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The Armed Forces of the European Union and the Conflict in Ukraine – Selected Aspects

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Abstract:

Purpose: *The purpose of this article is to present the international circumstances that led to the creation of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and the establishment of EU Battlegroups as part of the future EU Armed Forces, analyze threats to European security (including Russia's aggression against Ukraine) and their impact on the need to build a common European military capability, define the conditions that future EU Armed Forces must meet, and indicate the role of Battlegroups in the European security system.*
Design/Methodology/Approach: *This article discusses the evolution of European security policy after the Cold War, a chronology of political decisions leading to the creation of EU military structures (from the Maastricht Treaty, through Amsterdam and Nice, to the concept of EU Battlegroups), an analysis of military, asymmetric, and hybrid threats, organizational, legal, and operational requirements for the EU Armed Forces, the role of Battlegroups as a rapid response tool, the potential role of the EU in ending the conflict in Ukraine. This article is a review and analysis, utilizing an analysis of EU strategic documents (European Security Strategy, Headline Goal, EU Military Rapid Response Concept), an analysis of international treaties (Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice), a review of the literature on contemporary conflicts, military, and security, a comparative analysis of past and present assumptions regarding the construction of EU armed forces. The article is based on the method of political and strategic analysis, including the identification of threats, the assessment of military potential and the analysis of political and organizational assumptions.*
Findings: *Key findings: threats to Europe have changed in nature – asymmetric and hybrid conflicts have replaced classic bloc confrontation, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has exposed significant gaps in European defense capabilities and accelerated the discussion about the EU's own armed forces, the EU Battlegroups are a key element of the planned structure of the EU Armed Forces – they are mobile,*

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flexible, and prepared for a wide range of operations (from humanitarian to stabilization), the EU has a legal and organizational framework, but has still not implemented the full use of Battlegroups in operations, to achieve operational readiness, the Battlegroups must meet five key criteria: a common threat perception, a political mandate, legal arrangements (SOFA/ROE), technical and structural capabilities, and alternative operational plans, the EU can play a significant role in ending the war in Ukraine, particularly in terms of ceasefire supervision and peacekeeping missions.

Practical Implications: *The article leads to the following consequences for international practice: the need to increase defense spending and develop the arms industry in Europe, the need for better integration of command structures and common operational procedures, the need to strengthen EU cooperation with NATO and the UN, especially in the context of operational mandates, the EU Battlegroups may become the EU's main tool in crisis operations – also outside Europe, the EU gains the ability to shape its own security policy, independent (though complementary) to the USA and NATO.*

Originality/Value: *This article is distinguished by its comprehensive presentation of the evolution of European security policy, combining theoretical analysis (treaties, strategic concepts) with an assessment of contemporary conflicts (Ukraine), identifying detailed operational conditions for the functioning of EU Battlegroups, and attempting to define the role of the EU Armed Forces in the future international security order. Its scholarly value lies in its synthetic presentation of the processes leading to the development of European military potential, its in-depth analysis of the importance of EU Battlegroups in European security, its current contextualization of the issue in the context of the war in Ukraine, and its demonstration of the practical limitations and possibilities of EU defense policy. The article can serve as a resource for research on CSDP and EU security reform, for analyses of European strategic autonomy, and for decision-makers involved in EU operational planning and EU-NATO cooperation.*

Keywords: *Common Security and Defense Policy, European Union Armed Forces, Management, European Union Battlegroup, European Union Rapid Reaction Force, war in Ukraine.*

JEL Classification: *F50, F52, H56.*

Paper type: *Research article.*

"In the era of globalization, distant threats can be just as much a source of concern as threats lurking nearby" European Security Strategy, Brussels, December 12, 2003.

1. Introduction

The end of the 20th century brought significant changes in international relations and resulted in a new dimension in the perception of European security. The disintegration of the superpower Soviet Union and the associated bloc of socialist states, and thus the collapse of the classic bipolar international order, effectively eliminated the threat of a massive attack by Warsaw Pact countries on all fronts against neighboring states, primarily members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

With the end of the Cold War, armed conflict on a global scale became much less likely, while regional (local)[3] conflicts and asymmetric threats (hybrid warfare[4]) became much more significant. The disintegration of another large European country, Yugoslavia, became the main cause of the outbreak of regional conflicts, which, had they not received a decisive and rapid response from the international community, could have created a real threat of destabilizing the security of all of Europe, and perhaps even the world. But it was not only the processes of disintegration that were becoming a source of security concerns and anxieties.

The unification of Germany posed a completely different challenge to security. Some members of the Community feared that it would seek to play a hegemonic, dominant role in global international politics, particularly in Central Europe.

These concerns were intended to be allayed by linking them to a more tightly integrated European framework. Not only did the conflict index in the world's hot spots fail to decline, but new, dangerous trends began to emerge, including tensions based on territorial, religious, ethnic, or terrorist causes[5].

These were new security challenges that could effectively destabilize the current political and military conditions not only in Europe but also in other regions of the world. Europe correctly identified potential threats, but Russia's aggressive policy against Ukraine completely changed the perception of European security.

The ongoing full-scale armed conflict in the immediate vicinity of the European Union and NATO requires a new definition of threats and actions aimed at neutralizing them. This environment places increasingly higher demands on militaries and other organizations working to ensure security and peace[6].

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[3] *M. Wrzosek, Polska, Unia Europejska, NATO wobec wyzwań i zagrożeń, Warszawa 2014, p. 99.*

[4] *A hybrid model, an adopted method of operation limited only by the will and abilities of a potential aggressor, occurring in all or selected areas and levels simultaneously.*

[5] *W. Krztoń, Charakterystyczne cechy przeobrażeń współczesnych wojen i konfliktów zbrojnych, [in:] Wojny i konflikty zbrojne XXI wieku, ed. J. Lasota, Warszawa 2015, p. 59.*

[6] *K. Malasiewicz, Sztuka wojenna w „świecie podzielonym na troje", [in:]Wojny i konflikty zbrojne XXI wieku, ed. J. Lasota, Warszawa 2015, p. 178.*

These demands not only require equipping soldiers (officers) and units (organizations) with increasingly sophisticated and precise weaponry, but also necessitate adapting their organizational structures and operational principles to specific situations. The analysis of crisis situations and past and ongoing conflicts[7] worldwide indicates that conflict regions are characterized by a high degree of unpredictability.

Therefore, military threats are taking on the character of not only full-scale conflict but also constitute a site of hybrid and asymmetric actions[8] against neighbors – potential targets of future aggression. This is expressed in a certain non-standard nature of actions, methods and means used to achieve the intended goal, and different ways of thinking and organizing actions adopted by both sides of a potential or actual conflict.

Classic examples of such actions were the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and, more recently, Ukraine (the so-called "Little Green Men"[9]), where the goal of one of the actors, in this case a non-state actor, significantly deviated from the rationale of the system. The September 11, 2001, attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., were also classic examples of such actions.

These attacks were hailed by theorists, practitioners, and commentators as the "first battle of asymmetric warfare"[10] or the beginning of hybrid warfare[11]. This perception and definition of the future battlefield led European elites to significantly reduce military spending and degrade not only conventional armed forces but also the arms industry.

When Russia launched a full-scale conflict, Europe appeared defenseless, with only the United States Armed Forces providing a guarantor of European peace. European politicians, deeply committed to the idea of "eternal peace", realized how much time they had wasted and how many ideas for future European security had been abandoned. One of these ideas was the creation of a European Armed Forces.

2. The Environment of Creating the Armed Forces of the European Union

The presented conditions became the impetus for intense discussion within the European Community on the establishment of a political union, which resulted in the

[7] *Including the Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chad.*

[8] *Asymmetries include, among others: unfair combat, a significant difference in technological advancement, striking a weak point, information warfare, public opinion warfare (psychological warfare) and the threat or use of weapons of mass destruction.*

[9] *https://www.konflikty.pl/historia/czasy-najnowsze/krym-2014-zielone-ludziki-putin/ access 22.10.2025.*

[10] *N. Iwanowski, Teoria i praktyka wykorzystania grup bojowych Unii Europejskiej, Warszawa 2014, p. 6.*

[11] *A. Gruszczak, Hybrydowość współczesnych wojen – analiza krytyczna, [in:] Asymetria i hybrydowość – stare armie wobec nowych konfliktów, Warszawa 2011, p. 14.*

establishment of the European Union with the Common Foreign and Security Policy as one of its pillars. The Treaty on European Union (signed in Maastricht on 7 February 1992) stated that: *"The common foreign and security policy encompasses all matters related to the security of the European Union, including the ultimate definition of a common defense policy, which could eventually lead to a common defense"*[12].

Furthermore, the Treaty's provisions emphasized the importance of the Community, understood not only geographically, but also as a group of integrating states. The Western European Union was designated as the institution responsible for implementing the EU's security policy, henceforth considered the Community's military arm. It was also referred to as the European pillar of the North Atlantic Alliance, which, in the unspecified future, was to lead to the creation of a common European army[13].

In response to the provisions and assumptions set out in the Maastricht Treaty, the EU prepared a report on its future role in peacekeeping operations in 1994. The document outlined the general principles for their conduct, defined as follows:

- operations will be undertaken on the basis of UN Security Council resolutions or OSCE decisions, and at the request of the EU.
- all operations will be conducted in accordance with international law and the UN Charter.
- other UN or OSCE member states may participate in operations.
- there will be no geographical limitations to operations conducted within the UN mandate[14].

Furthermore, the members of the European Community have defined the fundamental objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, such as: protecting common values, strengthening the security of the European Union and its individual members, consolidating and developing democracy and the rule of law, and respecting human rights and fundamental civil liberties.

Further changes in foreign and defense policy were brought about by the Amsterdam Treaty[15], which amended the Treaty on European Union. The Amsterdam Treaty incorporated humanitarian, rescue, peacekeeping and restoration, and crisis management tasks into European security policy, i.e., the so-called Petersberg Missions (established by a decision of the WEU Council of Ministers in 1992 and previously the responsibility of the WEU), which were incorporated into the Treaty

[12] *Traktat z Maastricht, Tytuł V, Postanowienia dotyczące Wspólnej Polityki Zagranicznej i Bezpieczeństwa, artykuł J.1., Maastricht 1992, p. XIV/PL 78 – 82.*
[13] *R. Zięba, Wspólna Polityka Zagraniczna i Bezpieczeństwa Unii Europejskiej, Warszawa 2007, pp. 52-54.*
[14] *J. Kaczmarek, NATO – Europa – Polska 2000, Wrocław 2000, p.165.*
[15] *The Treaty of Amsterdam, signed on 2 October 1997, entered into force on 1 May 1999.*

on European Union.

Additionally, the position of High Representative of the Union for the Common Foreign and Security Policy was established, held by the Secretary General of the Council of the European Union, carrying out tasks within the framework of the second pillar[16] of the EU.

The Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties on European Union omitted the issue of equipping the EU with military capabilities. However, the Treaty of Nice[17] (February 1, 2003, amending the Treaty on European Union) stipulated that the Common Security and Defense Policy would be limited to crisis management, but did not rule out further development of defense cooperation between EU Member States[18].

3. Requirements for the Armed Forces of the European Union

The European Union's active involvement in shaping security quickly resulted in further planning and political decisions. From July 2001, the WEU's Petersberg missions[19] were fully taken over by the EU, and the anticipated military involvement of European states, including the assumptions for developing a concept of operational (response) forces capable of carrying out anti-crisis tasks, was defined in the 1999 as the Helsinki European Headline Goal[20].

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[16] *The first High Representative was former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana. The next High Representative was British Catherine Ashton, and the current position is held by Estonian Kaja Kallas.*

[17] *The Treaty of Nice, signed on 26 February 2001 (entered into force on 1 February 2003), removed the provisions regarding the WEU as an integral part of the EU's political and defense integration processes. However, despite the WEU's expiration as a political and military organization, its competences were exercised within the framework of the second pillar of the EU, and currently by the office of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (with the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty on 1 December 2009). The division of the European Union into pillars was abolished, and in its place, the position of High Representative was introduced.*

[18] *N. Iwanowski, Teoria i praktyka wykorzystania grup bojowych Unii Europejskiej, Warszawa 2014, p. 12.*

[19] *The last WEU missions took place between 1997 and 2001. The WEU participated in police operations, including in the former Yugoslavia (jointly with NATO), on the Danube and in Mostar (1993-1996), and Albania (1997-2001), satellite surveillance in Kosovo (1998-1999), and mine clearance operations in Croatia (1999-2000). The Lisbon Treaty, which implemented provisions concerning the Common Defence and Security Policy, effectively deprived the WEU of its purpose. Therefore, the Western European Union was dissolved on 31 March 2010, and its final termination took place on 30 June 2011.*

[20] *Presidency Conclusions, Helsinki European Council 10 and 11 December 1999, Annex 1 to Annex IV, European Parliament, 1999. The European Headline Goal provides for the possibility of establishing a force of up to 60,000 soldiers for an anti-crisis operation within 60 days of a political decision, with a mandate of one year. It also states that member states agree to build a European Rapid Reaction Force (ERF) starting in 2003.*

However, the entry into force of the Treaty of Nice effectively ended the formal ties between the two institutions. Despite this, the WEU retained its defense mandate.

The European Union's complete transfer of responsibility for military security from the Western European Union remained a matter of debate among member states.

This stemmed primarily from the neutrality of some EU countries that were not NATO members[21].

Hence, the unpredictability of the crisis management environment, as mentioned above, fundamentally influences the perception and definition of assumed political and military objectives. It also prompts decision-making centers to revise adopted concepts in favor of new technical and organizational challenges, thus building military structures and operational capabilities.

The new quality of forces and resources engaged in tactical operations should be characterized by high flexibility in carrying out a wide range of tasks, from stabilization operations and the provision of humanitarian aid to dynamic (kinetic) combat operations. Therefore, the creation of specialized battlegroups (task groups) has become the only rational response to such requirements[22].

For over twenty years, the European Union (EU) has been developing the concept[23] of specialized national and multinational forces in the form of battlegroups, whose purpose is to rapidly respond to crises emerging in various parts of Europe, as the natural environment of the Union, but also the world. According to the adopted assumptions of the aforementioned concept[24], these are to be highly maneuverable, well-trained and equipped groups.

Depending on the anticipated future operational area (desert, high mountains, Arctic terrain, tropical, etc.), the group must be equipped not only with specialized equipment and weapons to ensure the group's efficient operation in the operational area, but also

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Furthermore, the possibility of having and building smaller, more efficient rapid response forces (RAFs), i.e., battle groups for immediate operations, was discussed.

[21] *R. Zięba, cit. ed., pp. 52-54.*

[22] *Battle groups (task forces) are created to perform a specific task in a specific area (region) and often at a specific time, and their structure is geared toward achieving the intended operational objective. Therefore, no two task forces are identical, as even in the same location but at different times, the needs can be completely different.*

[23] *W. Kopaliński, Słownik wyrazów obcych i zwrotów obcojęzycznych, Warszawa 2007r. Concept: An idea, project, or devised plan of action. In this work, the term "concept" refers to a vision of general assumptions regarding the construction of operational forces (combat groups) with their combat and interoperability capabilities.*

[24] *After 2001, both the EU and NATO significantly intensified planning and organisational work on preparing new concepts for rapid response forces for future operations, such as the NATO Response Force (NRF) and the European Union Battlegroups (EUBGs).*

with individual soldier equipment (primarily uniforms) and logistical support. The group must achieve the highest level of readiness in every aspect to respond immediately to any area of EU interest for a period of at least six months.

The use of the term "European Rapid Reaction Force" (ERRF)[25] in the literature may raise some doubts. The reasons for this can be traced back to the development of European operational forces (Helsinki Headline Goal 1999, then Headline Goal 2010). At that time, member states agreed to organize (build) a European Rapid Reaction Force starting in 2003. Furthermore, the development of a European Union Rapid Response Force (RRF) Concept, encompassing small but highly maneuverable and cohesive forces, i.e. Battlegroups, was discussed.

As if to confirm this, the "EU Military Rapid Response Concept"[26] was developed at the level of the EU Military Staff, and subsequently approved by the Council of the European Union. This concept assumed the establishment of smaller, faster combat elements, i.e. battle groups called rapid response forces, which would be an instrument (tool) in the hands of the EU to respond to existing and future crisis situations.

4. European Union Battlegroups

The organization of European Union Battlegroups (EUBGs) has been a priority initiative of European security and defense policy for several years, striving to improve its operational effectiveness. The EU's intended operational capabilities were defined in the European Security Strategy[27] based on the identified threats and challenges the Union must address.

These groups are to be prepared to carry out the entire spectrum of Petersberg missions, from humanitarian, rescue, conflict prevention, and peacekeeping missions to crisis management, including peace enforcement operations, disarmament, and advisory activities.

This broad spectrum of future tasks requires these formations to be comprehensively prepared, equipped, and operationally effective. To achieve these goals, several fundamental conditions must be met:

- First, the European community should have a common understanding (perception) of the challenges and political objectives for which battlegroups are formed.

[25] *In some domestic and foreign publications it is identified with the EU Battle Groups.*

[26] *EU Military Rapid Response Concept, Brussels, 23 January 2009, supersedes the previous UE Military Concept dated 16 September 2003.*

[27] *The European Security Strategy was adopted on 12 December 2003 at the Brussels Summit. The threats and challenges identified include terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, and organized crime.*

- Second, if the use of battlegroup(s) is necessary, political approval (including a mandate from the UN international community) for the battlegroup's mandate must be ensured.
- Third, clear procedures for the presence of troops on the territory of a foreign country (SOFA) [28] should be established, along with rules for the combat use of both troops and weapons with which the group is equipped during the execution of the mandate (ROE), and national constraints should be taken into account.
- Fourth, battlegroups must have organizational structures, equipment, access to information (including intelligence from all available EU sources) appropriate for their tasks, and the ability to survive in various climatic conditions.
- Fifth, an alternative (contingency) plan for the implementation of the mandate by the battlegroup(s) should be developed, which will enable the achievement of the intended operation objective in alternative realities.

EU Battlegroups (BGs) are rapid reaction units, each consisting of approximately 1,500 soldiers, capable of self-sustaining in the area of operations and equipped with their own strategic transport assets provided by member states. The BG concept, developed since 2004, assumes the ability to deploy forces to the area of operations within 10 days of an EU decision, for a period of four months, and within a distance of 6,000 km from Brussels. Since January 2007, the EU has deployed two BGs every six months. This means that the EU (through one of the active Commands) can simultaneously conduct two operations utilizing BGs[29].

The creation of EU Battlegroups is consistent with the development of the European Security and Defense Policy, and is also intended to provide the EU with enhanced military capabilities, enabling the organization to become a major international player and have a significant impact on resolving crises in hotspots around the world. The experience of recent conflicts (especially those closest to the European Union's borders) and an analysis of asymmetric threats indicate that EU member states should focus on long-term defense planning, which is crucial for the development of European armed forces.

Obtaining appropriate capabilities, training, and the armament and technical equipment of dedicated forces will enable them to respond quickly and effectively to emerging threats to European and global security. Furthermore, such armed forces play another important role in shaping security and maintaining peace: deterrence[30].

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[28] *Agreement between the Parties to the North Atlantic Treaty Regarding the Status of Their Forces, done in London on 19 June 1951 (NATO SOFA).*

[29] *http://www.msz.gov.pl/pl/polityka_zagraniczna/polityka_bezpieczenstwa/europejska_polityka_bezpieczenstwa_i_obrony_esdp/rozwoj_wojskowych_zdolnosci_ue/?printMode=truepobrano 12.05.2025*

[30] *According to the author, this is the most important role of the armed forces of any country or organization. The very fact of possessing strong and well-organized armed forces discourages a potential adversary from aggression.*

This task has become particularly important since the outbreak of aggression against Ukraine. Without strong and well-commanded armed forces, deterrence cannot be achieved.

The implementation of the Battlegroup concept, meaning equipping the EU with the military response capabilities to respond to crisis situations, could give it the necessary strength on the international stage. It will undoubtedly constitute a new dimension in the global security system, alongside the previously dominant role of the United States and NATO.

The end of the Cold War, as well as the increasingly visible processes of globalization, have led European states to increase their responsibility for maintaining peace and security not only on the old continent but also globally. To effectively realize these aspirations and be a credible player in the international security arena, the construction of European Armed Forces seems necessary, although actions in this area should remain balanced[31].

5. Conclusions

In summary, the presented assumptions for the creation of EU Battlegroups, and thus the European Union's armed forces, should be emphasized that implementing the Battlegroup concept will undoubtedly lead to the European Union gaining new capabilities. However, achieving synergy requires the exchange of experiences, the implementation and development of procedures, and a strong, undisputed position in the international environment.

The European Union's security policy should strive to maintain equilibrium (balance) in both the civilian and military spheres, which will undoubtedly positively impact its ability to exert pressure in international relations, and achieve its intended goals without the use of military force. Europe is demonstrating this by imposing further sanctions on Russia, seeking to exert economic pressure.

However, such a policy will be significantly more effective when European Union politicians seeking a peaceful end to the war are supported by strong, mobile battlegroups with significant potential and operational capabilities, as well as the national armed forces of the Member States. These forces were never intended to be a counterweight to NATO[32], but rather to fill areas that, in addition to armed forces, would require significant economic involvement.

While the European community has successfully conducted and continues to carry out a wide variety of peacekeeping operations within the European Security and Defense

[31] *N. Iwanowski, op. cit. p. 49.*

[32] *https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/policies/eu-nato-cooperation/milestones-in-eu-nato-cooperation/ access 22.10.2025.*

Policy, such as military missions supporting the African Union in Darfur and Bosnia and Herzegovina, police missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, the Palestinian Authority, and Congo, missions monitoring the implementation of peace agreements in Indonesia, a mission related to judicial reform in Congo, an anti-piracy mission in Somalia, and stabilization efforts in the Republic of Chad, it has never utilized the Group to its full extent.

The practical deployment of such a Group will be a true test of its political, financial, and organizational capabilities, ultimately confirming or refuting the idea of its creation. It seems a natural consequence of current actions that a full-scale armed conflict will remain the domain of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, but it is the European Union Armed Forces (Battlegroups) that could play a crucial role in ending the war in Ukraine, which has been ongoing since February 24, 2022.

It appears that this military formation will be accepted by the warring parties and can effectively implement the process of supervising a ceasefire and then establishing a lasting peace.

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