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How militarily willing and able is the EU?

Operation Althea struggles in Bosnia and Herzegovina

POLICY BRIEF

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July 2019

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How militarily willing and able is the EU?

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A recent article in *Politico*¹ caused a flurry of anxiety in the EU's Brexit Task Force 50. The piece claimed that EU officials were concerned a no-deal Brexit could have "significant implications" for the EU's ability to conduct its peacekeeping military operation, EU Force (EUFOR) Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), as it would lead to the sudden withdrawal of British assets vital to the operation's credibility.

Until now the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has been largely ignored by policymakers and the public alike, as higher priority areas such as trade and freedom of movement take centre stage in the Brexit negotiations. Setting aside the unpredictability of a no-deal scenario, EU officials have argued that CSDP civilian and military missions do not heavily rely on British capabilities. It is claimed that Brexit, although highly regrettable, would be a manageable process. Some even envisioned that it could lead to progress in removing the British obstruction for a more integrated and ambitious EU defence policy. It is indeed hard to imagine that the defence toolkit launched by the EU over the past three years, among which the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), would have happened had the UK voted to remain.

In principle, Brexit presents an opportunity for the EU to advance its ambition of "strategic autonomy"² without the UK's foot on the brake, continually pleading for the non-duplication of NATO assets and capabilities. Even more so if, after an orderly withdrawal, the UK as a third country can contribute capabilities and troops to EU missions without the ability to decide on, or even influence, the course of an operation, let alone the higher strategic policy of the CSDP. The warning in *Politico* that a now plausible no-deal Brexit would have a significant impact on the EU's ability to carry out the operation in Bosnia, therefore came as a surprise; especially as no other Member State seems so far ready to contribute troops and assets as a replacement.

Without British assets, or their replacement by another contributor, if the security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina were to deteriorate, the EU's credibility as a security provider would be seriously at stake. At a time when the Union aims to reach some "strategic autonomy," the fact that Member States are so far either unwilling or unable to fully resource even such a minor operation is not a positive sign. Indeed, Operation Althea is at the low-end of what the Union has set out to achieve: a rather small operation – about 600 troops – in the Balkans, the EU's own backyard.³ How difficult can this be? The Althea conundrum, though minor in the overall scheme of CSDP and incidental in the Brexit negotiations, is representative of where the EU stands today on Member States' capacity and appetite for CSDP military missions.

1 Jacopo Barigazzi, "[EU warns of no-deal Brexit impact on peacekeeping mission in Bosnia](#)," *Politico*, April 4, 2019.

2 "[Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy](#)," European External Action Service, June 2016.

3 "[EUFOR Operation Althea](#)," European External Action Service, July 2019.

I. Operation Althea: a major leap forward for the EU as a security provider

As far back as 1992,⁴ the EU declared itself willing to undertake crisis management operations in its own right, including humanitarian tasks, peacekeeping and peacemaking. When launched in 2004, EUFOR Althea was a flagship project of over 7000 military personnel marking a major leap forward in terms of the EU's ability to conduct a military operation under its own responsibility and in its own neighbourhood. Taking over from NATO's Stabilisation Force (SFOR) under UN Security Council Resolution 1575, and on the basis of its executive mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, Operation Althea is responsible for the military implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement (GFAP) and authorised to use force against anybody threatening the "safe and secure environment"⁵ – a significant responsibility for the Union. Moreover, under the Berlin Plus arrangements,⁶ the EU retains decision-making autonomy over EUFOR Althea while NATO supports the operation by providing practical support – in this case a secure communications network and other logistics.

Fifteen years after the launch of EUFOR Althea, the situation in BiH has greatly evolved. Some consider that there are legitimate reasons after all this time to end Operation Althea:⁷ Bosnian politicians need to assume responsibility for their own affairs, including security, and a country

seeking EU membership – as is the case for BiH – should not have a UN-mandated EU military mission on its soil as guarantor of peace and stability. That said, there are good reasons for continuing the operation, as the country has not yet reached the stage of being able to independently maintain peace. In 2017, after a long period of reduction, the EU's first Strategic Review of Operation Althea concluded that the risk of renewed ethnic conflict in BiH was low, but that the stability achieved was not irreversible either. It recommended that EUFOR Althea should continue its presence in the country but reduce its non-essential tasks such as collective training of the Bosnian armed forces and refocus on its core mandate: supporting the authorities of BiH in maintaining a safe and secure environment.⁸ Consequently, the strength of the operation on the ground in 2019 is a little under 600 – more than ten times less than in 2004 – with the force concentrated in Sarajevo, apart from 17 Liaison and Observation Teams (LOT) dotted around the country.⁹

On the ground today, Althea is a low profile, low visibility reassurance force with limited operational capability. With a minimal military presence in the country, the operation now depends on intelligence assets and out-of-country rapidly deployable reserve forces to fulfil its mandate. According to the EU's own assessments, the risk of renewed conflict is low but not inconceivable. And without sufficient intelligence assets and readily available reserves able to intervene in the case of a deteriorating security situation, EUFOR Althea would be a military presence without military utility. A Potemkin operation, for show only.

4 ["Petersberg tasks,"](#) EUR-Lex.

5 ["EUFOR Operation Althea,"](#) European External Action Service, July 2019.

6 Nicholas Williams, ["NATO-EU cooperation: Don't Forget Berlin Plus!"](#) *European Leadership Network*, March 26, 2018.

7 Nicholas Williams, ["Bosnia and the EU: Time to end Operation Althea,"](#) *European Leadership Network*, April 30, 2018.

8 ["Bosnia and Herzegovina: Council adopts conclusions and confirm continued presence of Operation EUFOR Althea,"](#) Council of the European Union, October 15, 2018.

9 ["EUFOR Operation Althea,"](#) European External Action Service, July 2019.

Despite how small it is today, with EUFOR Althea the EU is entrusted with an important responsibility and commitment. It is moreover the only terrestrial force (EUFOR) of the EU's six ongoing military operations and missions,¹⁰ as well as the only one currently operating under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and under Berlin Plus arrangements with NATO.

“Without sufficient intelligence assets and readily available reserves, EUFOR Althea would be a military presence without military utility.”

II. Operational consequences of the reliance on UK assets in an uncertain Brexit context

The United Kingdom provides assets on which depend Althea's current strategy of relying on intelligence and reserves to predict a deterioration of the security situation. If necessary, reserves would be deployed to stabilise a situation which in-place forces are not designed to contain. The current British contribution to EUFOR Althea is as follows:¹¹

- **Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Task Force** (currently about 40 personnel): designed to detect and predict any change in the security situation in BiH and therefore enabling the operation

10 The EU is currently undertaking 6 military missions and operations: 1 terrestrial force (EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina), 2 naval forces (EUNAVFOR Sophia in the Mediterranean; EUNAVFOR Atalanta off the coast of Somalia), and 3 training missions (EUTM Mali; EUTM Somalia; EUTM RCA/CAF). See [“Military and civilian missions and operations,”](#) European External Action Service, 5 March 2019.

11 Interviews with EU and British officials.

to call in reserve forces in a timely manner if need be. The ISR Task Force is currently provided in full by the UK.

- **The Intermediate Reserve Force (IRF):** an EU-only reserve force of the operation that can be quickly activated, deployed and on task in BiH. The UK currently provides one company to the IRF (the other three companies are provided variously by Austria, Hungary, Italy and Romania).

- **The Strategic Reserve Force (SRF):** shared with NATO and constituting a larger force that can also be deployed. The UK provides the sole strategic reserve battalion, which is a reserve force that the UK also makes available to NATO on stand-by for contingencies in Kosovo and Bosnia.

If the EU and UK were to agree a Brexit deal, the UK could contribute as a third party under either a Participation Agreement (PA) or a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA), which provide the legal and political basis for cooperation between all non-EU states and CSDP missions.¹² Under this type of agreement, and in accordance with the Berlin Plus agreements, the UK would have no say in the strategic direction of EUFOR Althea and also would not be able to provide commanders for it. In anticipation of Brexit and following a decision of the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC), the British Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR) has already been replaced by the French Vice-Chief of Staff at NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).¹³

12 To participate in a CSDP mission or operation, a third country must sign either a Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) covering CSDP missions and/or operations overall, or a Participation Agreement (PA) relating to a specific mission or operation. See [“Brexit: Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations,”](#) House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union, 16th Report of Session 2017-2019, May 14, 2018, p.43-52.

13 [“EUFOR Operation Commander visits](#)

On the other hand, should the UK leave the EU without a deal, there would be no legal basis for treating the UK as a contributing third party since neither a PA nor a FPA would have been agreed. In this case, the UK would have to stop collaborating with EUFOR Althea and immediately remove the whole of its contribution, on which the operation for a large part depends for the effectiveness of its strategy. In a no-deal Brexit scenario, and if the operation were to stay credible, British capabilities would thus have to be replaced by those of another Member State or a third state partner. As a no-deal Brexit becomes increasingly likely, it is high time for the EU to do some serious contingency planning for Operation Althea.

III. What options does the EU have for EUFOR Althea in case of no-deal Brexit?

Having identified the potential problem, the EU is currently trying to find a solution before the UK's new departure date of 31 October 2019. Several options are on the table in case of no-deal Brexit.

First, the EU and UK could decide **an interim agreement** to ensure the continuity of the operation, by which the UK would be allowed to continue providing its assets to EUFOR Althea. This would be different from either a PA or FPA. The solution of an EU-UK interim agreement, although necessarily limited in time and scope, could solve the EU's operational problem in the short term. It was proposed by the UK as a contingency plan in case of no-deal Brexit.¹⁴ If the UK were to

maintain its contribution to Operation Althea in such a way, it would expect to have a say on the operational mandate and planning. If the EU were to accept this role for the UK, it would create a differentiation between third states, allowing the UK to have a say in the operation plan and force generation of Althea whereas the PAs and FPAs held by all other non-EU participants deny them such a say. Turkey, a major contributor to EUFOR Althea under FPA arrangements, would likely ask for the same terms as the new British interim agreement. This is enough to turn the Althea interim solution into a very unattractive option for the EU27, as the EU wants at all costs to avoid setting a precedent for PA and FPA exceptions and creating knock-on effects for all third party CSDP arrangements. This option has so far been ruled out by Task Force 50.

"As a no-deal Brexit becomes increasingly likely, it is high time for the EU to do some serious contingency planning for Operation Althea."

Second, the EU27 could decide **not to replace the British capabilities at all**. Faced with an appeal to make good on a potential shortage of critical assets, some Member States consider that the risks in BiH are manageable. They argue that there have been long periods in the history of EUFOR Althea when intelligence and reserve assets, such as the ones that the UK provides, have not been available. The security situation in Bosnia did not deteriorate then, so there is no reason to believe it would as of 31 October 2019, and the operational risk is worth taking. This is, of course, a risky bet for the Union to make. As previously mentioned, there are arguments in favour of ending Operation Althea altogether. But the EU should not decide, for want of a

[Sarajevo](#)," European Union Force in BiH – Operation Althea, April 2, 2019.

14 Major General Sir Adrian Bradshaw, former British army officer and Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR), said that participation in Operation EUFOR Althea, in contributing to stabilisation in BiH, was in the UK's "national interest." See ["Brexit: Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations,"](#)

House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union, 16th Report of Session 2017-2019, May 14, 2018, p.35.

better alternative, on a half measure: neither withdrawal nor being able to cope with a potential deterioration in the security situation.

Finally, the EU27 and their partners could **replace British assets** with capabilities and personnel from their own armies, with a focus on staffing the Intermediate Reserve Force (IRF) and the Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Task Force. This is the preferred outcome. Although Member States are mostly in favour of closing any gap that would threaten the integrity of Althea, whether they do so is another question. First, there is the seemingly simple option of using an **EU Battlegroup** (EU BGs).¹⁵ The EU can theoretically deploy two Battlegroups, which are always on standby, any one of which could fulfil the Strategic Reserve Force (SRF) requirement for Operation Althea. But they are intended as a reserve for unforeseen circumstances, not for plugging gaps in ongoing CSDP operations. The next best approach is to generate **ad hoc force replacement capabilities**. However, this depends on Member States' abilities and willingness to offer contributions. Having agreed in the 2017 Strategic Review that EUFOR Althea should be continued and refocus on its core task,¹⁶ Member States have little appetite for it. Discussions are still ongoing but they have so far not answered the EU's appeal to provide the military capabilities necessary to fill the gaps if the UK leaves the EU and takes its assets with it.

¹⁵ Fully operational since 2007, the Battlegroups have never been deployed under an EU flag for a number of political and financial reasons. See "[EU Battlegroups](#)," European External Action Service, October 9, 2017.

¹⁶ "[Bosnia and Herzegovina: Council adopts conclusions and confirm continued presence of Operation EUFOR Althea](#)," Council of the European Union, October 15, 2018.

IV. A long way to EU strategic autonomy

The chronicle of Operation Althea is revealing. The dilemma it presents embodies the operational, strategic and political challenges facing EU defence today, and which the UK's potential withdrawal highlights. Today, EUFOR Althea stands as a test, if only a low-level one, of the EU's seriousness as a military actor and its ability to fulfil its responsibilities.

First, Althea reveals **gaps in the EU's capabilities**. Member States are stretched thin doing not only CSDP operations but also NATO, UN, *ad hoc* and national-level ones – often simultaneously. Although only a small number of British assets are used as part of CSDP missions and operations such as Althea, Brexit will necessarily impact the EU's ability to project power given that about 25% of the key enabling capabilities and 20% of all military capabilities within the EU are currently held by the UK.¹⁷

The heart of the issue revealed by discussions on EUFOR Althea is, however, not Brexit-related. Europeans as a whole are heavily dependent on the United States when it comes to critical military capabilities, with Washington still providing over 50% of NATO's assets for many mission-critical capabilities.¹⁸ This reality necessarily limits the extent to which Europeans can launch and sustain military operations, such as CSDP ones, on their own. As of today, EU strategic autonomy is limited to the low-end of the operational

¹⁷ Peter Round, Bastian Giegerich and Christian Mölling, "[European strategic autonomy and Brexit](#)," IISS-DGAP, June 2018.

¹⁸ The major Europe-wide capability shortfalls in mission-critical areas include Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR), Air-to-Air Refuelling (AAR), Strategic Lift (air, maritime and land), Command and Control (C2), Precision-Guided Munitions (PGM), Suppression of Enemy Air Defence (SEAD), readiness, air defence, and cybersecurity. See Alice Billon-Galland and Adam Thomson, "[European Strategic Autonomy: Stop Talking, Start Planning](#)," *European Leadership Network*, May 2018.

spectrum – and Brexit will only render a bad situation worse.¹⁹ If the EU struggles to replace UK intelligence and reserve assets in an operation as small as Althea, how can the EU27 possibly aspire to realise a concept as grand and ambitious as “strategic autonomy,” even if restricted to crisis management in its neighbourhood? The gap between the Union’s objectives and its current military capacity, with or without the UK, is stark.

“EUFOR Althea stands as a test, if only a low-level one, of the EU’s seriousness as a military actor and its ability to fulfil its responsibilities.”

Second, Althea reveals **flaws in the EU’s thinking**. Perhaps EU resources and the pull of EU institutions will irreversibly stabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina, making an international military presence redundant and leading to the end of the mission and the UN mandate. But according to the EU’s own assessments that point has not yet been reached. Until then, the EU should take its responsibility seriously, even to the extent of preparing for a deterioration in the security situation, however remote the possibility might appear at present. Its credibility as a serious security provider depends on its willingness and ability to plan for such contingencies.

Today, the main risk is for the EU to fail to plan seriously enough for what should be a low-level stress test. If no other country were able to replace the British capabilities in time, the EU would be taking the risk of failing to fulfil its UN Dayton mandate. Should the security situation in BiH deteriorate, this would risk EUFOR not being able to rapidly react to the situation and expose the EU as a helpless military actor, repeating the crisis of credibility of the 1990s by appealing to NATO

for help. Although the likeliness of this worst-case scenario is low, it is not impossible.

Finally, Althea reveals **the EU27’s small appetite for operations**. Member States’ reluctance to get involved in CSDP military missions is not new.²⁰ EU officials often recall the cumbersome and embarrassing force generation process for the 2008 EUFOR Chad/CAR.²¹ A combined effort by 23 EU Member States and 3 third states, without recourse to either NATO or US assets, the operation struggled to secure sufficient contributions and its launch had to be postponed several times. EUFOR Chad/CAR – which, when fully deployed, numbered up to 3700 troops²² – provides a sobering example of how challenging ambitious CSDP operations can be. More than ten years later, few believe that Member States would be able and willing to launch a CSDP military operation of the calibre of EUFOR Chad/CAR today. The progress made since the 2016 EU Global Strategy has largely focused on capability development and the consolidation of the EU defence industrial base, with initiatives such as PESCO and the EDF. Over the past three years there has however been no real operational progress in CSDP military ambitions and

20 Although this policy brief focuses solely on CSDP military missions and operations, it is interesting to note that Member States’ appetite for CSDP civilian missions has also decreased over the last decade. See Calle Håkansson, [“What does the EU’s new Civilian CSDP Compact mean for European strategic autonomy?”](#) *European Leadership Network*, April 15, 2019.

21 The force generation process for EUFOR Chad/CAR lasted three and a half months. The force was eventually made of three battalions (instead of the four agreed at the political level) and, faced with considerable European capability shortfalls, had to rely on Russian critical transport helicopters. The lack of contributions to EUFOR Chad/CAR by Member States led to a reduced effectiveness on the ground and increased operational risks. See Bjoern Seibert, “The Quest for European Military Capabilities,” [European Defence Capabilities: No Adaptability without Co-operation](#), RUSI, March 2010, p. 8-13.

22 [“EUFOR Tchad/RCA,”](#) European External Action Service, March 2009.

19 Douglas Barrie et al, [“Protecting Europe: meeting the EU’s military level of ambition in the context of Brexit,”](#) *IJSS-DGAP*, November 2018.

deployment.²³ In this sense, the little appetite currently expressed by Member States to fill the gaps in EUFOR Althea in the case of a no-deal Brexit should not come as a surprise and could have been anticipated.

Conclusion

The current discussions on EUFOR Althea expose the EU27's struggle to come up with the capabilities for the operation, a lack of willingness to sustain serious CSDP military operations, as well the EU's unconcern about the consequences of failing to adequately fulfil its security responsibilities should the security situation deteriorate.

It is evident even from a relatively minor operation such as Althea that the EU still has a long way to go in developing a culture of military responsibility and in delivering its ambition of operational autonomy. In Bosnia and Herzegovina it is probable, in the increasingly likely event of a no-deal Brexit, that the EU will live with the consequences, hoping that its soft power will be enough to nudge the country into irreversible stability. But, even if a deterioration in the security situation in BiH appears remote, the EU needs a plan, or the consequences of failure have to be acceptable. At present, there is no sign that the EU27 are both willing and able to plug the gaps in Operation Althea in the event of a no-deal Brexit.

The EU has made great progress in its Common Security and Defence Policy since the famous, and ill-fated, declaration of former Luxembourg foreign minister Jacques Poos that Yugoslavia's implosion in the 1990s was "the hour of Europe." Nevertheless, the problem that Althea exposes is the long-

standing reluctance of Member States to agree on, and their incapacity to contribute to, CSDP military missions in any meaningful way. The gap between the Union's objectives and its current military capacity is wide and Brexit will only make a bad situation worse. There is an old military adage that EU officials should pay attention to: "if you fail to plan, you plan to fail." There is still time for the EU to learn that lesson.

23 With a strength of about 187 troops, the EU Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM-RCA) is the only CSDP military mission to have been launched since the June 2016 publication of the EU Global Strategy. See "[EUTM-RCA](#)," European External Action Service, April 30, 2019.



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