

No supply without demand

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No supply without demand: explaining the absence of the EU Battlegroups in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic

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ABSTRACT

Although the sad track record of the EU Battlegroups has attracted considerable scholarly attention, analyses have largely focused on obstacles related to the provision of the Battlegroup troops and to the consensus within the EU Council, hence taking a supply-side perspective. This article calls for complementing this perspective with an analysis of the demand for their deployment. That implies analysing whether and why the EU Battlegroups were (not) considered as an option by those actors taking the initiative to intervene in a particular crisis. Applying a rational-institutionalist approach, this article explains the absence of the Battlegroups from three recent crises: Libya (2011), Mali (2013) and the Central African Republic (2013–2014). Using data from document analysis and elite interviews, it shows that once a rapid military reaction became urgent, the EU Battlegroups were not even considered as an option by those initiating an international reaction.

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Introduction

In September 2015, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon stated that “I welcome (...) the commitment by the European Union to engaging European Union Battlegroups, where appropriate, for crisis management” (S/2015/682). While this suggests that the EU Battlegroups are still considered as a viable crisis management mechanism, it is completely at odds with the sad track record of this rapid response mechanism over the past decade. Although the EU has in recent years frequently been confronted with security threats in its (immediate) neighbourhood and areas of interest, the EU Battlegroups have only excelled in their absence since reaching full operational capability in 2007.

Referring to the crises in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), the European Political Strategy Centre, a think-tank under the auspices of the European Commission, pointed to the nub of the matter, arguing that “Past failures have brought to the fore many tough questions, with some Member States openly questioning EU solidarity and burden-sharing and the future of the Battlegroup concept” (EPSC 2015, p. 9). Although EU Battlegroup deployment has attracted quite some scholarly attention, analysts mainly focused on obstacles related to the provision of the Battlegroup troops and to

the consensus within the EU Council. Yet, such a supply-side perspective might only partially explain the absence of the EU Battlegroups.

Building upon rational-institutionalist insights, this article suggests that fully explaining the absence of EU Battlegroup deployment requires complementing a *supply-side* perspective with a *demand-side* perspective. That implies not only scrutinising the interests of the EU Battlegroup troop providers, or the preference divergence within the EU Council (whose consensus is required for deployment). It implies also analysing whether and why the EU Battlegroups were (not) considered as an option by those actors taking the initiative to intervene in a particular crisis, such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). This novel perspective will be illustrated through the analysis of three cases: Libya (2011), Mali (2013) and the CAR (2013–2014). Empirically, the article builds upon a combination of document analysis and 25 elite interviews conducted in Brussels, Paris and New York.

EU rapid response discourse

In June 2015, the high-level independent panel on peace operations proposed creating a “small ‘UN vanguard capability’” by building upon existing regional rapid response mechanisms, including the EU Battlegroups (United Nations, [A/70/95-S/2015/446](#)). In his response to the Panel, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon supported this idea, stating that compared to traditional UN peacekeeping forces, “national, multinational and regional responses are often faster to deploy and more capable of combating well-equipped and determined belligerents” (United Nations, [A/70/357-S/2015/682](#)). While such EU assistance would be a true example of inter-organisational cooperation, the credibility of this proposal can seriously be doubted.

Publicly, the EU continues to commit itself to assisting the UNSC in maintaining peace and security. These commitments often focus on providing rapid military responses where needed, involving the EU Battlegroups. The European Council on 20 December 2013 explicitly concluded that there is a “need to improve the EU rapid response capabilities, including through more flexible and deployable EU Battlegroups as Member States so decide” (General Secretariat of the Council, 20 December 2013). And at the UN Peacekeeping Summit of 28 September 2015, the EU promised to “strengthen cooperation on rapid response”, again confirming its preparedness to be a credible partner in the maintenance of international peace and security (UN Leaders’ Summit on Peacekeeping 2015).

Yet, the history of the EU’s rapid military responses strongly contradicts this, to the extent that building a UN vanguard capability by relying upon the EU Battlegroups sounds like a *contradictio in terminis* (Reykers 2016). The UN Secretary-General’s recent call for the use of regional rapid military response mechanisms has hence revived questions on the credibility of the EU Battlegroups as a tool for rapid reaction.

EU rapid response on paper and in practice

The EU’s showpiece in terms of rapid military reactions already dates back to May 2003, with the deployment of Operation Artemis to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Initiated at the request of then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, it aimed at restoring peace and security in the north-eastern Ituri region.¹ Operation Artemis’ successful experience shaped the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in two ways.

First, the EU and the UN mutually recognised the advantages of further intensifying and institutionalising cooperation in crisis management. This understanding was included in the EU–UN Joint Declaration of 2003 and the 2008 Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy, with the latter indicating that “everything the EU has done in the field of security has been linked to UN objectives”. In the field, the EU translated this by conducting around 30 peace and security operations since 2003, the large majority being civilian operations, mainly where there was also a UN operation underway.

Second, EU member states agreed on developing a rapid reaction capability through EU Battlegroups. Although initiated at the Helsinki Summit of December 1999 and further developed during the French–British Le Touquet Summit of February 2003, the Battlegroups idea only truly gained foothold after the successful completion of Operation Artemis (e.g. Lindstrom 2007). Following a declaration during the French–British Summit of November 2003 that the EU should create a mechanism which would allow deploying an EU operation “within 15 days to respond to a crisis” (Lindstrom 2007, p. 11), further specifications to “the Battlegroup concept” were made on a joint French–British–German initiative in February 2004. Ultimately, the General Affairs and External Relations Council of 17 May 2004 included the creation of the EU Battlegroups as a central element in the Headline Goal 2010, which was approved by the European Council on 14 June 2004 and aimed at reaching full operational capacity by 2007. The core idea behind the EU Battlegroups was to make the EU “more coherent, more active and more capable”, allowing the organisation to rapidly deploy military means to emerging crises (European Council 2003, p. 11).

The set-up of the EU Battlegroups mirrors the successful experience of Operation Artemis (e.g. Lindstrom 2007, European Consilium 2013). They are relatively small in size and consist of a brigade of around 1500 troops that should be able to deploy within 15 days and for a maximum of 120 days. In theory, the EU (2003) Battlegroups can be used for the full range of crisis management tasks covered by Article 43(1) of the *Treaty on the European Union* and the tasks specified in the 2003 *European Security Strategy*.² Yet, deployment requires a UNSC authorisation (e.g. European Consilium 2013). Operationally, the EU works with a rotation scheme where on every first of January and July a new pair of Battlegroups is placed on standby, either by one nation or by a so-called framework nation together with a multinational coalition (e.g. Lindstrom 2007, p. 14).³

Throughout recent years, many commentators have pointed out that the demand has been growing for EU military responses to crises in its immediate neighbourhood (e.g. Keohane 2015). Yet, while Operation Artemis significantly shaped EU CSDP, similar short-term EU military operations have only been installed three times since: EUFOR RD Congo (2006), EUFOR Tchad/RCA (2008–2009) and EUFOR RCA (2014).⁴ Although the EU Battlegroups reached full operational capacity in 2007, neither EUFOR Tchad/RCA, nor EUFOR RCA made use of them. The EU has on multiple occasions positioned itself at the side-lines instead of being a (rapid) player in the field, even despite calls for assistance from within the UN. Its absence from the 2008 crisis in the DRC is a typical example thereof. In recent years, the EU failed to deliver a (rapid) response to the crises in Libya (2011) and Mali (2013). The Mali crisis even led some to conclude that “for the EU and all of its member states, it is time to live up to the strategies to which they so kindly signed up” (Coolsaet *et al.* 2013). Why was an EU Battlegroup deployment impossible in each of these recent crises?

Explanations for the absence of the EU Battlegroups

The scholarly literature on EU CSDP offers a laundry list of explanations for the (non-) deployment of EU military operations, and the EU Battlegroups in particular. Case studies have focused on the EU's absence from crises such as in the DRC in 2008 (e.g. Gowan 2009, 2011a, Balossi-Restelli 2011) and in Libya in 2011 (e.g. Koenig 2011, Menon 2011), or the EU's inability to deploy its Battlegroups as part of the 2008 EUFOR Tchad/RCA (e.g. Jacoby and Jones 2008). In an attempt to see the wood for the trees, Nováky (2015) identifies four groups of scholars: realists, focusing on EU great power interests and the EU's quest for prestige (e.g. Gegout 2005); liberalists, dealing with societal interests and governments' goal of re-election (e.g. Pohl 2014); institutionalists, treating the interests of EU Council and Secretariat officials as key factors (e.g. Dijkstra 2012); and constructivists, following an ideational logic (e.g. Riddervold 2011).

Yet, explanations can also be subdivided into two other commonly mentioned categories: resource-related and strategic culture-related explanations. Resource-related explanations largely follow the expectations-capabilities argument: the EU's public discourse on its role as security provider creates the false expectation that it can respond to any crisis it is confronted with, while it actually lacks the means for doing so (e.g. Hill 1993). Balossi-Restelli (2011) explicitly connects this to the EU–UN relationship, referring to the EU's apparent commitment to supporting UN Chapter VII mandates. The literature identifies a number of such capacity-related factors that contribute to EU members' restraint to actually provide troops to the EU Battlegroups. These obstacles can be not only financial in nature, such as national financial constraints on military expenditures (Chappell 2009, Menon 2011, Barcikowski 2013) or frustrations about uneven financial (and material) burden-sharing (Chappell 2009, Balossi-Restelli 2011, Koenig 2011, Gowan 2011a); but also more structural such as the EU Battlegroups' limitation in time to 120 days or the absence of a permanent EU military headquarter (e.g. Brosig 2010, p. 331).

The strategic culture-argument focuses on "threat perceptions, interests and values" (Viggo Jakobsen 2007, p. 464). Chappell (2009, p. 417) argues that a divergence among EU members on "when, where and how force should be used" negatively affects the chances for EU Battlegroup deployment. The reason being that these EU members within the EU Council have to take a unanimous decision on deployment. While Germany is likely the most visible EU member that exercises restraint towards the use of force (e.g. Miskimmon 2012), Menon (2011, p. 83) adds that "even states that do commit troops to missions often encumber their contribution with restrictive caveats that severely limit their operational effectiveness". But ideas not only diverge on the appropriateness of the use of force, the area of interest is also often contested. Gowan (2011a, p. 605) contrasts the Nordics' support to UN peace operations in Africa with the likely lack of interest among Eastern European states. By consequence, EU Battlegroup studies often focus on a particular subset, such as the Nordic Battlegroup, which is perceived as having the highest chance of ever being deployed (e.g. Granholm 2006, Granholm and Jonson 2006, Viggo Jakobsen 2007, Andersson 2015).⁵

As is clear from the preceding overview, many scholars explain the lack of Battlegroup deployment through the preferences of those member states that are expected to supply troops or by referring to the disagreement among EU members within the EU Council. In other words, they largely take a *supply-side* perspective. Analysts rarely investigate

whether the EU Battlegroups were actually considered as a (credible) option. Are the EU Battlegroups a reliable rapid response mechanism in the eyes of those taking the initiative to tackle a conflict? Put differently, the literature might be disregarding a potential alternative explanation, that is, the *demand* for EU Battlegroups.

Supply and demand perspectives

In this article, it is argued that explaining the absence of the EU Battlegroups does not only require scrutinising why they were not deployed, looking at decision-making within the EU, but also whether and why they were (not) considered as an option to intervene, primarily looking at decision-making by those taking the initiative to tackle a crisis.

Taking a rational-institutionalist approach, states are here treated as the main actors in the decision-making on military interventions, including decision-making on EU Battlegroup deployment. They are seen as rational actors that only decide to work through an international or regional organisation after having rationally outweighed the costs and benefits of doing so, compared to other available options. This state-centric focus also informs the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which holds that decisions on CSDP mission deployment are taken “by the Council acting unanimously” (Art 42[4] TEU). Evidently, this rational-institutionalist framework does not imply a complete disregard of other actors’ potential influence on decision-making, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) or even other international organisations.⁶

As argued above, the literature has largely focused on obstacles related to the provision of the Battlegroup troops and to the consensus within the EU Council. On the one hand, member states that are part of the EU Battlegroup that is on standby develop preferences and have interests which may hinder them from actually making their armed forces available when needed. On the other hand, EU Battlegroup deployment can be obstructed by irreconcilable interests among EU member states, preventing the EU Council from taking a unanimous decision. Both perspectives can be seen as a “supply-side” focus. In this article, it is suggested that such a supply-side focus should be complemented with a “demand-side” focus, being the analysis of those actors that take the initiative to intervene in a particular crisis. The reason is that these actors can choose between multiple mechanisms for implementing such an intervention, of which the EU Battlegroups is only one. Such an initiative can be undertaken within a national context, but equally so in fora outside the EU. That hence implies also looking at the UN context, with particular attention for the UNSC, not only because the EU keeps publicly committing itself to supporting the UNSC in maintaining international peace and security, but particularly also because it tends to only deploy military troops when approved by the UNSC (e.g. Lindstrom 2007, European Concilium 2013). Moreover, this highlights the often overlooked yet pivotal position of two EU members, the United Kingdom (UK) and France, as both have an agenda-setting role within the UNSC (Nadin 2016). Given their overlapping membership of the EU and the UNSC, they are in principle able to determine to a certain extent whether or not the UNSC will approve intervention in a conflict in the EU’s area of interest, hence also whether or not the EU’s crisis management mechanisms will be considered. Yet, it should be noted that their influence is of course largely

dependent upon the case at hand, as it is strongly linked to whether or not they are the penholder within the UNSC on that specific issue.⁷ Nonetheless, adding an explicit demand-side focus allows scrutinising whether the EU Battlegroups were actually considered as a policy option by those actors looking for mechanisms to intervene in a particular crisis.

In sum, a supply-side perspective, which is the traditional approach, mainly focuses on decision-making within the EU. This first and foremost includes the analysis of considerations by EU member states that are to provide troops to the Battlegroup on standby. In the second order, this can also include an analysis of preference divergences within the EU Council, as well as of the potential role of institutional actors such as the EEAS. A demand-side perspective, which is claimed to be an analytically valuable complement to this traditional approach, focuses on the considerations of those actors taking the initiative to tackle a particular crisis. Such an initiative can be undertaken within a national context, but equally so within international fora outside of the EU, in particular at the UNSC.

It should be noted that in practice, considerations shaping decision-making on each of these two sides can operate in tandem, reinforcing each other. The demand for the Battlegroups can be informed by expectations regarding the supply (e.g. lengthy approval procedure), but it can also be influenced by other considerations (e.g. a more symbolic or strategic preference for not working through an EU mechanism). Yet, this conceptual dichotomy nonetheless comes with significant benefits. On the one hand, it has analytical purchase, as it allows for highlighting the potential determining effect of decision-making by those actors taking the initiative to tackle a crisis, and hence also their pivotal position. This might lead to the identification of additional obstacles to deployment that are situated outside the EU. On the other hand, it also has a practical policy-relevance, as it can lead to better policy recommendations, moving beyond solely suggesting solutions for obstacles to supplying troops.

When deciding upon military interventions, one can assume that those states that take the initiative to initiate a military response generally have a set of options on the table, ranging from unilateral action to an operation through a coalition of the willing or a regional organisation. Building upon the rational-choice institutionalist logic, it is expected that they will only use an international or regional organisation's military mechanisms, here the EU Battlegroups, if this lowers the transaction costs compared to acting unilaterally or in a coalition of the willing (Abbott and Snidal 1998, p. 5; Hawkins *et al.* 2006). Importantly, it is not *a priori* claimed that the preferences of those actors taking the initiative are decisive in the (non-)deployment of the EU Battlegroups. The core idea is rather to urge for a more balanced analysis, in which inquiry into the interests of the suppliers of the Battlegroups is complemented with a more explicit analysis of the preferences of those taking the initiative to tackle a crisis.

Following from the above, it is suggested that the decision not to engage the EU Battlegroups should be understood as a function of (1) demand-side considerations, primarily cost-benefit analyses by the initiator (often France and/or the UK), and (2) supply-side considerations, primarily cost-benefit analyses made within the EU (first and foremost by those supplying troops to the EU Battlegroup that is on standby).

Case studies

The next sections show how taking into account both perspectives can shed a new light on three recent post-Lisbon cases in which the EU Battlegroups were *not* deployed: Libya (2011), Mali (2013) and the CAR (2013–2014). These three crises were considered as (most) likely cases for EU Battlegroup deployment, as the necessary contextual conditions were present. First, for each of these crises, a UNSC authorisation or at least approval for intervention was present, providing the appropriate legal framework for a potential EU involvement. Second, in each of these cases, a European security interest was at stake.⁸ And third, it has frequently been mentioned that, at least in theory, the EU Battlegroups were designed for dealing with some aspects of these conflicts. For each of the three non-cases, criticisms have been voiced about the absence of the EU Battlegroups, even from within the EU. In June 2015, the European Political Strategy Center raised attention to the EU Battlegroup concept by asking “does it serve a purpose and will it ever be used?” (EPSC 2015). Stating that much of the problem is situated in a lack of political commitment and diverging strategic interests by EU member states, it also critically voiced that “The Central African Republic crisis in 2013, and Mali, Libya and Congo before that, were arguably all lost opportunities” (EPSC 2015, p. 8). In other words, even within the EU, these cases are seen as illustrative of the problem that the EU Battlegroups are confronted with.⁹

For explaining the absence of the EU Battlegroups from each of these cases, data are used from 25 elite interviews as well as from official EU and UN documents, and media accounts. Elite interviews were conducted with involved decision-makers between February and November 2015 in Brussels, Paris and New York at the EU, the UN, NATO and various national representations.¹⁰

Case study: Libya (2011)

On 17 March 2011, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1973 in response to Colonel Qaddafi’s brutal actions against Libyan protestors, and subsequent requests by the Gulf Cooperation Council (8 March) and the Arab League (12 March) for an international reaction. Through Resolution 1973, drafted at the initiative of the UK and France, the UNSC authorised “member states (...), acting nationally or through regional organisations or arrangements” to use all necessary measures to protect civilians (Operational Paragraph 4) and to establish a no-fly zone over the Libyan territory (Operational Paragraph 8). In addition, it authorised the continuation of the arms embargo (Operational Paragraph 13) installed by UNSC Resolution 1970.

Only two days after the Resolution’s adoption, France conducted first air strikes as part of a broader coalition of the willing. While the coalition gradually expanded, among others with a number of EU member states, the intervention ultimately became a NATO-led operation from 31 March onwards. Numerous sources, including discussions within the UNSC after the adoption of Resolution 1973 and interviews with involved decision-makers, show that a general consensus existed on the urgency of a rapid reaction to stop the ongoing mass atrocities (S/PV/6498, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, Reykers and Smeets 2015).

The Battlegroups were not considered as an option for the task of protecting civilians, nor for the task of installing a no-fly zone (which was largely deemed a measure to protect those civilians under attack). For these tasks, the Battlegroups, which mainly consist of

light infantry troops, were obviously not fit for the purpose, a conclusion that was shared both within and outside the EU. Although France initially wanted to keep the operation out of NATO's structures (Howorth 2014), key officials from the EEAS agreed that "the French knew well that they would not have been able to unfold without American drones and intelligence, so they had to go through NATO" and added that "they could not use the EU" for these tasks (Interviews 1 and 22). In addition, there was actually no consensus among EU members on the use of force for implementing both tasks (Miskimmon 2012, Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014). That already became clear during the EU Summit of 11 March where German Chancellor Merkel criticised a potential military action. Even more illustrative was the unexpected German abstention on Resolution 1973 in the UNSC, where it was a non-permanent member at that time. Moreover, there was also opposition against a forceful EU operation by High Representative Catherine Ashton (e.g. Howorth 2014, p. 407).

Yet, interviews have shown that this did not keep some EU members and the EEAS from proposing to supply the EU Battlegroups for implementing other UNSC-authorized tasks. These included installing the maritime embargo and setting up a humanitarian operation (with the use of force in case humanitarian convoys were threatened), tasks which far better match the Battlegroups' design. With regard to the maritime embargo, numerous sources indicated that the *Atalanta* ships, which were used to fight piracy along the Somali coast, were considered as an option for implementation (Interviews 1 and 22). French EU and UN officials also confirmed that they had demanded the EU Battlegroups as an option for implementing the maritime embargo (e.g. Interview 18). However, obstacles were present both at the supply and the demand side, as EU members could not reach an agreement on this point (Interview 9), and the USA would not have supported the EU taking the lead, given their explicit urge for NATO to lead both the air and the naval campaign (Interview 11). Ultimately, this left the EU no other option than to accept a "two-track plan, in which NATO would implement the air and naval protection, and the EU would be responsible for the protection of humanitarian aid provisions" (Interview 1).

On 21 March 2011, Foreign Affairs ministers agreed at a European Council meeting that "The EU is ready to provide CSDP support to humanitarian assistance in response to a request from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and under the coordinating role of the UN" (Council of the European Union, Press Release, 22 March 2011). Yet, the operation named EUFOR Libya, for which the EU had even set up an operations headquarters in Rome (see Council Decision 2011/210/CFSP), never materialised, although some argued that the EU Battlegroups were ready for deployment.¹¹

Explanation for the absence of the EU Battlegroups (and for EUFOR Libya more generally) can be found in both the supply side and the demand side of the decision-making process. On the one hand, the two Battlegroups on standby at that time were led by the Netherlands and Sweden. The Battlegroup that was envisioned for implementation was "EU Battlegroup 107" (Interview 9), consisting of troops from the Netherlands, complemented by troops from Germany, Finland, Austria and Lithuania (UK House of Lords 2012). However, national Defence planners from one of these countries indicated having received national ministerial instructions during the early planning phases to, as one involved Defence official phrased it, "find reasons not to deploy the EU Battlegroup" (Interview 8). The main reasons for these instructions were argued to be the large political

responsibility that a deployment would imply, and the classical problem of the financial costs that Battlegroup providers are expected to carry. In addition, commentators seriously wondered if Germany, which earlier abstained from voting in the UNSC, would not impose strong restrictions on the rules of engagement under which its troops would act (Gowan 2011b).

On the other hand, an EU operation was made dependent upon the explicit demand by OCHA. The EU Council's decision on the creation of EUFOR Libya in support of humanitarian assistance operations of 1 April 2011 included the requirement that "any decision to launch the operation must be preceded by a request from OCHA" (Council Decision 2011/210/CFSP, para. 5). By doing so, it made deployment of EUFOR Libya (and potentially of the EU Battlegroups) dependent not only upon the willingness of the troop-providing countries, but also on the evaluation by OCHA that EUFOR Libya would be fit for that purpose. Put differently, in their quest for legitimacy, the EU member states thus deemed it necessary to only act when approved by OCHA, making themselves dependent upon an explicit demand. Quite remarkably, "UN OCHA already in early phases had explicitly said that they did not want the EU to take up the task of protecting humanitarian assistance" (Interview 1), and similar signals were heard from UN Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos, heading OCHA. Some argued that a fear existed within OCHA that an EU deployment would spur opposition by Russia and China, as well as a fear of militarising their humanitarian efforts, and hence running the risk of hostage-taking by Qaddafi loyalists (Gowan 2011b). In addition, and adding to the importance of a demand-side perspective, media coverage pointed at French and British beliefs that a German involvement in an EU Battlegroup would create too many obstacles, given the cautious position taken by Germany in the UNSC voting on Resolution 1973.¹²

Overall, fully explaining the absence of an EU rapid reaction to the Libya conflict requires combining a supply-side perspective with a demand-side perspective. That includes the interests of the troop providers of the EU Battlegroup that was on standby, but equally so the considerations by some UNSC members and OCHA (when it comes to facilitating humanitarian assistance). The role of OCHA furthermore indicates that treating states as the key actors has its benefits, but should not imply neglecting the potential independent role of non-state actors or international organisations.

Case study: Mali (2013)

In the summer of 2012, separatist Tuareg rebels, known as the National Movement for the Liberation of Anzawad (MNLA), took control of large parts of Northern Mali. Strikingly, however, their initial allies, the Islamist jihadist movement Ansar Dine, quickly took over control and started imposing sharia law. By September 2012, northern jihadist forces had moved on to the centre of Mali, leading the Economic Community of West African States to agree in November on a military operation to recapture control. Remarkably, as planning for such an operation takes months, actual deployment of this UNSC-authorised African-led International Support Mission in Africa (AFISMA) was initially only foreseen for September 2013 (S/RES/2085, Francis 2013). With the continuing political and military instability of the incumbent government, Islamist jihadist rebels were able to overthrow the central city of Konna, showing determination to proceed to the capital Bamako in early January 2013.

The urgency of the situation led France to start a forceful military campaign on 11 January 2013, including an air campaign and deployment of up to 4500 French troops, named Operation Serval. Although a formal UNSC authorisation for the use of force was absent, the legality of an intervention was nonetheless widely confirmed, given that the operation was requested by the Malian interim-government and the UNSC further expressed its support for the intervention through multiple press statements (Bannelier and Christakis 2013). In addition, but more contentiously as it did not authorise the use of force, UNSC resolution 2085 of 20 December 2012 urged UN member states to support AFISMA among others with “any necessary assistance in efforts to reduce the threat posed by terrorist organizations” (S/RES/2085, para. 14).

The EU launched an EU Training Mission (EUTM-Mali) on 18 February 2013, aimed at supporting the rebuilding of the Malian armed forces (Council Decision, 2013/87/CFSP). Serious questions were nevertheless raised on the absence of an EU Battlegroup from the actual military intervention in January. Although multiple EU members provided airlift support to the French intervention, The Economist of 19 January 2013 strongly criticised the EU, saying that “the reality is that only the French are putting their troops in harm’s way to push back the militants”, while stressing that the EU Battlegroups would be well-fit for a short-termed intervention like the one in Mali.¹³ Questions were also raised within the EU. Representatives from the European Parliament’s security and defence subcommittee, for instance, voiced their disappointment about the non-deployment of the Battlegroups to a situation that was argued to be well-suited for doing so.¹⁴

In line with the analysis of the Libya case, one should first ask to what extent Battlegroup deployment was really considered by those taking the initiative to tackle the crisis. Empirics indicate that France in the earlier phases of the Malian conflict had already undertaken efforts to create a European intervention. Delegates to the UN confirmed this demand, saying that “we tried it through the EU” (Interview 20). French UN officials explicitly indicated that “France had been working on a European intervention since August 2012”, while showing frustration that “although we *demarched* seriously on European member states, they were not showing willingness; we only received a training mission” (Interview 18).

When taking a supply-side perspective, focusing on the considerations by the envisioned troop providers, one would explain the non-deployment of the EU Battlegroups particularly by referring to German and Polish interests. At the moment of the French intervention, in January 2013, the EU Battlegroup that was on standby was the so-called Weimar Battlegroup, led by Poland and further consisting of French and German military troops. The German commitment to non-military conflict management measures is an oft-mentioned explanation for the Battlegroup’s absence (e.g. Vogt 2013). In addition, the Polish fear for overstretch, as they already had numerous troops deployed to Afghanistan, is another explanation. Academic commentators have further pointed to a German and Polish unwillingness to fight for what was perceived “as an essentially French interest” (Faleg 2013) and to a lesser extent to the rather late awareness within the EEAS administration that Mali could become a threat to European security (Coolsaet *et al.* 2013).

However, such a supply-side perspective only provides a partial explanation. Not the least because in addition to EU members such as Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden, also Germany contributed to French airlift capacity by providing aircrafts. Granted, this German contribution only included transport aircrafts, of which

French military officials indicated that they operated under strict restrictions imposed by the German government (Interview 15). In other words, although Germany and Poland might not have been willing to deploy troops, a demand-side perspective is essential for fully explaining the absence of the EU Battlegroups.

Crucially, the EU Battlegroups were argued to be fit for purpose. Gowan (2011b) in that regard highlighted that, “in theory, the EU has exactly the military assets needed for this sort of campaign, including a multi-national battle-group deployable within weeks”. Yet, he also added that, “Paris never considered this option, turning instead to African nations for reinforcements”. Once the urgency of a forceful intervention became clear, the demand for the EU Battlegroups indeed immediately evaporated. Or as an involved EEAS planner indicated: “the French had not even thought about the EU in Mali, they just had to react fast” (Interview 9). A French high-level military decision-maker further stressed that on 10 January 2013 “the terrorists were threatening Bamako and that would mean a collapse of the country”, leading them to decide “to go with four Rafales” (Interview 15). The decision to intervene on a national basis was argued to be further based upon the cost–benefit analysis that “we already had some forces in Northern Mali and Chad, so we could stop the first colonne” and that “if you want to react quickly, you need one to three nations; the EU decision-making would have taken a long time” (Interview 15). An involved member of the French Defence Ministry added to this argumentation that “we did not think we would need other allies as we could afford to do it alone” (Interview 12). Or as a UN representative of one of the states that provided strategic airlift said: “they primarily wanted to work on a national basis” (Interview 14). In other words, the relative benefits of a French-led intervention (with support of some partners) were deemed higher than those of an intervention through other structures, such as those of the EU. This hence also supports this article’s assumption that decision-making is largely shaped by rational cost–benefit considerations.

In sum, although France, which took the initiative to deal with the Mali crisis, considered the EU Battlegroups as a potential means for intervention in the earlier phases of the decision-making process, this situation reversed once the urgency of a rapid military response became clear. The expectations on a potential deployment of the EU Battlegroups as a rapid military response to the Malian conflict in January 2013 were hence not only confronted with a lack of interest from Germany and Poland. In addition to these supply-side obstacles, there was no demand, as France considered its own military structures sufficient for setting up an intervention. This idea was furthermore strengthened by their lacking belief in, on the one hand, the added-value of these EU Battlegroups over its own national military capabilities, and on the other hand, the ability of the EU’s decision-making structures to deliver such a rapid response.

What further supports the claim that the demand side should not be neglected when explaining the selection of a particular mechanism for implementation is the follow-up of the Mali crisis within the UNSC. On 25 April 2013, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2100 (2013), which included the authorisation of a robust UN peacekeeping mission, implying the transformation of AFISMA into MINUSMA. Interestingly though, this resolution also authorised “French troops, within the limits of their capacities and areas of deployment, to use all necessary means, to intervene in support of elements of MINUSMA when under imminent and serious threat” (Operative Paragraph 18). In other words, in case of

emergency, this French-drafted resolution predefines the actor that should forcefully come to the aid, which is not the EU but France itself.

Case study: CAR (2013–2014)

International awareness of the need of a rapid military response in the CAR was particularly raised when UN officials warned for a potential genocide in November 2013 (e.g. Weltz 2014). Although Séléka rebels already at the end of 2012 captured numerous towns in the CAR as part of their fight against the Bozizé government, it was particularly the installment of Djotodia, a Muslim, as president of a largely Christian country in March 2013 that led to escalating sectarian clashes between Muslims and Christians. The inability of the Economic Community of Central African States operation, which was already on the ground since 2008, to deal with the situation led the UNSC to adopt Resolution 2127 on 5 December 2013. Acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, this (again) French-drafted Resolution did not only authorise the African Union's (AU) initiative of an African-led Support Mission to the CAR (MISCA); interestingly, it also explicitly provided France with a legitimisation "to take all necessary measures" in support of MISCA (S/RES/2127, Operative Paragraph 50). As a result, in early December French President Hollande decided to deploy about 1000 military forces, in addition to the already present French military troops that were securing the Bangui airport.

In contrast to the Libya and Mali crises, the EU was able to reach an agreement on deploying a military operation to the CAR. The European Council on 19–20 December 2013 already confirmed "the EU's willingness to examine the use of relevant instruments to contribute towards the efforts under way to stabilise the country, including under the CSDP, in both its military and civilian dimensions" (European Council Conclusions, 19/20 December 2013, para. 46). But despite it being emphasised at the same meeting that there was a need to improve the EU's rapid response capabilities and a commitment was voiced to make the EU Battlegroups more flexible and deployable (European Council Conclusions, 19/20 December 2013, para. 8), the EU's reaction to the CAR conflict did not translate this in practice. On 10 February 2014, the EU Council decided to deploy a military ground operation, EUFOR RCA, which earlier in January had received UNSC authorisation through Resolution 2134 (Council Decision 2014/73/CFSP). Yet, EUFOR RCA could neither be described as a rapid response, given that it was deployed in April and it took until June to reach full operational capacity, nor did it make use of the EU Battlegroups (EEAS, Factsheet, 17 September 2014).

Similar to the Libya and Mali cases: have the EU Battlegroups ever been considered as an option to intervene in the CAR? And if so, why did they remain absent, even though the EU reached an agreement on the deployment of a military operation? The answer to the first question is positive. Interviews confirmed that a European intervention through the EU Battlegroups was already considered within the EU, by France more in particular, at the end of 2013. But given that the only Battlegroup on standby for the period July–December 2013 was led by the UK (and further consisted of troops from Lithuania, Latvia, Sweden and the Netherlands), this option was already swept from the table even before it was officially proposed. A high-level EEAS official summarised this as follows:

we thought about the Battlegroup in the end of 2013; we started prudent planning. We received a relative good reaction from the London Military Staff, but that ended quickly. The political side in Downing Street 10 gave a robust “no”, for mostly domestic reasons. (Interview 10)

While some indicated the financial costs of deployment as a core argument (interview 8), the tough British position can be explained by internal considerations, being a fear by the Conservatives to unnecessarily provide grist to the eurosceptics’ mill, and a more general strategic culture which sees the use of hard military power as a NATO prerogative (Interview 10).¹⁵

But also in January 2014, during the decision-making towards setting up EUFOR RCA, the EU Battlegroups were taken into consideration within the EU (e.g. Tardy 2014). Moreover, multiple reasons were present to expect an EU Battlegroup deployment: the EU’s military operation was envisioned to comprise about 1000 troops, an explicit UNSC authorisation was available through resolution 2134, a general agreement on the urgency of an intervention seemed to be present among EU members and the operation was initially expected to be rather short termed as it only served as a bridging force until the AU force MISCA would take over. Yet, EUFOR RCA did not make use of the Battlegroup structures.

From a supply-side perspective, two factors partially explain why EU Battlegroup deployment did not occur. First, reputable media already mentioned that the length of the envisioned operation, originally foreseen to last until September 2014, exceeded the maximum duration of a Battlegroup deployment, being only 120 days.¹⁶ Second, and more important, involved decision-makers confirmed that EU Battlegroup deployment was once again obstructed by the lead country of the EU’s standby force, Greece (which led the “Balkan Battlegroup” for the period January–June 2014). Quite remarkably, although the operational headquarter for EUFOR RCA was situated in the Greek city Larissa, this did not mean that Greece was willing to actually contribute military forces (Council Decision, 2014/73/CFSP, Article 3).¹⁷ An involved Greek EU delegate explained this situation as follows: “it was Greece’s turn in the CAR, but the national public opinion would not accept Greece fighting in the CAR; and there is also the financial argument, of course”, hence concluding that “the government would do everything to avoid it” (Interview 20).

Yet again, such a supply-side perspective does not fully explain the absence of the EU Battlegroups. Investigation of the French decision-making calculus, the initiating actor, highlights that while their demand for EU support seemed to be present at first sight, this changed once a rapid response became indispensable. Two observations are key in that regard. First, although French EU and UN delegates explicitly highlighted their efforts to create a European coalition, these efforts have particularly been undertaken in the Autumn of 2013 and did not yet deal with an actual rapid military response. They were rather focused on creating an EU force that would provide a bridging capacity until the African Union-led operation MISCA would take over (cf. *supra*). It has earlier already been claimed that France’s main driving force for such coalition-seeking was an awareness of a potential financial overstretch, given that it was at the same time present in the Mali conflict (Weltz 2014). And to some extent they succeeded. Although France provided the bulk of the troops for EUFOR RCA, other EU members also contributed with military forces and airlift capabilities.

Second, and more important, once warnings for a potential genocide were voiced and a rapid military response became indispensable in December 2013, French political and military decision-makers did not even consider the EU Battlegroups as an option anymore, most clearly illustrated by the French-drafted UNSC Resolution 2127, which explicitly legitimised French forces to use all necessary means. A national intervention was preferred, given their calculation that “they already had troops in the field and they knew the terrain, so they were well-prepared to initiate an intervention without running the risks of casualties” (Interview 17). In addition to this rational calculation that working unilaterally would provide the fastest solution, a French military official also indicated a lack of belief in the EU Battlegroups, saying that “how can we use these battlegroups? As long as you do not have a process to do it rapidly, you cannot use it” (Interview 15). As such, the national decision-making structures were preferred over these of the EU, given that a military response was considered as urgent.

The crisis in the CAR highlights that explanation for the absence of the EU Battlegroups is not only to be found in the preferences of the Battlegroups’ troop contributors. Granted, the UK and Greece both obstructed Battlegroup deployment for reasons relating to material or financial capabilities, or a lack of interest in the conflict area. But at the same time, it has been shown that although France, the initiator of an international response, clearly had interests in support from its European counterparts, it did perceive its own national structures as the most appropriate for being able to respond rapidly, hence not even demanding EU Battlegroup deployment.

Findings

The analysis of the non-deployment of the EU Battlegroups in Libya, Mali and the CAR leads to two important findings. First, traditional supply-side obstacles, related to the considerations by the Battlegroups’ troop providers and preference divergences within the EU Council, were clearly present in each of the cases. These included national financial restraints by the envisioned troop providers, discontent among troop providers with the Battlegroups’ biased funding arrangements, diverging strategic cultures within the EU Council and the subsequent inability to reach consensual agreement. In that sense, each of the three case studies largely corresponds with the existing literature’s findings.

Second, it was shown that such a supply-side focus only provided partial explanation for the absence of the EU Battlegroups from these crises. Scrutinising the considerations by those taking the initiative to intervene, that is, a demand-side perspective, highlighted that on some occasions the EU Battlegroups were deemed not fit for purpose, and that they often were not even considered. In each of the cases, France was a key actor in initiating an international response. It not only drafted UNSC resolutions authorising military intervention or generated support within the UNSC for tackling a crisis, but it was also able to somewhat shape the characteristics of the actual military intervention. This was most clearly illustrated by the French-drafted Resolutions 2100 and 2127, which explicitly authorised French troops to use all necessary measures in, respectively, the follow-up of the Mali crisis and during the CAR crisis. In other words, as the initiating country, it was to some extent able to determine whether the actual forceful military intervention would be implemented unilaterally, as part of a broader coalition or through a regional organisation’s mechanisms such as the EU Battlegroups. It was shown that France has in all three

cases definitely undertaken efforts to initiate a European response, including through the EU Battlegroups. But what the case studies also showed is that when forceful military intervention became really urgent, France did not even consider the EU Battlegroups as an option for doing so, as it preferred to rely upon its own national structures. In that sense, the lack of demand for the EU Battlegroups, and the French decision to intervene unilaterally, was driven by two types of rational cost–benefit-driven considerations: On the one hand, considerations that unilateral action was the path of least resistance which guaranteed rapid action, and a conviction that they could do it alone; but on the other hand, also considerations linked to the supply of the EU Battlegroups, such as the likely unavoidable lengthy approval procedure. Although France tried to work through the EU Battlegroups at multiple occasions, the mechanism therefore did not enjoy much credibility when rapid action became indispensable. This lack of confidence hence seems to be an obstacle to EU Battlegroup deployment, which is inextricably linked to the earlier identified supply-side obstacles.

Conclusion

Originally intended to become the EU's showpiece in crisis management, the EU Battlegroups have rather become a blot on the CSDP's escutcheon, given that they have never been deployed. Remarkably, however, the EU's so-called rapid response mechanism is still commonly mentioned in the EU's foreign policy discourse and has even been publicly endorsed by the UN Secretary-General as a tool for future crisis management operations. Starting from this observation, this article showed that despite having attracted quite some scholarly attention, the absence of EU Battlegroup deployment has largely been explained by referring to obstacles related to the EU troop contributing countries or the diverging strategic interests among EU members in general. In other words, the analyses have largely taken a supply-side perspective.

Throughout this article, it was argued that such a supply-side perspective should ideally be complemented with an analysis of the demand for the EU Battlegroups. A novel approach was therefore proposed, in which not only the interests of the EU Battlegroup troop providers or the preference divergence within the EU Council is scrutinised, but where attention is also paid to whether and why the EU Battlegroups were (not) considered as an option by those actors taking the initiative to intervene in a particular crisis. Taking a rational-institutionalist approach, it was argued that the decision (not) to involve the EU Battlegroups should thus be seen as a function of demand-side considerations, that is, cost–benefit considerations by the initiator, and supply-side consideration, that is, cost–benefit analyses made within the EU context. This logic was used to explain the absence of the EU Battlegroups from three recent crises: Libya (2011), Mali (2013) and the CAR (2013–2014).

Interestingly, for each of the three crises, the initiative to undertake action was taken by France, requiring the analysis to explicitly take into account the French decision-making calculus in addition to the more classical analytical supply-side perspective. It was shown that the EU Battlegroups have in each of the three crises at some point been considered as an option. Strikingly, however, it was also shown that when a rapid military response became urgent (i.e. a forceful military intervention), France tended to prefer its own national structures above those of the EU. In other words, in times of imminent threats to peace and security, the EU Battlegroups have often not even been considered

as an option. Quite ironically, part of the reason lies in the fact that EU Battlegroup deployment cannot be rapidly decided upon, although they were originally envisioned to allow such rapid responses.

This study has two main implications. First, supplementing the analysis into the supply side of the EU Battlegroups with a demand-side perspective raises awareness of the pivotal position of those EU members with a permanent UNSC seat, here particularly France. Their membership within both the EU and the UNSC places them in a position in which they do not only have the responsibility of raising awareness for threats to international security; they can also somewhat shape the decision through which structures to address a particular conflict. Second, an explicit demand-side focus also highlights an increasingly important obstacle to any future deployment, being the Battlegroups' broader credibility.

Following from these conclusions, every other non-deployment seems to increase the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the EU Battlegroups lose credibility as an option for future interventions. Every new failure to deploy them makes the believers look like, as a British military representative said, "they are living in cloud cuckoo land". Those expecting that the EU Battlegroups will ever be used to provide a rapid response to serious threats to peace and security might indeed be waiting for Godot.

Notes

1. Authorised by UNSC Resolution 1484 "to take all necessary measures to fulfil its mandate" (S/RES/1484), Operation Artemis consisted of about 1800 troops, provided by 12 EU members and led by France as a "framework nation".
2. That is, joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peace-keeping, and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilisation (Article 43(1) of the Treaty on European Union).
3. According to the European Land Forces Interoperability Center (Finabel), which consists of 21 EU member states' Chiefs of Staff, the EU Battlegroups should be able to act in the following scenarios: conflict prevention, separation of parties by force, stabilisation and reconstruction, non-combatant evacuation and assistance to humanitarian operations. In its study, aimed to inform EU member states of the activities, missions and tasks that Battlegroups might face, Finabel also stresses taking into account the feasibility of these tasks given the Battlegroups' limited size (Finabel 2014).
4. Engberg (2013, pp. 47–48) identified six EU military operations throughout the history of EU CSDP: Operation Concordia in Macedonia (2003), Operation Artemis in the DRC (2003), Operation EUFOR Althea in Bosnia (2004–ongoing), Operation EUFOR RD Congo (2006), Operation EUFOR Chad/CAR (2008–2009) and Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta (2009–ongoing). Since her publication, two more can be added: EUFOR RCA in the CAR (2014) and EUNAVFOR MED in the Mediterranean (2015–ongoing).
5. The Nordic Battlegroup is led by Sweden, supplemented with contingents from Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania and Norway.
6. While the (rational-)institutionalist literature treats states as key actors in decision-making, it nevertheless acknowledges that international organisations can also operate autonomously from the interests of the states that created them. Barnett and Finnemore (1999, p. 707), for instance, refer to the importance of international organisations' legitimacy stemming from their rational-legal authority and their control over information and expertise, making rational states willing to submit to this authority. Abbott and Snidal (1998, p. 17) highlight that their legitimacy offers them a chance to even act as "initiating organisations".

7. Within the UNSC, the informal practice exists that dossiers are divided among the P5. Nadin (2016) indicates that France is generally the penholder for issues regarding the francophone countries such as the CAR, Mali, the DRC, the Great Lakes, Burundi and Côte d'Ivoire, while the UK usually holds the pen for Yemen, Cyprus, Sierra Leone, Darfur, Libya and Somalia. He stresses that "In practice, the penholder becomes the de facto leader on the topic" (Nadin 2016, p. 107). Their ability to shape decision-making can hence be assumed to be much greater when they are holding the pen.
8. The Libya crisis created a security threat at the EU's immediate borders, maintaining peace and security in Mali was at the core of the EU's 2011 Sahel Strategy and tackling the humanitarian crisis in the CAR was at the EU's interest, as it is the country's main donor.
9. When it comes to the earlier mentioned pivotal position of France and the UK at the demand side, it should be noted that France was the penholder for UNSC resolutions on the conflicts in Mali and the CAR, and positioned itself as the frontrunner in the intervention in Libya. It can hence be assumed that the French decision-making considerations were much more decisive in these cases than those of the UK.
10. Interviews were anonymised at the request of the respondents and in line with organisational regulations (for a full overview, see Annex).
11. Traynor, I., 2011. Libya conflict: EU awaits UN approval for deployment of ground troops. *The Guardian*, 18 April 2011.
12. Traynor, I., 2011.
13. The Economist, 2013. Europe in a foreign field. *The Economist*, 19 January 2013.
14. European Parliament News, 2013. Mali: It's a shame that the EU's tactical battle groups are not being deployed. [online] Available from: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/content/20130125STO05492/html/Mali-It's-a-shame-that-the-EU's-tactical-battle-groups-are-not-being-deployed>.
15. For example, J. Dempsey 2013. The Depressing Sage of Europe's Battle Groups, Carnegie Europe. [online] Available from: <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=53975>.
16. For example, A. Croft, 2013. EU to send military force to Central African Republic, *Reuters*. [online] Available from: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/01/20/us-centralafrican-eu-idUSBREA0J0SC20140120>.
17. The costs for an operational headquarter fall under shared CFSP costs funded through the Athena mechanism (Council Decision, 2011/871/CFSP).

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Appendix. List of interviews

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|----|------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | EU National Counsellor | 22 April 2014 | Personal Interview |
| 2 | NATO Liaison | 08 October 2014 | Personal Interview |
| 3 | NATO National Representative | 13 November 2014 | Personal Interview |
| 4 | NATO National Representative | 11 December 2014 | Personal Interview |
| 5 | NATO National Representative | 06 February 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 6 | NATO Official | 10 February 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 7 | NATO Official | 18 February 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 8 | National Cabinet Member | 06 March 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 9 | EU Official | 13 March 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 10 | EU Official | 22 March 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 11 | NATO National Representative | 15 April 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 12 | National Cabinet Member | 27 May 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 13 | EU Military Representative | 08 July 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 14 | UN National Representative | 16 July 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 15 | National Military Official | 22 July 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 16 | UN National Representative | 11 September 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 17 | UN EU Counsellor | 21 September 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 18 | UN National Counsellor | 21 September 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 19 | UN Military Representative | 22 September 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 20 | UN Representative | 09 October 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 21 | UN National Counsellor | 29 October 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 22 | UN Military Representative | 04 November 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 23 | UN DPKO Official | 23 November 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 24 | UN Military Representative | 03 December 2015 | Personal Interview |
| 25 | UN Liaison | 09 February 2016 | Personal Interview |