The European Union Challenge as an Actor in Crisis and Conflict Management

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After an apparently easy victory in the Afghan war by American troops in October 2001, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) had reached a crossroad by the time Obama entered office. In his campaign for the presidency during 2008, he had claimed that American Armed Forces were losing the war in Afghanistan. Regretfully, the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) mission, led by NATO, had failed to fulfill the political goal of stabilizing the country, "the graveyard of the empires," and the European Union (EU) itself did not actively fight. To make things worse, NATO troops had to work within a lot of caveats, which kept them from implementing many military operations. Consequently, nations less burdened with caveats like theUnited States, the United Kingdom and Australia, had to take most of the burden of the military operations.

 On December 1, 2009, President Barack Obama announced in a national televised address at the Military Academy in West Point that he was ordering a surge of 30,000 troops in Afghanistan. Despite Obama's decision, the process to approve the surge required a great deal of "pulling and hauling" by the major actors who had access to and influence on the president.[1] Consequently, the plan for the surge included a date of withdrawal, which gave a clear message to military commanders that the time to achieve political ends had a deadline. Regretfully, that message implied that the insurgent's strategy could be based on resistance and resilience to wait for the American and NATO troops to withdraw.

Even though some European leaders criticized Obama´s decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, most EU countries also withdrew their troops in 2014, leaving Afghanistan in a difficult situation where the activity of terrorists, insurgents and corrupt officials filled the daily news. In sum, the American and NATO strategy failed to leave a stable Afghanistan, after deploying more than one hundred thousand troops during thirteen years of the operation. The international community lacked the necessary tools to achieve their political objectives.

Despite the latest agreement of EU members to enhance the military branch of the EU via the Permanent Structured Cooperation Accords (PESCO), a future European army will face similar problems like the United States encountered in Afghanistan and other conflicts. Furthermore, the lack of commitment, and latest setbacks in the European political scenario will endanger any possible EU intervention in future operations like Afghanistan or Syria. To explain this situation, this paper will address four relevant points. First, a description of the main American and NATO difficulties and errors in Afghanistan. Second, a discussion about the leadership of the EU, analyzing its common security and defense policy, and the PESCO. Third, an explanation of the challenges that EU is facing making progres in its integration. Finally, this paper will analyze if the EU could succeed in a scenario like Afghanistan, considering these points.

Recent conflicts, like Iraq and Afghanistan, have demonstrated the superior military strength of the American Armed Forces in conventional warfare. In Afghanistan, these forces defeated the Taliban regime in little more than two months with a combination of special forces, airpower and indigenous militias.[2] Despite this success in dethroning the Taliban, the mission to stabilize the government, and to defeat and afterwards disrupt Al Qaeda, failed. In this phase of the military operation, after achieving the initial military objective and removing efforts transitioned to

mainly peace-building operations, called phase four. This essay will assess phase four operations in Afghanistan. As this essay will demonstrate, the current situation of rampant corruption, terrorism, insurgency, and a high poverty rate, means that the mission in Afghanistan remains far from accomplished.

More than fifteen years after the beginning of OEF, the Taliban have again begun seizing and controlling territory in Afghanistan. In the first six months of 2016, according to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), terrorist attacks killed or injured 5,166 civilians, a half-year record since the counting began in 2009.[3] Thus, the situation is even worse than in 2009, when Obama ordered the surge to stabilize the country. In 2015, according to the Global Terrorism Index, Afghanistan ranked as the second hardest hit country.[4] The number of people killed by the Taliban rose by 29 per cent: 4,502 deaths from terrorism during 2015.[5]

The poverty rate increased from 36 percent in 2011-12 to 39.1 percent in 2013-14 (latest available survey data), according to the World Bank.[6] Therefore, 1.3 million people fell into poverty over this period. Rural areas, where most of the population lives, saw the biggest increase, from 38.3 to 43.6 percent in 2014.[7] Additionally, labor demand in the off-farm sector also declined. In 2017, according to the Transparency International index, Afghanistan continues its status as one of the most corrupt countries.[8] Jamil Danish claims that much of the aid coming from international funds has fallen into private hands.[9] In sum, Afghanistan faces continued internal conflict: an insurgency that challenges the government and spreads terror among the population, fueled by high levels of corruption. The situation proves the error of the way in which the United States implemented the surge strategy.

To accomplish the surge strategy in 2009, American leaders put most of the burden on the Armed Forces. In other words, they assigned the military a crucial role in accomplishing political ends. Nevertheless, as Richard Betts observes, "large-scale force is seldom more than a blunt instrument."[10] Most experienced military professionals consider this an obvious fact, but it eludes most policymakers. Most of them consider the military organization as the main way to achieve complex political ends in volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous scenarios, resulting in catastrophic consequences.

Betts goes on to note that strategy fails when the chosen means prove insufficient to the ends. This can happen because the wrong means are chosen or because the ends are too ambitious or slippery."[11] The limited size and duration of the Afghan surge made the task even more difficult. Despite the surge of a substantial force, military leaders tried to use that force to accomplish many challenging tasks within a tight time frame.[12] Organizations plan their performance based on a limited repertoire of programs, which resist adapting to a new function during a complex mission.[13] To succeed in the surge, American Armed Forces and NATO had to choose from among the tools in their repertoire. Consequently, they made the Counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine the heart of the Afghan surge.[14] The COIN plan consisted of three main assumptions to succeed: 1) the military could achieve the COIN goal of protecting the population; 2) if the government became efficient it would gain legitimacy and support; and 3) the United States and the host nation could negotiate an alignment of their strategies. Despite great efforts, all three assumptions proved wrong.

If security forces can identify a clear enemy, they can protect their population. If they defeat the enemy and secure the population, then the citizens can see the Armed Forces as the new liberators from the oppressive enemy, in the Afghan case, the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, efforts to identify the enemy fell short in Afghanistan. Regretfully, other actors also threatened the citizens, such as criminal narco-traffickers, local police chiefs, predatory government officials, and corrupt local politicians. In addition, Afghans also fought each other due to ethnic vendettas dating more than five centuries in almost every corner of the country. To make things worse, young unemployed men saw the Taliban as the only way to escape from extreme poverty

and desperation. These were real day-to-day challenges that US military forces, NATO and civilian diplomatic personnel struggled with while trying to implement COIN doctrine.

Following the standards of military doctrine, training and SOPs, military leaders were focused on the tactical battlefield and the development of the Afghan National Security Forces rather than on political and economic reforms.[15] Assuming that good governance would inevitably follow, the military did not apply their resources to influence and persuade President Karzai to make much needed difficult decisions of state. His failures as a statesman created a disjoined military-civil approach to the political ends. That approach also damaged the Afghan government´s credibility with the Afghan people and, most important, Afghan forces could not fulfill the political goals of the government.[16] Consequently, Afghan people did not consider the Afghan military as an arm of a legitimate government. Arguably, both American Forces and NATO fell short of their political objectives because they tried to implement a complex strategy based on the COIN doctrine. Next, this essay will analyze the European Union as a regional hegemon, and as a possible future actor in conflicts such as Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq.

In September 2017, the EU ambassador to the UAE, at The National Security Summit-Middle East, held in Abu Dhabi, said that "the European Union was becoming increasingly a global security actor."[17] The EU policy on security, and especially in the economic arena, proves that the EU acts as a consolidated influential actor not only in the region but also worldwide. A few months ago, EU diplomats had a serious diplomatic incident with Philippine President Duarte when "he accused the EU of interfering in the Philippines' domestic affairs, and alleged the EU wanted to get the country removed from the UN."[18] In December 2017, the EU also published a list of countries labeled "safe haven fiscal paradise," and Pierre Moscovici, Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, stated the EU should intensify the pressure on listed countries to change their ways. Blacklisted jurisdictions must face consequences in the form of dissuasive sanctions…"[19] The EU is also planning to extend the number of States to enlarge its borders and influence to the eastern region of the continent.

Since it was founded in 1957, the EU has grown from 6 countries to 28. To join the EU, countries must meet some membership criteria. Politically, countries must have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Economically, they must have a functioning market economy and legally, they must accept established EU law and practice.[20] In other words, new EU members must apply the EU laws and most importantly, the EU can control, in some ways, all members of the Union. Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia and Turkey have engaged in the process of negotiations to join the EU, with preparations under way in Bosnia and Kosovo for the long term process.[21] If the joining process is successful for all these seven states, then the EU will have a total 35 members, with almost all European states belonging to the Union. Thus, EU would become the most influential actor in Europe and, arguably, one of the most important players regarding security and defense worldwide.

According to Article 42 of the EU, "the common security and defense policy is an integral part of the common foreign and security policy."[22] This common security policy requires both military and civilian means. To guarantee the maintenance of peace, the prevention of conflicts, and the strengthening of international security, the EU can resort, according to the Treaty of the EU (TEU), to those means in missions outside the Union that follow the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. In other words, the EU has the legal frame to conduct missions to reinforce peace, or to build peace. To carry out these tasks, which can be carried out outside EU territories, the EU must rely on the capabilities provided by its member states. It is important to highlight that the EU does not have its own capabilities, but only what member states provide.

Along with the EU´s values, peace building and conflict prevention motivate the service of the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS serves to support the High Representative, as the EU's diplomatic service, through a network of over 139 delegations and Offices around the world, to promote and protect Europe's values and interests.[23] Thus, the EEAS represents an

important body in the complex decision-making process of the EU. Nevertheless, the 27 heads of state and government, who constitute the European Council, hold the ultimate decision-making authority. The European Council meets 4 times a year to define policy principles and general guidelines. In addition, the High Representative for the EU makes EU foreign and security policy more consistent. This official chairs the monthly meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council at the level of foreign Minister. This decision-making process reflects the principle that "most foreign and security policy decisions require the agreement of all EU countries."[24] Moreover, in case of troop deployment outside the frontiers of each of the EU states, it also requires the approval of all the EU states members, which makes the process even more difficult.

The EU aims to "promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples" and to "preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security."[25] The main pillars of the European Union's external actions are "conflict prevention, peace building and mediation among the parts involved in a conflict."[26] To direct peace building operations, the EEAS has the EU Military Staff (EUMS), which is the source of military expertise within the EEAS. The EUMS provides early warning, situation assessment, strategic planning, communications and information systems, concept development, training and education, and support of partnerships.[27] Rather than a conventional military instrument of war, the EUMS is more focused on phase four of a conflict. In other words, the EU has designed its main military strength to take part in rebuilding a state after the conflict. Thus, the EU is involved in 17 missions worldwide, with soldiers of the EU country members under the European flag.[28]

Under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), the EU has carried out missions with objectives under the umbrella of phase four operations, namely: joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance, conflict prevention and peacekeeping, crisis management, peacemaking and post-conflict stabilization. Since 2003 the EU has conducted approximately 30 civilian and military missions in 3 different continents. In each case, the EU has responded to a crisis, for example: post-tsunami peace-building in Indonesia; protecting refugees in Mali & the Central African Republic; and fighting piracy off Somalia and the Horn of Africa. Since January 2007, the EU has been able to carry out rapid-response operations with two concurrent single-battle groups, each comprising 1,500 soldiers. In case of maximum effort, the EU can launch two big operations almost simultaneously.[29] Nevertheless, any decision regarding troops must come from the national ministers from EU countries meeting as the Council of the EU, which makes the process complex. Thus, to better coordinate and get resources and military personnel, most EU members signed the PESCO.

PESCO is a Treaty-based framework and process to enhance defense cooperation amongst EU Member States.[30] As of April 2018, 25 EU members have joined PESCO.[31] Through this agreement, member states seek to jointly develop defense capabilities and make them available for EU military operations. Arguably, PESCO will reinforce the EU's strategic autonomy to act when necessary, mainly based on 17 different projects. The PESCO projects consists of five main areas: 1) common training and exercises, with two competence and certification centers; 2) operational domains, mainly focusing on maritime domain in surveillance missions and harbor protection, and the cyber domain; 3) a European force for crisis response; 4) jointly enabled capabilities with a C2 strategic command system; 5) and the most relevant project of PESCO, the European Medical Command that will enable the EU to deploy medical personnel and material in phase four operations.[32] In short, most PESCO projects enable EU members to deploy, command and control a military force prepared for crisis management, medical assistance and training.

Most importantly for phase 4 projects, these accords create a C2 structure to enhance EU commanders 'capability to conduct operations. Consequently, the EU military structure will act as a single actor in future operations, just as NATO seeks to act when doing exercises or in real missions.[33] In sum, PESCO will provide the elements that the EU needs to conduct operations in

locations other than mainland Europe. Thus, with PESCO in mind, the EU will probably take more responsibility and action in coming conflicts, mainly in emergency crises, by using its European Battlegroups.

EU Battlegroups are multinational, military units, composed of 1,500 military personnel each. They form an integral part of the European Union's military quick reaction capability to respond to emerging crises.[34] However, like most decisions relating to the CSDP, their deployment is subject to a unanimous decision by the Council, which is frequently a "show-stopper." Although Battlegroups have been fully operational since 2007, issues relating to political will, usability, and financial solidarity have prevented them from being deployed. The most significant obstacle to deploy a Battlegroup has long been the financing of EU Battlegroup operations, and it would generally require an authorizing UN Security Council Resolution. Even if deployed, EU Battlegroups can only initially sustain missions for 30 days, extendable to 120 days if resupplied appropriately.[35] The EU Battlegroup, with a maximum time of 120 days of deployment, and with all the military caveats of a regular European nation, will only play an insignificant role in a scenario like Afghanistan, where 150,000 American and NATO troops struggled to stabilize the area for more a decade.

Despite the good intentions of PESCO, the EU still faces relevant challenges to implement a single European army with a common objective. The integration of all the members as a single actor represents one of the biggest challenges since the creation of the EU. This desired integration remains far from being a reality. Indeed, the 27 Member States face great difficulty coordinating their strategy. Security and defense continues to be a vital part of the sovereignty of States, which is why it is always difficult to advance in this field. In other words, the political objectives of Germany in Afghanistan differ from those of Spain and vice versa. Thus, the 27 different member state strategies in Afghanistan make pursuing a single strategy difficult despite PESCO efforts. Furthermore, many EU members participate in NATO, the biggest military alliance worldwide.

Despite the rise of the EU in recent times, operating in Africa, Europe and Asia, many European states rely on NATO as one of the main pillars of their collective defense. Most of them, as a member of both the Alliance and the EU, have acquired commitments in terms of security and defense with both organizations. However, in order to obtain an optimum performance of their capabilities, most countries will have to differentiate which ones are within the umbrella of security, that means PESCO, and which within the concept of defense and, therefore, of NATO. Nevertheless, since most capabilities support both objectives, this can prove difficult. For instance, cybersecurity is sometimes within the limits of cyber security and others times out of cyber defense, and vice versa. Therefore, separating capabilities in such tightly integrated domains risks duplication and coordination problems, leading to a reduction of efficiency and, consequently, of security. Since the EU does not have any dedicated armed forces to fulfill its political objectives in its missions, the problem becomes greater.

On December 14th, 2017, Donald Tusk, President of the European Council, said in a speech in front of EU leaders and military personnel from each of the 25 countries involved in PESCO, that in contrast to the dream to create and European army that failed in 1950, "today this dream becomes reality."[36] Despite the victorious thoughts and declarations of the EU leaders, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who attended part of the summit, warned against duplication. In fact, he told reporters that twenty-two EU countries were also members of NATO, which could duplicate efforts, capabilities, etc. In fact, Stoltenberg told reporters that "there has to be coherence between the capability developments of NATO and the European Union. We cannot risk ending up with conflicting requirements from the EU and from NATO for the same nations. Forces and capabilities developed under EU initiatives also have to be available for NATO because we only have one set of forces."[37] In short, the EU could damage the military strength of NATO, since both organizations overlap in the membership of most of the countries.

Countries that have both NATO and EU membership, therefore, could face challenges in integrating their defense and security capabilities. Any structure resulting from the EU project of defense and security integration should not duplicate structures that already exist in NATO.[38] One of the most obvious examples of duplication will be with the personnel that will participate in future EU missions. Neither of the organizations, NATO or EU, have permanent personnel assigned to them. Therefore, the same military personnel could participate in the same scenario, but under two different missions, one under the EU and the other under NATO. Military personnel frequently find themselves double-hatted when their country lack sufficient personnel, especially true for many small EU nations. Consequently, these personnel must know different standard operational procedures, doctrine, rules of engagement, strategy, etc., depending whether they will serve under the NATO or EU flag.

Apart from the paradox at the individual level, at the national level an EU army may cause friction in case of interfering in NATO missions. Turkey, for example, is not an EU member but a key member of NATO, which contributes significantly to the Alliance. Turkey´s geographical location and its role in the Syrian refugee crisis give Turkey a leading role in the region. In 1987, Turkey applied to join what was then the European Economic Community, and in 1997 it was declared eligible to join the EU.[39] Despite the long wait and Turkey´s willingness, the continuous block from the EU has raised tensions. In fact, Turkish and European officials have engaged recently in harsh rhetoric "with Ankara accusing members of the EU of supporting "terrorism" and EU politicians alleging a deterioration of democratic and human rights in Turkey."[40] In September 2017, when Germany's Angela Merkel claimed that Turkey should not be a EU member, this elevated diplomatic tensions between Turkey and Germany and other EU members that disapprove of the Turkey´s membership in the EU.[41] In short, EU interference in military affairs could not only damage the NATO alliance, but also the relationship with non-EU members who play a key role in this geopolitical arena.

European countries must decide what political ends a future European army would pursue, and who and when will define it? The EU's 2016 Global Strategy," emphasized cooperation with NATO, and European leaders insisted that a EU military force would complement NATO, never replace it. Replacing NATO does not seem likely, as all EU members would have to agree on a common European defense policy. In this case, the European Council would recommend Member States to adopt a decision in this area, always respecting each state's respective constitutional norms. Thus, before the common defense policy would become effective, the European Council must be completely unanimous, which would greatly complicate a common response to any crisis or conflict.

As another barrier to emulating the NATO alliance is that five EU member states have policies of neutrality. Thus, countries such as Malta or Ireland have the same vote as Germany or Italy, and could block any EU mission that does not follow their constitutional principles. Although most EU members would probably participate in a EU force, since the EU's Treaty of Lisbon requires member states make unanimous decision on security and defense, small or non-belligerent countries could derail the project. Unless these countries discard their neutrality, the EU army will be, at best, a paradox: "an army that cannot fight wars."[42] Accordingly, the EU army would focus solely on peace-keeping operations, including collective defensive war. Most probably, the EU future army would merely continue the custom of EU missions that currently conduct peace-keeping missions. Furthermore, the EU army would have to reconsider all the national caveats that every single EU nation imposes when deploying its armed forces out of its national territory.

The caveats that many nations applied in Afghanistan explains their territorial distribution of responsibilities in the theater of operations. The coalition assigned to those countries with a lot of caveats, responsibility for areas with less confrontation, and in some cases, they performed support missions such as logistics. Consequently, the caveats represented a very significant factor

impeding political objectives. In the case of the EU, states could impose even greater caveats than they did for NATO operations. In a NATO operation, each nation´s troops have to get the clearance from their respective national parliament. Nevertheless, in an EU mission, military leaders face an even more complicated approval procedure. First, the High Representative for the foreign affairs and security policy of the EU, Federica Mogherini, would present the mission to the European Parliament to get their approval. Second, if it gets enough votes at the EU parliament, then every single member nation will have to approve their participation in their national parliament as well. Taking into account that many EU national member´s parliaments are very divided, such as Spain, Germany, Greece, Italy, etc., this creates many obstacles.

The European caveats in military international mission also affected the Allied Force mission in Libya in critical ways. Although more than 175 aircraft from 17 different nations joined the coalition, most governments restricted their full participation, preventing them from carrying out effective strike missions against Gaddafi's forces.[43] Only British and French aircrafts were free to perform without political restrictions. Nations with more political constraints, namely the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Qatar, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, flew non-targeting missions such as patrolling Libyan airspace to enforce the no-fly zone.[44]

To get more nations to join a coalition, organizers have to accept restrictions. From a political point of view, the practice has some advantages: "it allows for the widest possible participation, which in theory boosts the legitimacy of the action."[45] On the other hand, from a military point of view, this leads to weakness. Military Commanders face difficulties in planning in an operational scenario with volatile and complex circumstances using troops with many restrictions. Consequently, enemy forces find advantages in moving to areas where, on occasions, they evade resistance from a heavily restrained nation´s forces. In sum, EU troops will face difficulties when facing future missions with highly caveated operations. Furthermore, the scenario could even worsen in the EU political arena since recent events are also rocking the foundations of European integration.

Recent events that have occurred in the EU have shown that, despite more than half a century of European integration, the union still remains far from acting as a single state. The multifaceted crisis in the EU has visibly deepened during the last years, especially since the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, commonly known as the Brexit. According to experts, the British referendum on EU membership and the vote in favor of exiting the EU have only been the most explicit symptom of its disintegrative tendencies.[46] The core-periphery rift in the euro area has continued. The arrival of a large number of refugees from the war-torn areas of the Middle East has created several conflicts within the EU on the question of who should take care of them. Regretfully, the immigration crisis also provoked the rise of nationalism in key European states like Austria, the Netherlands, and even in one of the most relevant founding fathers: France.

The last French elections in last 2017 were a key point of crisis for the future of the EU. If Marie Le Pen had won the French presidential election, this would have shocked postwar European politics. The leader of the Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant National Front (FN) party told a rally in Lille that the French election would be the next step in what she called "the global rebellion of the people." "The European Union will die because the people do not want it anymore ... arrogant and hegemonic empires are destined to perish," Ms. Le Pen said in one of the FN political meetings.[47] Although the FN did not win, the rise of Ms. Le Pen was a real warning to European enthusiasts.

Due to all these political storms and setbacks affecting the EU, its political leaders now advocate for a "better Europe" instead of "more Europe." This message arguably portrays the frustration of millions of EU citizens. Consequently, some see the PESCO as an effort to regain public confidence in the European future. Most citizens approve the intervention of the armed forces in peace-keeping operations and PESCO represents the perfect tool to participate in these missions at the European level. In sum, all these European challenges, the Brexit, the Euroscepti-

cism, and the rise of nationalism may delay or even derail the weak project of the European army which, even in the best circumstances, will mainly operate as a peace-keeper force. Next, this essay will analyze if the EU could operate in a complex scenario like Afghanistan.

The American and NATO strategy in Afghanistan, focused highly on the COIN doctrine, not only failed to achieve its planned political ends but left Afghanistan as almost a de facto failed state. Nevertheless, every political or military campaign requires a strategy. The EU CSDP does not apply in such a complex scenario like Afghanistan. In fact, the only aspect of the EU strategy currently working in Afghanistan is related to the "support for the development and use of a Police and Prosecutors Coordination Training Manual," inside the EUPOL mission.[48] Although EUPOL is the second largest civilian mission under the EU's CSDP, it consists of 290 international staff, mainly police officers and rule of law experts, and 200 local staff members.[49] In short, the EUPOL mission only mentors, advises and trains at the senior management level, and mainly operates in Kabul. Thus, the only effort to confront the task of stabilizing Afghanistan is a mission of less than three hundred personnel with only civilian expertise at the Ministry of Internal affairs level.

Any military operation requires reliable and precise intelligence about the country, opponent forces, society, political situation, etc. In Afghanistan, the CIA, NATO and national services, provided most of the intelligence necessary for operations. On the EU side, to obtain intelligence, the EU only has just one civilian body, namely The EU Intelligence Analysis Centre (EU INT-CEN). The agency mainly focuses on terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Regretfully, EU INTCEN has no formal mandate to collect intelligence as traditionally understood, since its analytical products are based on intelligence from the EU Member States' intelligence and security services, and on open-source intelligence.[50] In sum, the EU totally lacks a robust intelligence service to operate in an environment of insurgency, terrorism, special operations, etc.

The excessive time required to assemble and deploy an army further constrains EU's military capability. Even if PESCO contemplates an emergency crisis response army, it would still take a long bureaucratic process to reach a decision. The decision-making process at the EU level includes many steps which add time to reach a decision to commence an operation. First, key figures like the High Representative for the EU and the Chief of the EUMS must come together with a strategy that will pass the "green light" of the European Parliament or the European Council at the presidential level with unanimous consensus. After all this, every single nation will have to provide clearance from their specific national parliament. Consequently, any national level failure could have a tremendous impact on the previously designed strategy that, at best, will have to adjust and to reflect the demands of any EU member to participate. Regretfully, even if all EU members approved the EU strategy in a conflict such as Afghanistan, the total time to get troops on the ground once the political process began could take months or even more. This means such operations could be a total failure even before having started. Recent events in Syria clearly show this effect.

On April 14th 2018, President Trump announced that "he ordered the United States Armed Forces to launch precision strikes on targets associated with the chemical weapons capabilities of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. A combined operation with the armed forces of France and the United Kingdom."[51] Within 48 hours, French, UK and American forces began carrying out an operation in response to the use of the chemical agents by Assad´s forces. Also, on the same day, the president declared via twitter: "mission accomplished in a perfectly executed strike."[52] Despite the controversy and the Russian complaints on the strike, three countries coordinated and executed the operation in a record time. This type of operation, which requires quick responses, totally surpass the capabilities of the EU, which had been speechless during the latest events in Syria.

The EU has played a spectator role in Syria. After the strikes, the only EU reaction was an official statement from the High Representative, Federica Mogherini. In the statement, the EU seems to vaguely support the strikes by saying that "The EU is supportive of all efforts aimed at the prevention of the use of chemical weapons….The EU calls upon all countries, notably Russia and Iran, to use their influence to prevent any further use of chemical weapons, notably by the Syrian regime.."[53] Basically, the EU adopted the position that only political action can solve the Syrian conflict, and stated "to implement immediately the ceasefire, and to ensure humanitarian access and medical evacuations as unanimously agreed in UNSC Resolution 2401."[54]

Allison Graham in his book Essence of Decision explains why the EU´s approach does not require a military force. To achieve their ends, organizations base their performance on programs in a repertoire which is limited and difficult to change during a complex mission.[55] The EU only has the diplomatic and political approach in its repertoire, since it lacks any kind of capable military tool to reverse the situation. Accordingly, the main contribution of the EU to the Syrian civil war will be economic sanctions and political declarations condemning the Assad regime, an approach that clearly will fall short to restrain the Syrian regime forces from committing war atrocities and crimes against humanity.

In sum, the EU is facing several challenges which restrain it from becoming a relevant actor in future crisis and conflict management. Revisiting the difficulties that the United States faced in Afghanistan, the EU would even encounter more challenges. The United States followed a "pulling and hauling" decision making process that dampened the strategy to achieve political ends. Furthermore, if the EU attempted to lead a response of a similar nature, the decision-making process would have been even worse. First, there is a complex decision-making process that delays and prolongs any common decision on relevant matters. Second, any EU member could derail a common strategy since there must be a total consensus. Finally, national parliaments have power over the EU approach on Afghanistan. These three main points illustrate the great difficulties for the EU to act as a single global actor. Furthermore, anti-European feelings have risen in key EU members.

Brexit hit the credibility of the EU concept hard. The United Kingdom initiated the process to leave the EU on the grounds of sovereign interference due to the refugee crisis. The EU imposed some refugee quotas that also raised concern in other EU countries. In France, opposition leaders like Ms. Le Pen claimed that the EU was a big mistake for France´s future, and she got big support in the last French elections. This feeling of renewed nationalism has spread out in all of Europe and clearly demonstrate the lack of full unanimity on key matters inside the Union. Consequently, this lack of unanimity threatens any common posture on possible future conflicts like Afghanistan, despite last PESCO accords among most EU countries.

Although relevant EU leaders have stated that PESCO is the way for the new future EU army, reality dictates differently. The main military force inside PESCO still lies in the Battlegroup: an organization of scarcely 1,500 personnel. That figure, compared to that of 100,000 troops that took part in ISAF mission, is clearly insufficient to achieve political ends in such complex scenarios like Afghanistan. It is even more remarkable that the Battlegroups have not ever been deployed despite reaching full operational capability in 2007. More important, the EU interference in military operations could also diminish the role of the NATO alliance. This is a big concern since most EU members don´t have great capabilities to contribute to both organizations. Accordingly, any rise in EU influence in military campaigns will result in weakening the NATO alliance. Nevertheless, NATO supporters should not worry much, considering the role of the EU in worldwide recent events.

The crisis in Syria has revealed the lack of leading role of the EU. So far, the EU has not deployed any military forces and any future possibility is almost zero. The EU approach to the Syrian conflict has consisted of diplomatic sanctions and press conferences. Thus, the role of the EU is closer to a mere spectator than a leading actor like Russia or the United States. The poor

cooperation among EU countries in vital issues is raising concerns about the viability of the EU concept in general, even among EU supporters. This raises the question about who is next to follow in U.K's steps to leave the EU. The lack of coordination and the distrust among EU members has shown big flaws in its concept, despite having started more than 60 years ago. In short, to have the tools to lead a conflict like Afghanistan, EU devotees might have to wait other 60 years.

Notes

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Commander Manuel López-Lago López-Zuazo is an officer in the Spanish Air Force. He graduated as a Lieutenant from the General Air Academy in 2001, and was assigned to Llanos Air Base, in Albacete, where he flew almost 1,800 flight hours in the Mirage F-1, was promoted to Captain, and participated in international exercises in Europe and Africa. Once promoted to commander in 2011, he was assigned to the Air Staff in Madrid and the Combined Operations Air Center (CAOC) of Torrejón. During his time as a Commander he was also on duty at NATO Headquarters, from March to November 2015. He graduated from the U.S. Air Force's Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell AFB in 2005. In June 2018, he was assigned to the Air Staff, Air Operations section. Additionally, he was champion of the world military aeronautical pentathlon in 2003; being a three time winner in swimming and once in fencing.