The Future of European Defence and Security

Article written by Mark Abdilla – Executive, MEUSAC
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As security threats are increasing across the globe, from attacks targeting civilians to cyber-related ones, ensuring that the European Union can face such threats is one of the top priorities for the European Commission.

On June 7, the European Commission and the Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, published a Reflection Paper on the future of European defence and security.

The reflection paper sets out three possible scenarios on the future of European defence. These scenarios emphasise the importance of continued cooperation between the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), security and defence cooperation, shared security and defence, and a common defence and security scenario. It is being proposed that any reforms in relation to these scenarios are undertaken by the EU and its Member States by 2025.

The reflection paper states that through the cooperation scenario, security and defence would remain exclusive competences of EU Member States and any cooperation on such issues between Member States would be voluntary. The EU would continue to support and complement national efforts. However, the EU's participation in demanding operations would remain limited and cooperation with NATO would retain the current arrangement. As such, this scenario does not propose any major reforms or changes to the EU's security structures, although it does encourage increased cooperation between Member States.

The shared security and defence scenario gives importance to the need for Member States to combine their capabilities and increase solidarity in defence. This would lead to the EU playing a greater role in areas such as border protection, the fight against terrorism, and cyber security. The EU would play a greater role in the protection of Member States and citizens, with Member States making greater financial and operational contributions towards a shared European defence structure.

The third and final scenario would see the EU creating a common defence policy where Member States assume commitments towards each other's security and defence. This will include a level of integration between Member States' defence forces to ensure that European protection is a shared responsibility between the EU and NATO, allowing the EU to undertake high-end security and defence operations. This is an ambitious scenario as all Member States would need to be willing to work closer together on sensitive issues.

The importance the EU gives to security and defence is also highlighted in the 2015 European Agenda on Security - a policy document which sets out actions the EU can take to support the efforts of Member States in ensuring security for their citizens. These measures include a better exchange of information between Member States and increased cooperation and trust between all those involved. The Agenda also acts as a framework guiding all future policies on security and defence to help meet the EU's objectives.

The 2015 Agenda on Security was followed up in April 2016, when the European Commission adopted the Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats. Hybrid threats are defined as being coercive and subversive activities which utilise both conventional and unconventional methods to achieve their aims. The Joint Framework is aimed at facilitating the approach which the EU, in coordination with its Member States, takes to counter such threats. The emphasis is on creating synergies between the instruments at the EU's disposal, while also fostering cooperation between all relevant actors.

The report on the progress of the Joint Framework observes that there has been progress in various areas. In particular, steps have been taken to further strengthen the protection of citizens' presence online and to reduce the availability of illegal online content. This has led to the establishment of the EU Internet Forum which seeks to ensure that illegal online content is taken down immediately, including terrorist propaganda.

The EU has also taken an important step in strengthening its defensive capabilities by increasing its cooperation with NATO. Support for strengthening of cooperation between the EU and NATO was also expressed by EU Foreign Affairs during a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) held on June 19, 2017. The initiative to increase cooperation is not only focused on countering hybrid threats, but also includes cyber defence, crisis response and strategic communication.