"This changing security environment has made citizens look more towards the EU and its leaders, to make their protection and the protection of Europe's territory a priority"

"Since these challenges need to be tackled in a transnational manner, with borders becoming more fluid, this has led to the consequence that defence plans that are purely national will not work in an efficient manner in the future."

For the former Spanish diplomat, closer defence cooperation among EU Member States should now become the norm. Key to bringing about closer defence cooperation has been the EU's 2016 Global Strategy paper.

According to Domecq, the paper set up for the first time a more substantial framework for EU defence planning which did not exist. "The basis for the framework is that we now have a have a common priority setting with a new capability development plan."

Three key proposals have emerged; firstly, the Co-ordinated Annual Review (CARD), which looks at the defence plans of Member States, the trends ahead and where cooperation could be enhanced. According to Domecq, this has become essential for a more efficient output.

Secondly, on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), Domecq says, "PESCO will allow us to take advantage of opportunities for cooperation in a more structural way, so moving towards a more interoperable, deployable, sustainable and efficient set of armed forces".

And the third key pillar for enhanced defence cooperation, the European Defence Action Plan - which has brought about the use of EU funds for defence is a further incentive for joint defence planning.

However, Domecq admits there are still major hurdles to overcome to improve defence cooperation. "The main challenge, I would say, is that we now need to get Member States to realise the advantage of using these EU tools. While, at the same time we need a change of mindset on how you organise defence at European level." In addition, "We need to embed these new processes into national

defence planning.”

However, given how varied defence capabilities, force numbers and funding are across Member States, Domecq was keen to stress that CARD was not simply an instrument to compare or rank the defence effort of Member States. “Instead we try and identify opportunities for cooperation to implement plans by each of our Members.”

For the EDA, the information gained from CARD will help them analyse how defence plans can be better synchronised with other Member States, “with the objective of having more coherent capabilities, which is not the case today.”

Another key area that the EDA has worked on is better cooperation with other defence and security agencies, especially Nato. Domecq pointed out that “when trying to improve defence cooperation in Europe, Member States asked us not to do this in total isolation.”

“The main challenge I would say, is that we now need to get Member States to realise the advantage of using these EU tools”

Despite having different defence projects with Nato, he stressed, “there are no diverging priorities and we are making sure that in the practical implementation of projects, there is no unnecessary duplication.”

He added, “We are today in a more structured relationship, I think it’s very important for the future. A strong Nato needs a strong EU in defence.”

Other non-EU agencies which the EDA is also working with include the European Space Agency. This includes on earth observation and cyber issues.

Moreover, it is working with ENISA on cyber defence and FRONTEX on protecting EU borders. But Domecq sees PESCO as a real game-changer for EU defence cooperation, describing it as “revolutionary.”

The treaty-based framework aims to deepen defence cooperation amongst EU Member States with the aim of jointly developing defence capabilities and making them available for EU military operations.

He pointed out that Member States have committed to 20 projects which 25 Members have signed up to. “These commitments translate into a political will to invest together, plan together, to operate the capabilities together and has the intention to be a long-term priority.”

He admitted however, that PESCO has been a ‘learning process’ for both the EDA and Member States. Despite the European defence industry being the second biggest in the world after the US, the main complaint about the sector was that it was too fragmented, making it inefficient and uncompetitive.

Domecq wanted Europe’s defence sector to be more like other commercial manufacturers, saying “Experience has shown that the only way to maintain a competitive industry in Europe with Member States is by working seamlessly together around projects.”

He added, “When you have projects where Member States pool together their needs and harmonise their requirements, this could lead in some sectors in European defence to a really competitive industry.”

But he stressed that defence cooperation will continue to exist outside PESCO. “My hope is that as defence cooperation is enhanced, we will also move towards a more competitive and capable industry.”

However, in a recent speech in Brussels by US Secretary of Defence Mark Esper, he highlighted issues his country had about US defence companies having access to the EDF and PESCO, saying, “This concerns us, we think it is heading in the wrong direction.”

Domecq responded by saying that third country participation in PESCO is still under discussion. In the EDF, it is already in a draft regulation which needs still to be finalised. “But notwithstanding, what I would say is that we should not confuse both initiatives.”

“I think today our agency is fit-for-purpose for the coming years. Remaining as the hub for defence cooperation”

For Domecq, PESCO is to create projects among Member States which does not exclude other defence cooperation projects. Stressing that PESCO is not an instrument for international defence cooperation, “it’s part of the European integration effort.”

While the EDF has its rules and it does not exclude US defence industry, “it has established some conditions, and I understand that our Commission colleagues have explained this and are continuing to discuss this with US experts.”

Another complaint Esper had concerning PESCO was creating diverging capabilities and interoperability between Nato backed defence projects and EU ones. But Domecq responded by saying, “I don’t see why there should be any concern of diverging defence capabilities or diverting investment from what is needed. The second thing is interoperability of what you produce. We in the agency work on standardisation and I can tell you we do not want to duplicate the standards from Nato.”

Despite being optimistic about closer European defence cooperation, with the UK departure of the EU, one of Europe’s biggest contributors towards security and defence, is providing headaches to defence planners. Domecq said, “I think the departure of the UK from the EU is not good news for Europe or the UK, that’s my personal view, however Brexit is a decision the UK people made.”

He added, “now, as for the effect on security and defence, we will need to see.” He pointed out that in the draft political declaration the UK stated it still wanted to continue to have a strong security and defence link with the rest of the EU.

“As part of that effort the UK may wish to have a unanimous arrangement with the EDA, which would be the platform to be able to continue to have that engagement in the agency’s activities.”

When asked what he considered his key achievement as EDA head, Domecq said, “I think today our agency is fit-for-purpose for the coming years. Remaining as the hub for defence cooperation we have at present 115-odd ongoing projects, which has been a positive trend.”

He highlighted the agency’s work in helicopter training, air transport, as well as dealing with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and training on energy management. “We are at the same time becoming more visible as the spokesperson or interface towards a wider EU defence policy.”

He pointed out the various projects the EDA was now getting involved in, including the contribution of

the military to the EU's Green Deal, artificial intelligence, "where we are working on an action plan", looking into a singular European sky, military mobility, or even security in space.

Despite these various projects Domecq stressed that the two key priorities of the EDA is to ensure that these "policy tools [EDF CARD and PESCO] are embedded into national defence plans and also that these tools work in a coherent manner, to ensure a European defence for our citizens.

### **About the author**

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