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A new dawn for European defence

The new military cooperation pact, PESCO, will increase the EU's ability to act as one in matters of defence

In November this year, 23 European Union member states officially launched a programme of joint military investment, separate from NATO. Denmark and the UK were among the countries that chose not to take part. Known as 'permanent structured cooperation', or PESCO, the pact aims to help the EU confront its many security challenges – including cyber-attacks, Russian meddling and mass-migration from war-torn lands. Hannes Alpen *spoke to Polish security expert Ireneusz Bil about the new deal.*

23 out of 28 EU countries have joined together under the PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) defence pact. What is the goal of this union?

The goal is to give fresh impetus to European cooperation in defence and the military industry. PESCO allows a group of member states to develop a joint future project within the framework of the European Union. This option was introduced in the Lisbon Treaty.

Signing this initiative represents a great accomplishment for the EU - previously, it was in stalemate. Up till now it's been NATO that's been present militarily in the East; the EU has restricted itself to political measures such as sanctions against Russia and structural support for Ukraine.

Now we're seeing that most EU countries are willing to provide more for defence – in political, economic, technical and financial terms – from within the EU itself. That's good news for EU integration.

I'm particularly pleased to see countries with markedly different security policies taking part in PESCO. On the one hand you have Poland and the Baltic States, big backers of NATO, and on the other Finland and Austria, who aren't even NATO members. Hopefully this will help align security perspectives and create the foundation for a common European vision for defence.

Were you surprised that Poland joined PESCO, despite its strong

support for NATO and the US in matters of defence?

Actually, the surprise is that so many other countries were willing to join PESCO. For Poland, with its emphasis on security, the decision was both good and completely rational. That said, was a great deal of uncertainty right up to the last moment. We've seen this [Polish] government make a number of irrational decisions.

I believe there was a lot of debate, particularly within the Ministry of Defence [led by Antoni Macierewicz, seen as an opponent of PESCO] as to whether joining the pact would be economically beneficial – from a military and financial perspective and in terms of domestic and security policy. There were also reservations about the EU's cooperation with NATO, and many asked for clarification over the European defence fund's allocation of public tenders. This shows the Polish Law and Justice Party is prioritising its economic interests, and is less interested in military integration within the EU.

France has indicated it would have preferred a more ambitious project involving a smaller number of member states. So it won't be easy to strike a balance between flexibility and convergence within PESCO.

One of the conditions for joining PESCO is regularly raising defence budgets. But those who support increased European defence cooperation have always argued it will save money. Isn't that a bit contradictory?

It's true that some countries, the smaller ones in particular, will be expected to raise their defence spending to two per cent of GDP. Belonging to PESCO will help these governments make the argument for increased military spending at home: they'll now be dealing with firm international commitments, rather than just domestic issues. That will be especially important in countries such as Austria, the Czech Republic and Hungary. The PESCO commitments will also help prevent 'free rider syndrome', whereby some countries capitalise on security guarantees without contributing their fair share to the costs.

But big countries like Germany can hardly be expected to suddenly increase spending to two per cent. That would mean an oversized weapons programme that's both unnecessary, and that neighbouring countries would find troubling. Germany could better contribute by using its already large budget to purchase armaments together with other countries, benefiting from economies of scale.

In which specific areas can we now expect closer cooperation under PESCO?

A particular strength of PESCO is the possibility for smaller groups of member states to come together and work on projects that will benefit EU defence as a whole. For some countries this might involve streamlining their military transport, for others it might mean creating greater clarity [over defence procurement].

Perhaps within PESCO we'll also see new partners join what has been, up to now, a bilateral collaboration between Germany and the Netherlands. Another broader area for cooperation would be EU-wide operations and missions, which could be of particular interest to France and Italy. It will be the new PESCO Secretariat's job to set priorities and strike an appropriate balance between proposals in this area.



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