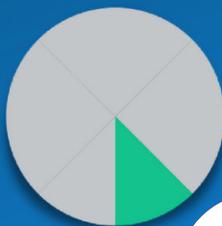
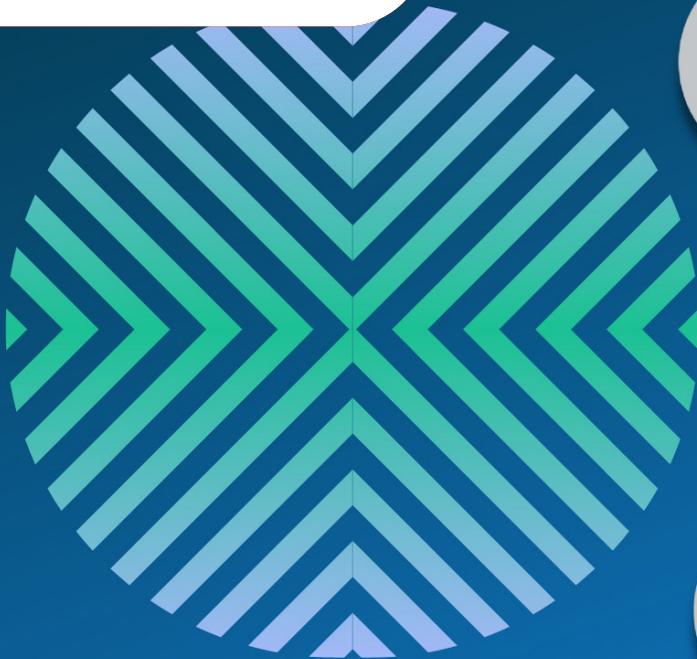


Specialising in European defence

To choose or not to choose?

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Clingendael Report



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July 2022

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July 2022

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Executive summary

The Russian invasion in Ukraine has fundamentally changed the security environment in Europe. Member states as well as the EU and NATO have responded to the new challenges posed by Russia's aggression, resulting in decisions that were deemed unthinkable before, such as the Finnish and Swedish application for NATO membership. Defence budgets have been further increased and the number of Allied countries realising NATO's 2 percent GDP target on defence is growing. With defence budgets on the rise, there is an increasing risk of countries seeking national solutions to European capability shortfalls. Multinational defence cooperation is the tool to prevent this from happening and defence specialisation should become an important element in strengthening European military capabilities.

However, the term specialisation generates more opposition than support in the defence community because it has often been interpreted as a scapegoat for deliberately abandoning defence capabilities, driven by budget cuts and conducted in an uncoordinated way – specialisation 'by default' instead of 'by design'. This form of specialisation makes a country fully dependent on other nations to provide the abandoned capabilities, which raises the issue of dependency and guaranteed access when needed.

However, despite the controversy, various forms of specialisation and dependencies already exist, without being labelled as such. Smaller countries, with limited defence budgets, often rely on larger partners for the provision of certain defence capabilities such as missile defence or long-range strike capabilities. The rising costs of armaments, in particular high-technology weapon systems, also reduces the number of 'haves' versus 'non-haves'. In some cases, pooling and sharing models have been developed for capabilities that countries cannot afford on their own. Examples are multinational pools for strategic transport and air-to-air refuelling: NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC) with C-17 military transport aircraft and the Multi-Role Transport and Tanker (MRTT) pool operating military adjusted versions of the Airbus A330. Nations using drawing rights for aircraft are dependent on such a multinational capability. Dependencies on the capabilities of other states or multinational frameworks also exist for space-based secure communications, strategic reconnaissance and intelligence. Another format is a capability collectively provided by 'have nations' to 'non-have nations'. For example, the Baltic States are fully dependent on NATO partners to provide fighter aircraft for air policing on rotation. An already existing form of agreed mutual dependencies is the Belgian and Dutch specialisation in training and maintenance facilities – concentrated in either of the two countries – for minehunters and frigates respectively. This far-reaching dependency has also led to the common acquisition of follow-on capabilities.

Amongst others, history, geographic location and strategic culture are factors of great importance to specialisation, resulting in the different capability profiles of countries with 'specialised or niche capabilities' or 'specialisms'. France and the United Kingdom emphasise their strength in expeditionary capabilities, as a result of their former worldwide empires and continuous overseas military responsibilities. For that purpose, they operate aircraft carriers amongst other capabilities that are deployable over long distances. Germany has an orientation on strengthening above all its posture for collective defence, in particular heavy land forces. Landlocked nations, such as Hungary, have armies, but no navies. The Czech Republic has a niche capability in defence against chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CRBN) threats. In a somewhat different vein, the integration of the Dutch-German land forces is progressing towards increasing mutual dependency, based on geographic proximity and close military cooperation over decades which has strengthened mutual trust and confidence between the two countries.

Thus, the issue of specialisation has to be placed in a wider context of multinational defence cooperation and it can take various forms. The common feature of all varieties of specialisation is the element of dependency. There is no single agreed-upon definition, but the following covers the essential aspects:

"Specialisation refers to the process in which governments invest in those defence capabilities in which they excel or want to excel, while (partially) abolishing other capabilities, for which they become (partially) reliant on partner countries."

The negative connotation of the term specialisation might be countered by introducing another, more positive term. As specialisation in whatever format is related to making use of the fact that countries excel in particular capabilities, an alternative term could be *excelling capabilities* or *mutually agreed specialisation*. Furthermore, the risks associated with specialisation – most importantly, dependency and the loss of sovereignty – should be balanced by presenting the potential benefits, such as optimising capabilities in a coordinated way, increasing interoperability, enhancing mutual trust and confidence, and saving on costs. In more simple terms, specialisation – if carried out by design – will strengthen rather than weaken European defence capabilities. The comparative advantage of specialisation is its contribution to ending fragmentation and increasing the collective capability output of all its participants.

To bring order in the landscape of confusing terminology – (task) specialisation, specialisms, pooling and sharing, integration and others – and to offer a framework for considering options for specialisation, this report identifies three main forms of specialisation:

- *Structured European capability groups*: a multinational capability based on various contributions by European countries, such as for missile defence, rapidly deployable

initial entry forces, heavy land forces or amphibious forces. Within these structured European capability groups, participating nations can specialise in a coordinated way with their contributions. In most cases, larger member states will provide the core of such a multinational capability, for example the United Kingdom (Joint Expeditionary Force) and Germany (Framework Nation Concept for heavy land forces).

- *Specialisation in support functions*: countries maintain their own capabilities but specialise in support functions in areas such as training and maintenance in a system of reciprocity with other countries. Having exactly the same equipment is a prerequisite for this form of specialisation. The Belgian-Dutch naval specialisation in supporting facilities for minehunters and frigates is an excellent example.
- *Traditional specialisation*: countries completely abandoning a capability while specialising in another, based on a mutual arrangement with at least one other country. This is the most far-reaching model of specialisation, which presumes a high level of confidence to rely on the capabilities of other countries. There are almost no examples of such a far-reaching specialisation.

Of the three different categories, traditional specialisation is the most challenging as the degree of dependency reaches maximum levels. Therefore, it requires time and patience as well as trusted partners – often neighbouring countries – to realise such a form of specialisation. Constituting European capability groups can be considered as relatively easy to realise, in particular as several groups already exist (the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and Framework Nation Concept (FNC)). They can serve as examples and can be used in the near term to explore options for the specialisation of contributions within the group. Specialisation in support functions can give rise to more difficulties, including of a non-military nature. Economic and social (labour) interests may be a factor blocking such specialisation, as it assumes giving up facilities in one country in exchange for the same in another nation.

Using the categorisation of the three forms of specialisation, the following concrete options for specialisation could be envisaged:

1. For *structured European capability groups*: first, to build on already existing models such as the JEF, and the FNC for grouping heavy land forces. The expected regionalisation of the NATO deterrence and defence posture should be taken into account for constituting these structured formats as *regional groups*. For example, the JEF seems to be the most suitable for reinforcing the defence of Northern Europe, which will become even more important when Sweden and Finland join the Alliance. Heavy land forces are particularly relevant in Central and Eastern Europe, which will imply that the enhanced Forward Presence has to be rearranged – to start with standardised NATO Battlegroups, also with regard to the brigade-size formations that will be established if required. Follow-on capabilities have to be better connected to the enhanced Forward Presence units with the FNC led by Germany as the key European contribution. In South-Eastern Europe a comparable

group of connected forward deployed Battlegroups and follow-on capabilities should also be constituted. Southern European NATO Allies should contribute with specialised capabilities.

Additionally, *functional structured capability groups* should be established.

For crisis management, a European intervention group for (if needed, high-end) operations could be formed. The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity as referred to in the EU Strategic Compass could provide the context. It would be preferable to have quick decision-making procedures in place that also allow for the participation of the United Kingdom taking into account the British expeditionary capabilities. A European stabilisation group could bring together contributions of European countries that have specialised capabilities for (lower-end) post-conflict operations. Other options are: regional maritime surveillance groups; a humanitarian assistance and disaster relief support group; an integrated air and missile defence group; an unmanned air reconnaissance group; a space defence group; a special forces group; a logistic support group, a host nation support group.

2. *Specialisation in support functions*: as having the same equipment is an important precondition for specialisation in training and maintenance, new multinational armaments programmes seem most suitable to explore its scope. Too often, nations agree on common requirements and on the distribution of industrial shares, but the exploitation phase – the costs of which are twice as high as the procurement bill – is often forgotten in multinational cooperation. The European Defence Fund and the most recent Joint Communication of the European Commission (May 2022) are valuable contributions to increase cross-border collaborative armaments development and procurement. New key European multinational initiatives such as the Eurodrone, the European Patrol Corvette (EPC), Main Ground Combat Systems (MGCS), the Future Air Combat Systems (FCAS) and the Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability (NGRC) programmes offer a great deal of scope for specialisation in support functions. However, specialisation in support functions has to be included from the start of such programmes. This could also offer smaller countries – in particular those having limited industrial capacities to contribute to the development and production of equipment – the opportunity to receive benefits by hosting training or maintenance facilities.
3. *Traditional specialisation*: the most radical forms such as contributing only to collective defence or crisis management, or abandoning an armed service (army, navy, air force) can be considered as ‘no go’ options for national and international political reasons. Instead, traditional specialisation has to be found at the level of specific service components or weapon systems, such as air mobile forces, aircraft carriers, surface fleet components, submarines, fighter aircraft, unmanned systems, helicopters and space-based assets. Geographic proximity (especially for land forces), trust and confidence are key factors for successful traditional specialisation.

Various combinations could be considered between member states for mutual dependencies through traditional specialisation: long-range missile systems vs. short-range firepower; heavy armoured tracked vehicles/units vs. light/wheeled vehicles/units or air mobile units; heavy lift helicopters vs. transport vehicle fleets; engineering capabilities vs. for reconstruction vs. CBRN capabilities; blue water/ocean-going naval assets vs. brown/regional water naval capabilities; maritime patrol aircraft vs. unmanned maritime reconnaissance assets; ground-based missile defence systems vs. sea-based missile defence systems; large and medium-sized transport aircraft vs. small air transport aircraft.

When moving from specialisation by default to specialisation by design, countries should not operate in isolation from the two key international organisations for safeguarding and ensuring European security: the EU and NATO. First, in designing specialisation formats, the capability needs as defined by both organisations have to be taken as the point of departure and should direct the capability areas for exploring options for specialisation. Second, both organisations should steer, coordinate and monitor specialisation efforts as part of their responsibilities in capability development. In that regard, the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) should incorporate multinational targets in addition to national targets. The EU should also incorporate multinational capability efforts in its Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) in order to steer collaborative programmes and projects even better.

1 Introduction

When the EU Strategic Compass was released at the end of March 2022 few commentators noted the reference to 'specialisation' in the section on investing in capabilities:

"In addition to investing in future capabilities and innovation, we need to make better use of collaborative capability development and pooling endeavours, including by exploring tasks specialisation between Member States. We will build on successful examples such as the European Multi-Role Tanker and Transport Fleet."¹

The term 'specialisation' was inserted into the text of the Compass at the request of the Netherlands, based on its Defence Vision 2035 (DV35) document of October 2020. The DV35 lists ten design principles for future Dutch armed forces.² Design principle 9 is entitled 'Focus on further specialisation within the EU and NATO'.³ The DV35 does not specify in what capabilities the Dutch armed forces will further specialise, although the point of departure is defined as: "Each country has a natural leaning towards certain capabilities and type of deployment." Excelling in submarines, the cyber domain, special operations forces and missile defence are mentioned as Dutch 'specialisms' that could be expanded. Boldly, the text states that "Specialisation ultimately means that there are some things we will no longer do – that will be possible if these tasks are taken over by our partners, and vice versa."

In line with the DV35, the recently released Dutch Defence White Paper 2022 mentions the "strengthening of specialisms" as one of the six main courses of action. The White Paper states that the Ministry of Defence will "make targeted investments in specific capabilities and skills where we add significant value" with the objective of increasing resulting "combat power and the effectiveness of deployment".⁴ The term specialisation

1 European External Action Service, [A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence](#), March 2022.

2 The Netherlands Ministry of Defence, [Defence Vision 2035: Fighting for a safer future](#), 15 October 2020.

3 Design principle 9 states as objectives for 2035: "It is our policy commitment in NATO and the EU to achieve further specialisation and full interoperability. From a versatile and high-end quality base we will build on our own specialisation. We will intensify our collaboration with strategic partners as a step towards specialisation."

4 The Netherlands Ministry of Defence, [A stronger Netherlands, a safer Europe: Investing in a robust NATO and EU \(Summary\)](#), Defence White Paper 2022, June 2022.

is also mentioned, but rather as a long-term objective. It is “a far-reaching form of cooperation with the aim to make more use of the individual strengths of partners and allies.”⁵

The use of two terms – specialism and specialisation – raises the question of definition. In what sense are they different and where do they perhaps overlap? Many countries have specialisms, such as missile defence or military space capabilities. How can this be embedded in more far-reaching specialisation? Furthermore, specialisation itself needs further explanation and categorisation as different forms exist, ranging from mutual dependencies between countries on capabilities to more limited forms of dependency, such as using each other’s training and maintenance facilities.

This report addresses what specialisation can entail and how it can build on specialisms. It explores specialisation’s scope and analyses its potential, parameters and feasibility. Furthermore, by offering a categorisation of specialisation, the authors aim at providing a framework for considering concrete options. In chapter 2, the definitions and different forms of specialisation as well as risk factors and its opportunities will be outlined. In the subsequent chapter, the focus is on exploring practical options, taking into account the various models of specialisation, and the requirements of NATO and the EU. This chapter builds on a Clingendael policy brief on the same subject, published in October 2021.⁶ Chapter 4 lists the conclusions and provides specialisation options for the Dutch armed forces.

The methodology applied to this report is based on a mix of literature desk research and interviews conducted with officials at various Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs in a selection of larger and smaller European countries, experts at EU and NATO institutions, and with researchers at various think tanks across Europe. Interviews took place under the Chatham House Rule and the authors are grateful for the provision of important and often practical input by these experts.

5 Ministerie van Defensie, [*Sterker Nederland, veiliger Europa: Investeren in een krachtige NAVO en EU*](#), Defensienota 2022, juni 2022. Translation into English by the authors.

6 Dick Zandee, [*European defence: Specialisation by capability groups*](#), Clingendael Policy Brief, October 2021.

2 Specialisation in defence: what does it mean?

Defence specialisation is a controversial topic. Whereas in many sectors it is regarded as a virtue, this is not the case in the realm of security and defence. As specialisation in this domain is closely associated with dependency and giving up sovereignty, it is viewed with much scepticism. This is all the more the case given that specialisation has often been associated with abolishing defence capabilities due to budget cuts. An additional issue of concern is that the political and military levels have diverging perspectives when it comes to specialisation: whereas the political level is able to see the potential benefits, the military level primarily sees risks.⁷ Consequently, there is a gap within defence ministries that makes the issue of specialisation even more sensitive. This partly stems from the fact that it is not always evident what specialisation exactly entails. This chapter will therefore try to shed light on various definitions of specialisation, the existing forms of specialisation (including some real-life examples), and the various advantages and disadvantages associated with specialisation. It offers a framework listing the different categories for considering future potential for specialisation.

Definitions

There is no single agreed upon definition of 'specialisation'. In addition, various terms are being used to describe the process of specialisation, including 'differentiation', 'integration' and creating 'interdependency', to name just a few examples.⁸ The use of different terms to describe specialisation is exactly what makes it difficult to grasp what is being meant when the term is coined. The following definitions of defence specialisation can be found in the literature:

"Specialisation means that a government focuses its defence resources on the provision of a limited set of capabilities and therefore consciously abandons others. As a result, countries turn into specialists".⁹

7 Information from interviews.

8 Information from interviews.

9 Claudia Major & Christian Mölling, *Synergies between EU and NATO? Specialisation as the litmus test for "Smart Defence" and "Pooling and Sharing"*, Note 12/13 de Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, 30 May 2013, p. 2.

*Specialisation entails “a member government investing in existing areas of excellence and in turn giving up capability in other areas”.*¹⁰

*“In role specialisation, each state foregoes some capacity and specialises in another, causing complementarity and dependence. It means that a state can invest resources in specific areas and excel in them, relying upon collaborators to do the same”.*¹¹

While these definitions differ in their wording, they all refer to specialisation as a process that requires countries to focus their efforts on certain defence capabilities, while abandoning others. Therefore, in this report:

Specialisation refers to the process in which governments invest in those defence capabilities in which they excel or want to excel, while (partially) abolishing other capabilities, for which they become (partially) reliant on partner countries.

Embarking on a process of specialisation can be explained by the logic of comparative advantage. This logic is primarily used within the economic domain, but also holds true when it comes to specialisation in security and defence. The rationale entails that a country should focus its investments on those defence capabilities in which it excels and rely on partner countries for those capabilities in which it does not excel – while the other country or countries act in reverse and, thus, both sides can profit from optimising the capability and save on costs.

Specialisation: confusing terminology

Practice shows quite a different picture than the theory of specialisation. Countries have been reluctant to use the term specialisation because of its negative connotation, namely that it is covering up the unilateral abolishment of a capability. Other terms have been introduced, such as niche capabilities, specialism, pooling and sharing or smart defence, collective tasks and integration. All of them have aspects of specialisation, but are not fully in line with the definition stated above.

10 Bastian Giegerich, [NATO's Smart Defence Agenda: From Concepts to Implementation](#), in: Riccardo Alcaro & Sonia Lucarelli, *Dynamic Change. Rethinking NATO's Capabilities, Operations and Partnerships*, p. 22.

11 Andreas Osthaugen, [Coastguards in peril: a study of Arctic defence collaboration](#), Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, March 2015, p. 3.

Niche or specialised capabilities, specialisms

As a result of historic, geographical and other factors many countries have what they call 'niche or specialised capabilities', also labelled as 'specialisms'. Landlocked nations such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia invest in land and air forces as they do not have navies. Within that context, the Czechs have specialised in CBRN capabilities.¹² European countries with naval forces have different specialisms: France and the United Kingdom operate aircraft carriers related to their expeditionary past and overseas responsibilities. The Netherlands has a unique specialism of conventional ocean-going submarines. Although almost never labelled as such, national specialisms exist with regard to amphibious forces, air mobile forces, military satellites, offensive cyber capabilities and others.

In most cases, specialisms are the result of national decisions and not of agreed upon specialisation between two or more countries. Nevertheless, specialisms offer potential for specialisation in two ways:

- First, among a group of countries with specialised capabilities, specialisation can take place assuming that the group members are willing to rely on each other. For example, for integrated air and missile defence countries could specialise in land-based systems or in sea-based missile defence. This model is further explained in the next chapter in the section on 'structured European capability groups' with various concrete options being mentioned.
- Second, specialisms could also be used to explore the scope for specialisation in support functions. A key assumption is that countries with the same specialism operate the same equipment, as this will allow for maximum potential in specialising in training and maintenance facilities. A further explanation with concrete options is given in chapter 3.

While specialisms offer immediate potential for specialisation among countries with the same specialised capabilities, the issue of dependency in this format is less critical compared to specialisation models in which one country is fully dependent on the capability offered by another state and vice versa. Therefore, specialisation can best start on a bilateral or mini-lateral basis, in particular between countries that already have a track record of close defence cooperation as trust and confidence are essential prerequisites for accepting mutual dependencies.

12 Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear (defence).

Pooling and sharing, smart defence

The term specialisation is also closely associated with the concepts of 'pooling and sharing' and 'smart defence'. For example, the Protocol on Permanent Structured Cooperation of the Treaty on European Union states that one of its aims (for the member states) is to "bring their defence apparatus in line with each other as far as possible, particularly by harmonising the identification of their military needs, by pooling and, where appropriate, specialising their defence means and capabilities, and by encouraging cooperation in the field of training and logistics."¹³ Three different, though potentially interrelated concepts are mentioned here in one sentence: pooling, specialisation and cooperation. To create more clarity, it is important to distinguish areas of overlap between the different terms while at the same time noting their specific meaning.

The phenomenon 'pooling and sharing' has been developed in the EU. It offers countries that do not possess (or no longer possess) a certain defence capability the opportunity to still make use of that capability through the pool. Concretely, this may entail that a common capacity could be created which can be shared between the partner countries. In such instances, states explicitly choose to rely on the 'joint unit' when needed, providing some degree of relief for those capabilities that are not required on a regular basis. A concrete example of pooling and sharing is the Multi-Role Transport and Tanker (MRTT) fleet with a pool of military-configured Airbus 330 aircraft.

The concept 'smart defence' was developed by NATO. The three central elements of this concept are the pooling and sharing of capabilities (sometimes also referred to as specialisation¹⁴), setting the right priorities and improving coordination efforts. Especially the pooling and sharing component is of relevance here but cannot be seen independently from the other two aspects. NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), consisting of pooled C17 transport aircraft, is an example of smart defence. As with regard to the MRTT pool, countries participating in SAC have drawing rights of flight hours (for which they pay), but the capability is collectively owned.

The question then remains how 'pooling and sharing' and 'smart defence' differ from specialisation. This essentially comes down to the degree of dependency. With the two concepts there is a certain degree of dependency between partner countries, but this is significantly lower than with specialisation.¹⁵ While pooling and sharing also implies the setting up of a joint structure for the defence capability at hand, specialisation goes

13 [*Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union – PROTOCOLS – Protocol \(No 10\) on permanent structured cooperation established by Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union.*](#)

14 Antonín Novotný, [Smart Defence and Pooling & Sharing: How to Survive Austerity.](#)

15 Andreas Osthaagen, [Coastguards in peril: a study of Arctic defence collaboration.](#) p. 3.

beyond that, as some countries become entirely dependent on other countries for the provision of the abandoned defence capabilities.

Collective task

In NATO, the term collective task is used for the provision of fighter aircraft for air policing the air space of the three Baltic States.¹⁶ For relatively small states like Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, it is very expensive to maintain an air force. After becoming NATO member states, the air policing task has been carried out by other Allied countries on a rotational basis, as the small defence budgets of the three countries did not make it possible for them to purchase and maintain fighter aircraft by themselves.¹⁷ This model can be labelled as an 'organised non-specialisation' since one or more countries decide not to have a capability by themselves 'by design' but receive that capability from other nations, albeit without offering a specialisation themselves. However, it could be argued that countries such as the Baltic States can allocate their growing defence budgets almost completely to strengthening their land forces – which is also considered as a priority by NATO. Therefore, non-specialisation can be considered as a form of traditional specialisation.

Non-specialisation also exists in other capability areas. Only two European countries have their own nuclear weapons; all other European nations are fully dependent as 'have nots' on the nuclear umbrella provided by NATO's nuclear weapon member states, primarily the US. The same applies to missile defence or certain categories of unmanned systems. The larger a country's size and defence budget, the more capabilities it can maintain by itself. The smaller a country's size and defence budget, the less capabilities it can maintain by itself. The rising costs of high-tech weapons also drives the reduction of 'haves' and increases the number of 'non-haves'. This explains why some smaller European nations have already embarked upon the road to far-reaching forms of dependency, while often using other terms than specialisation.

Integration

In particular in various bilateral formats, defence cooperation has reached the level of integration by which dependencies have been created. As dependency is a key issue in specialisation, it is important to take a closer look at defence integration. Three examples are the German-Dutch defence cooperation, the naval cooperation between Belgium and the Netherlands, and the cooperation efforts of the Belgian and French land forces.

¹⁶ See: [NATO Air Policing: securing NATO airspace](#).

¹⁷ The Baltic Air Policing model is also applied to Slovenia (by Hungary and Italy), Albania and Montenegro (by Greece and Italy), and North Macedonia (by Greece).

As for the German-Dutch cooperation, it has witnessed far-reaching integration over a long period of time, but in the last decade with integrating units.¹⁸ Except for the 1st German-Netherlands Army HQ, units can still be withdrawn from the command or parent unit in order to be deployed nationally. This has happened regularly with Dutch 'red berets' companies of the 11th Air Assault Brigade, when deployed in the context of the NATO enhanced Forward Presence in Eastern Europe. The integration of a Dutch tank company in a German tank battalion is the most far-reaching form of integration. Although it can still be deployed outside its parent unit, in the case of collective defence operations this would not make any sense. Furthermore, there is a degree of dependency when it comes to armaments, given that Dutch tanks are leased from Germany. Consequently, the Netherlands is dependent on Germany for their maintenance and upgrading. Thus, the German-Dutch tank cooperation is also a clear example of specialisation in support functions, where one state, in this case the Netherlands, has become dependent on another country, Germany, for the provision of support functions.

Belgian-Dutch (Naval) Cooperation (Benesam)¹⁹ is also an example of a specific form of specialisation. The Netherlands provides the education, training and maintenance facilities for both countries with regard to the M-frigates and Belgium vice-versa for the minehunters. This model strengthens military effectiveness and it is cost-saving.²⁰ It can even 'protect' the capability from being scrapped in times of budget austerity. When the Netherlands considered the option of de-activating its M-frigates early this century, the argument that this would have a tremendous impact on the Belgian Navy prevented the related decision from being taken.²¹ Today, both countries fully coordinate the common acquisition of the next generation of frigates and mine countermeasures capability. Thus, specialisation in these support functions has become a driving force for combining defence planning and the procurement of the same equipment for future use.

The third example is the cooperation between the Belgian and French armies. In 2018, France and Belgium entered into a strategic partnership, the *Capacité Motorisée* (CaMo), aimed at extensive (armaments) cooperation between both countries' land forces.²² Concretely, this entails that the Belgian Land Component will operate French

18 There are now five integrated capabilities: the 1st German-Netherlands Army Corps Headquarters (HQ); the Dutch 11th Air Assault Brigade is part of the German *Division Schnelle Kräfte* (Rapid Forces); the integration of a Dutch tank company in the 414th German Tank Battalion; the German *Seebataillon* (Sea Battalion) has been integrated with the Dutch Marine Corps; a German short-range air defence unit is under the command of the Dutch Defence Ground-based Air Defence Command.

19 In Dutch: Benesam = Belgisch-Nederlandse Samenwerking.

20 For further information, see: <https://www.defensie.nl/organisatie/marine/eenheden/admiraal-benelux>.

21 Information from interviews.

22 [Arms Cooperation Between Belgium and France - European Security & Defence \(euro-sd.com\)](https://www.euro-sd.com/arms-cooperation-between-belgium-and-france)

armoured vehicles, type Griffon and Jaguar, from 2025 onwards. As a result, Belgium will, to a certain extent, become dependent on France's (operational) priorities.²³ For both countries this is a win-win situation, as the vehicles are equipped with a unique system of network radios, which facilitates the integration and sharing of information at different levels.²⁴ CaMo will not only allow for operational integration (a Belgian company can operate in a French battalion and vice versa), but it also opens the door for common education and training.²⁵ At this stage, it is not clear if the two countries will specialise in maintenance (copying the Belgian-Dutch Benesam model), but the CaMo partnership certainly offers potential in this respect.

Figure 1 Summary of terms related to specialisation

| | Niche/specialisms | Pooling & Sharing | Collective task | Integration |
|------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Dependency rate | + | + | +++ | ++ |
| Example | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Czech Republic: CBRN • France & United Kingdom: aircraft carriers • Netherlands: conventional ocean-going submarines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nato's Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), consisting of pooled C17 transport aircraft • The Multi-Role Transport and Tanker (MRTT) fleet with a pool of military-configured Airbus 330 aircraft | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of fighter aircraft by NATO allies for air-policing of the Baltic states • United States plus France & the United Kingdom: nuclear weapons | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Germany-Netherlands cooperation between land forces • Belgium-Netherlands naval cooperation • Belgium-France cooperation between land forces |

Explanation: + means 'low dependency rate'; ++ means 'medium dependency rate'; +++ means 'high dependency rate'.

Source: The Clingendael Institute

23 Information from interviews.

24 [CaMo: een uniek strategisch partnerschap | Defensie \(mil.be\)](#)

25 [CaMo: Un partenariat stratégique unique, CaMo : Un partenariat stratégique unique | La Défense \(mil.be\)](#); [Projet CaMo: comme sur des roulettes \(blindées\)](#), 5 novembre 2021, [Beldefnews | Projet CaMo : comme sur des roulettes \(blindées\) \(mil.be\)](#); Nathan Gain, [En attendant Griffon et Jaguar, CaMo se construit sur les terrains d'entraînement et dans les écoles](#), 28 janvier, 2022.

Framework for specialisation

The confusion about terminology and the negative connotation of the term specialisation require clarity and a categorisation of what specialisation may entail. Another term might even be considered, for example *excelling capabilities* or *mutually agreed specialisation*, in order to use a positive label. Importantly, to avoid sub-optimal outcomes and to ensure specialisation is beneficial, close coordination with partner countries is crucial, both bilaterally and within multilateral organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). This will generate ‘specialisation by design’ – following deliberate, coordinated and well thought out decisions by at least two governments, driven by how best to maintain and strengthen capabilities and ensuring complementarity – instead of ‘specialisation by default’, following uncoordinated decisions by one government. Concrete examples of specialisation by default are the decisions by Denmark to give up its submarines (2004) and by the Netherlands to abolish its P3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft (2003) and its last two tank battalions (2011), in all cases without agreements with other countries to compensate for these losses of capabilities.

The absence of a single definition also means that specialisation may be interpreted in various ways and can thus come in different forms. Based on the definition provided above and the existing models, this report offers a framework for specialisation. It incorporates three forms of specialisation (see Figure 2): structured European capability groups, specialisation in support functions, and traditional specialisation.

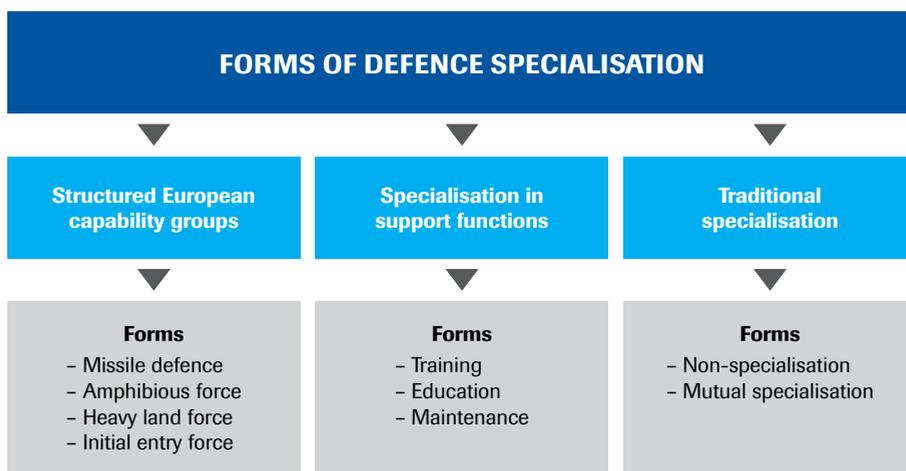
- *Structured European capability groups* can be described as “a system of multinational capability groups [that] can optimise defence capabilities by steering multinational defence cooperation and channelling investment in a more efficient way”²⁶. In this case, countries can specialise in capabilities that are part of an overall capability provided by a group of countries. Structured European capability groups can, for example, be formed along the lines of missile defence, amphibious forces, heavy land forces and rapidly deployable initial entry forces – within which participating countries contribute with capabilities of their excellence (e.g. within the latter with air mobile capabilities, air transport or light infantry).
- *Specialisation in support functions* implies that countries retain sovereignty with respect to the deployment of defence capabilities and do not completely relinquish them but specialise in the corresponding support functions. These support functions encompass training, education and maintenance.
- *Traditional specialisation* entails that countries will specialise in some capabilities, while explicitly abandoning others. This is the most far-reaching form of specialisation, as it will come with an extensive level of dependency for the provision of those capabilities that a country decides to abandon. It can take the form of

26 Dick Zandee, [European Defence: Specialisation by capability groups](#), p. 3.

non-specialisation – without a *quid pro quo* specialisation between countries – or a mutual specialisation (and mutual abandonment) of capabilities.

The next chapter offers concrete options for the three forms of specialisation.

Figure 2 Forms of defence specialisation



Source: The Clingendael Institute

Risks and benefits of specialisation

When a country embarks on a process of specialisation, this automatically implies that it becomes (partially) dependent on other countries for those defence capabilities it decides to relinquish. In general, states are reluctant to give up sovereignty, especially when it comes to the protection of a country's territory and the people that reside therein, the primary task of a state's armed forces. Therefore, states prefer to keep that responsibility themselves, and are of the opinion that they should be able to deliver any defence capability to that end.²⁷ This is especially true in times of crisis, when states are less willing to rely on others for the delivery of the necessary capabilities. Giving up sovereignty and subsequently creating dependency are therefore the primary reasons why specialisation in defence is met with critique.

While the sovereignty and dependency arguments stand out, other factors also play a role in why countries are cautious when it comes to specialisation in defence. One of them is economic in nature: when countries embark on a process of specialisation, this could lead to losing defence industrial capacities when abolishing a certain

²⁷ Information from interviews.

capability. The result might be a loss of jobs and skills at the national level²⁸. While there is an argument in favour – consolidation of defence industries instead of continuing with industrial fragmentation – especially larger countries with an advanced defence industrial base, such as France and Germany, might find this problematic.²⁹ Another factor at play is political in nature: specialisation means that one country will have to focus on a certain defence capability to which access might be requested by partner countries. There is, however, a risk that the request will conflict with the national interests of the country that possesses the requested defence capability, making that country more reluctant to guarantee access in specific cases.³⁰ This creates a trust issue: countries do not have the guarantee that partner countries are in any case prepared to provide access to their capabilities. Sovereignty in terms of having the capabilities at one's own disposal will have to be matched with the risks of relying on partners when a country cannot maintain all capabilities by itself. It should be noted that such risks might vary with regard to capability areas. For example: guaranteeing access to transport aircraft will be easier to obtain than in the case of frontline units.

It is, however, easy to overlook the possible benefits that might stem from specialisation. Severe cuts in defence spending over the past few decades, in combination with an increasingly unsafe world, lead to the conclusion that it would be most welcome for countries to find ways to make most effective and efficient use of their defence capabilities. Specialisation can therefore be viewed as a way to make better use of resources that are already scarce. In this regard, “it is not about saving money, but about creating value in defence, e.g. cost savings, capability and interoperability increases, mutual trust and understanding”.³¹ The uncertainty as to which threats and challenges countries might face underlines the need for close coordination among participating countries because it is crucial that they together cover the entire spectrum of defence capabilities. Only then will the countries involved be able to increase their collective military capabilities. This is easier said than done, however, in particular as the armed services of European countries seek further integration with ‘natural partners’ in different nations. For example, the Dutch army has worked closely with the German army for many decades, while the navy has the Royal Navy (UK) as its natural partner. In Belgium, deeper defence cooperation with the Netherlands (navies) has been ‘complemented’ by the close army cooperation with France in view of the two language communities in the country.³²

28 Giegerich, [NATO's Smart Defence Agenda: From Concepts to Implementation](#), p. 24-25.

29 Information from interviews.

30 Heiko Borchert & René Eggenberger, [European Security Defence Policy, Role Specialization and Pooling of Resources: the EU's Need for Action and What It Means for Switzerland](#), in: *Contemporary Security Policy*, 24(3) (December 2003), p. 6.

31 Giegerich, [NATO's Smart Defence Agenda: From Concepts to Implementation](#), p. 22.

32 Information from interviews.

If specialisation by design can be generated, it can yield serious benefits. On the military level, it will promote interoperability, which is the ability of the armed forces of multiple countries and the corresponding military equipment to operate in conjunction with each other. In turn, interoperability will ease further military cooperation and foster integration between participating countries. Moreover, through a process of specialisation, medium-sized and small countries will gain access to sophisticated and expensive capabilities, which, given their size, they would be unable to develop or acquire on their own.³³ In that sense, the medium-sized and smaller countries will become dependent on the larger countries. Dependency, however, does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. When smaller countries become dependent on larger countries, it provides an incentive for the latter group to maintain certain defence capabilities, as this will guarantee that the smaller countries will maintain access to those defence capabilities.³⁴ At the same time, it contributes to solidarity, confidence and involvement.

In addition, specialisation might also reap economic benefits in the longer term. If fragmentation can be reduced and industrial consolidation is created, then economies of scale can emerge: cost advantages that occur when companies increase the scale of production and become more efficient, decreasing the production cost per unit.³⁵ Concretely, this means that if larger defence industrial companies were to cooperate, they together would reduce the long-term costs of the production process, eventually leading to cost savings and an increased level of efficiency. Furthermore, specialisation (in support functions) will reduce costs for defence departments as fewer facilities and infrastructure will have to be kept open.

Figure 3 Summary of the risks and benefits of specialisation

| Risks | Benefits |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Loss of sovereignty | Strengthening collective capabilities |
| Dependency | Access to capabilities |
| Losing industrial capacities | Increasing interoperability |
| Reluctance to guarantee access | Cost savings |

Source: The Clingendael Institute

33 António Eugénio, *Smart Defense: Overcoming Hurdles and Passing Batons*, (George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, December 2013).

34 Information from interviews.

35 [How your business can benefit from economies of scale](#), GoCardless, last updated: May 2020.

3 Specialisation in defence: concrete options

Russia's war in Ukraine has a fundamental impact on Europe's security and defence needs. The EU has taken a series of measures – from sanctions to funding the delivery of arms by member states as well as by adapting its Strategic Compass for security and defence – and NATO at its Madrid Summit in June 2022 has decided to step up its efforts to strengthen the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture, next to various other measures. Finland and Sweden have applied for NATO membership, a step deemed unthinkable in the past. Defence budgets are on the rise across Europe and an increasing number of Allies is realising the NATO 2 percent GDP on defence target by 2024. With more money available for defence, it is important to explore further potential for deepening multinational defence cooperation in order to transfer from fragmentation to growing integration in the defence realm. In that context concrete options for specialisation should be explored. The previous chapter provided an inventory of the different forms of specialisation under three headings. This chapter explores options for new concrete specialisation formats, addressing the scope for expanding already existing formats as well as proposing new practical applications.³⁶

Structured European capability groups

For many decades European countries have structured their armed forces in different ways, based on a variety of considerations related to their history, geographical location, strategic culture, threat perception and other factors of influence. To a large extent, multinational forces are also the result of this scattered capability landscape, as nations preferably cooperate most closely with like-minded partners and provide added value with their capabilities to the multinational format. Very often, multinational formations have been constructed according to the lead-nation or framework nation concept. Two evident examples of this are the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the NATO Framework Nation Concept (FNC). The JEF, led by the United Kingdom, is an operational grouping of ten North-Western and Northern European countries. As a 'first responder' or 'initial-entry' force, it has a particular focus on Northern Europe, suitable for acting

36 It is assumed that European capability needs and shortfalls – as defined in the EU and NATO context – are guiding specialisation, but this report does not list these requirements and capability priorities as such.

in all kinds of scenarios, including of a hybrid nature.³⁷ The NATO FNC, initiated and led by Germany, can be considered as a key building block for a European pillar in NATO, in particular for land forces.³⁸ Other countries can hook up military units (brigades or specialised capabilities) to heavy German divisions, providing the European nucleus for the NATO follow-on forces in case of a large-scale attack.³⁹

So far, these groupings of countries with a specific capability profile have been the result of bottom-up initiatives by lead nations. The result is a patchwork of multinational formats, which lacks structure and cohesion. The question arises what can be done to realise a more structured approach, in which European countries organise their capabilities in a coordinated manner. At least the following factors should be taken into account:

- *Geography*: although membership of the EU and NATO stretches over all parts and corners of Europe, the geographic location of the member states still matters. It is an important factor of influence for their security interests and, thus, for their defence priorities. Furthermore, geography also affects options for multinational groupings in the practical sense – in particular for land and naval forces. The proximity of Western, Central and Eastern European countries make the establishment of larger land formations with their participation relatively easy compared to combining land units for European countries at great distances from each other. In the Cold War era NATO's forces were organised in a regional pattern, which seems to have been forgotten. Now, it is time to reconsider the formation of collective defence on a structured regional basis.
- *Collective defence vs. crisis management*: the distinction between the types of forces required for collective defence under NATO's Article 5 and for the Alliance's

37 Sean Monagan, [The Joint Expeditionary Force: Global Britain in Northern Europe?](#), Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 25, 2022.

38 [Framework Nations Concept: Militärkooperation in Europa weiter stärken](#), Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, 28 August 2020.

39 For a further explanation, see: Rainer L. Glatz & Martin Zapfe, [Ambitious Framework Nation: Germany and NATO – Bundeswehr Capability Planning and the “Framework Nations Concept”](#), SWP Comments 35, September 2017.

and the EU's crisis management tasks has almost disappeared⁴⁰, but there remains an important difference between the two. Collective defence is a 'must do', while crisis management is a 'can do'.⁴¹ The latter always has an element of uncertainty about who is willing to participate. Furthermore, crisis management forces have to be tailor-made to the crisis at hand – with diverging force packages needed for air campaigns, counterterrorism, stabilisation operations or training and assistance missions. Therefore, structured capability groups should first be considered for collective defence purposes, although there is also some scope for exploring the potential for crisis management.

- *Existing 'specialisms'*: many European countries already have 'specialised' or 'niche capabilities', which should explicitly be considered when advancing specialisation. Missile defence is an example: only the larger and medium-sized countries have land- or sea-based missile defence capabilities. Many other assets of 'limited ownership' can be mentioned, such as air-to-air refuelling aircraft, submarines, cruise missiles and military satellites. The increasing costs of high-tech military capabilities should encourage the grouping of 'the few' which can still afford this nationally in multinational cooperation formats to sustain and modernise these assets over time.

Taking these factors into account, firstly, NATO's collective defence posture should be regarded as the basis for structuring European capability groups. After the end of the Cold War, subregional force structures have been replaced by rapid deployment capabilities – the NATO Response Force – and, more recently, by the battlegroup-sized enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) units in Eastern European member states. Although constructed around a lead nation, the principle has been that the maximum number of NATO Allies contribute in order to demonstrate political and military solidarity. However, from the angle of maximising the military effectiveness of the Alliance's forward deployed forces this is not the optimum solution. Often, smaller contributions (at company level) of a different nature (mechanised, light infantry, etc.) rotate as temporary elements of the eFP Battlegroups. It would be much better if these Battlegroups were to have a fixed composition, not deployed as permanent units but with the same

40 In the 1990s the armed forces of most European countries were restructured from 'heavy' to 'light and more mobile' in order to be better suited for crisis management operations far away from the home base. In the more recent past, practice has shown (in Afghanistan, the Sahel area, etc.) that crisis management operations at the high end of the spectrum are no longer the exception but rather the rule. The growing involvement of Russia and other countries in crises, such as in Africa, also blurs the traditional distinction between collective defence and crisis management. Finally, the proliferation of technology also implies that opponents – even non-state actors – will increasingly have access to and will use high-tech weapons as has already been shown by the rebels in Yemen attacking targets in Saudi Arabia with armed unmanned systems.

41 Also expressed as 'wars of necessity' vs. 'wars by choice'.

components rotating continuously. This will also be required in view of the establishment of brigade-size units in the Eastern European countries, when these are required – as decided at the NATO Summit in Madrid.⁴²

Most likely, NATO's force posture will be restructured on a regional basis to allow for the optimisation of close cooperation, interoperability and standardisation, and even the integration of armed forces contributions by geographically close neighbours. The following force structures in 'specialised' European capability groups could be considered:

- For *Northern Europe*: taking into account the vast distances and the complicated topography (sea areas, forested and mountainous terrain, etc.) rapidly deployable capabilities should form the 'first responder' forces. The JEF is already focused on Northern Europe in terms of participation and exercises. Furthermore, it has also been trained to respond to hybrid challenges. This could be further developed into a structured capability group for Northern Europe and the Arctic region. For example, Norway could contribute with surface fleet and air-defence capabilities and the UK and the Netherlands could strengthen their marine corps capabilities, providing the first responder capabilities for sea/amphibious capabilities in support of territorial defence on land.^{43/44} The JEF could also be made available as an initial defence force for Finland and Sweden, either as non-NATO countries or as Allies, after they have joined the Alliance. Sea-based missile defence and submarine capabilities should also become part of such a capability group for Northern Europe.
- For *Eastern Europe*: the NATO eFP Battlegroups in the Baltic States and Poland – as well as the newly formed Battlegroups in Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria – should have a fixed composition instead of the existing system of rotating units of different composition, providing credible war-fighting capabilities to brigade-size units. For the Battlegroups, the rotation principle can be maintained, but then the unit contributions (the building blocks) should always have the same composition in order to sustain the presence of standard force packages.
- For *Central Europe*: the already existing FNC led by Germany has to be reinforced by strengthening the heavy land forces contributions of the contributing Allies in the

42 "Allies have committed to deploy additional robust in-place combat-ready forces on the eastern flank, to be scaled up to brigade-size units when and where required, underpinned by credible rapidly available reinforcements, prepositioned equipment, and enhanced command and control", *Madrid Summit Declaration – Issued by NATO Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Madrid 29 June 2022*, paragraph 9.

43 Idea mentioned in interviews.

44 The Royal Marines are in the process of restructuring into two Littoral Response Groups, each with a strength of around 1,800 personnel. See: Matthew Alderton, *A force in flux, Briefing UK Royal Marines*, Jane's Online, first published 6 July 2021.

region, based on the plug in/plug out system – meaning that European countries can hook up their own units (brigades or specialised units) to German divisions. The FNC should form the European core of NATO's deterrence and defence posture for Central and Eastern Europe. Standardisation with NATO Battlegroups (plus) in Eastern Europe⁴⁵ (comparable battalions, same equipment) should be the norm.

- For *South-Eastern Europe*: for the Alliance's Battlegroups in Romania and Bulgaria the same principle of unit rotation should be applied by the lead nations (such as France in the case of Romania). Preferably, other troop contributors should come from the same region – including Greece and Turkey. The creation of a Multinational Division South-East could be the next step. The lack of a secure Black Sea environment also asks for a structured maritime group. In order to reinforce NATO's deterrence and defence posture in Turkey, specific capabilities – such as for air and missile defence – could be located on a permanent basis in the country, once the relationship between Turkey and its Allies starts to improve.⁴⁶

In addition to these regionally constructed European capability groups, others could be constituted based on functional needs and on the specific capabilities of its contributing member states⁴⁷:

- A *European intervention group*, in which the cooperation in the European Intervention Initiative (EI2) could be brought together with the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC) as agreed upon in the EU Strategic Compass.⁴⁸ Within EI2, specialisation on the Baltic area, the Caribbean and the Sahel area has already been agreed upon in terms of converging doctrine, procedures and increasing preparedness. In the case of the EU RDC optimal arrangements should be in place to allow for participation by the UK, taking into account the expeditionary character of the British armed forces. The European intervention group could provide the framework for further specialised capabilities, for example for operations in urban areas, in a desert environment or at sea.

45 In the Baltic States, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary.

46 Additionally, regional capability postures could be built on already existing or newly created multinational capability formats for 'Southern Europe' (the Mediterranean) and 'South-Western Europe'.

47 This section of proposals builds on: Dick Zandee, [European defence: Specialisation by capability groups](#), p. 4-5.

48 EI2 was launched in 2017 by France. Participating countries aim to converge concepts and doctrines for various operational scenarios and EI2 also acts as a network of experts allowing for quick interaction in times of crisis. For a further explanation, see: Dick Zandee, Kimberley Kruijver, [The European Intervention Initiative – Developing a shared strategic culture for Europe](#), Clingendael Report, September 2019. The EU Strategic Compass was approved by the Council of the EU on 21 March 2022, see: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-eu-0_en

- A *European stabilisation group*, focusing on post-conflict stabilisation operations, with its own CIMIC (Civil-Military Cooperation) capabilities and whose contributors are well prepared to work closely with a variety of civil actors, non-governmental organisations and local authorities. Specialisation within this group could focus on e.g. medical, engineering and reconstruction support, transport and other capabilities. The FNC group led by Italy could be the basis for expanding the group to those European countries that prefer to contribute to these sorts of operations, such as Austria and Ireland. The Belgian-French *Capacité Motorisée* could be another core capability for this stabilisation group, but it should also be part of the European intervention group. CaMo with its wheeled vehicle fleet also seems to be a very suitable format for the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations in areas such as the Sahel.
- *Maritime surveillance (Marsur) groups*, bringing together the various assets (maritime patrol aircraft-MPA, ships, unmanned systems, satellite information, etc.) in regional groups for the Baltic Sea, the North Sea/Norwegian Sea, the Mediterranean area and the Black Sea. These groups should include connectivity to civilian actors involved in maritime surveillance, the protection and monitoring of territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zones and in safety/ecological matters. Within those groups member states could opt for the (coordinated) specialisation of assets (MPA, sea-based, drones, etc.). Most of these regional Marsur groups already exist in one form or another.
- A *humanitarian assistance and disaster relief support group*, providing a collective European capability to provide 'first responder' support to civilian authorities in case of disasters such as high-impact earthquakes, large-scale flooding or forest fires, requiring e.g. heavy-lift helicopters, engineer capabilities, medical support, etc. Contributing member states could specialise their contributions accordingly. This particular European capability group should also be made available to the EU's emergency capacity for disaster relief.⁴⁹
- An *integrated air and missile defence group*, within which contributors could specialise in land- or sea-based capabilities. Most likely, the importance of air and missile defence is growing due to the rapid development of unmanned systems and cruise missiles. In particular, drone defence requires prioritised attention and could become a new category of specialisation within this group (or as a separate group). Regionalisation within this group needs to be considered as well. The NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence System (NATIMADS)⁵⁰ should be the overall context for such specialisation within the group of contributors, but a European core should be constructed in order to be able to act alone when needed.

49 The European Humanitarian Response Capacity, see: https://ec.europa.eu/echo/what/humanitarian-aid/european-humanitarian-response-capacity-ehrc_en.

50 [NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defence](#).

- An *unmanned air reconnaissance group*, to constitute a much required capability alongside the Alliance's unmanned air reconnaissance capability.⁵¹ The development and production of the Eurodrone⁵² (operational as of 2027), to be procured by at least four European countries (Germany, France, Italy and Spain), offers scope for a European group. The pooling & sharing model of the air-to-air refuelling MRTT⁵³ group could serve as a model to be applied for this group. Participation and co-financing by potential civilian national and international operators, such as the EU's border protection agency Frontex, should be considered.
- A *space defence group*, bringing together the military space capabilities of European countries. France and Italy have already specialised their military capabilities in space with the former concentrating on optical observation satellites and the latter on spectral technology. Both countries also have data-sharing arrangements.⁵⁴ This bilateral specialisation could be enlarged to other European nations with military space-based capabilities.
- A *Special Forces (SF) group*, within which contributing countries can specialise their contributions – such as para commandos, land-based and maritime special forces or delivery means, for example transport aircraft, helicopters, submarines and vehicles. The Composite Special Forces Command of Denmark and the Benelux countries could be used as the starting point for such specialisation. Later on, other European countries could join and coordinate their specialised SF capability with the other participating members.
- A *logistic support group* within which countries could specialise in the acquisition and storage of munitions, spare parts and other supply goods when operating the same equipment, based on a regional approach. Within this group nations procuring expensive precision-guided munitions could also constitute a specialised category. Stocks of supplies should be procured based on national needs, but the arrangement should include that stocks are to be made available to group members that have urgent operational needs.⁵⁵
- *Host nation support groups*, consisting of countries whose harbours and territory play a central role in receiving, staging and transferring American reinforcement military equipment from the US to continental Europe. Harbour protection and support tasks could be grouped between Belgium (for the Port of Antwerp) and the Netherlands (the Ports of Vlissingen and Rotterdam) taking into account their close geographical

51 The Alliance Ground Surveillance (AGS) capability, consisting of five RQ-4D Global Hawk drones, based at Sigonella Air Base in Italy. See: <https://ac.nato.int/missions/indications-and-warnings/phoenix>.

52 Also known as the European Medium Altitude Long Endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (MALE-UAV), <https://www.airbus.com/en/defence/eurodrone>.

53 Multi-Role Tanker and Transport

54 Information based on interviews.

55 This proposal has also been made by: Sven Biscop, [A European Defence Summit in May 2022: From Compass to Capabilities](#), Egmont Policy Brief 275, April 2022, p. 2.

proximity. Germany (Port of Hamburg) and Denmark (Port of Esbjerg) provide two other entry points for American reinforcements to Europe. As a starting point, two bilateral formats (Belgian-Dutch, Danish-German) could explore options for mutually agreed specialisation.

Naturally, structured European capability groups should also be used as the framework for the collaborative development and acquisition of military equipment. The proposals of the European Commission presented in May 2022 to increase European collaborative defence procurement – with financial incentives to be made available if at least three member states participate in joint acquisition – support this process.⁵⁶ This is of great importance for increasing specialisation at the support level, which is to be explained in the next section.

Regional and functional structured capability groups can be connected, dependent on their capability profile. For example, maritime surveillance is already organised in a regional manner. The model offered would logically build on this regional approach. Logistic support groups would have to be connected to regional groups per definition. Others, such as groups for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief support or for special operations, will not have to be regionally oriented per se. The European intervention and stabilisation groups are specifically tailor-made for crisis management operations – so they would ideally fit in the implementation of the EU Strategic Compass, in particular for establishing the Rapid Deployment Capacity.

Specialisation in support functions

Education and training are areas of established cooperation between the armed forces of many countries. Logically, operating together requires first and foremost to learn and exercise together. Military personnel are often exchanged at schools, academies, colleges and other education facilities. In some cases – such as Belgium and the Netherlands – certain modules are provided by one of the two countries for the military of both nationalities – a model of specialisation that could be applied elsewhere. The Baltic States have taken this a step further in establishing a common college, thus creating one instead of three defence colleges.⁵⁷ At this political-military level of education, there is certainly scope for further integration by other countries.

56 *Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Defence Investment Gap Analysis and Way Forward*, JOIN(2022) 24 final, Brussels, 18 May 2022.

57 The Baltic Defence College in Tartu (Estonia). See: <https://www.baltdefcol.org/>

Binational or multinational specialisation in education and training also exists at the level of weapon systems, although it is more the exception than the rule. Two important conditions have to be fulfilled to allow for specialisation at the lowest levels of education, training (and maintenance): first and foremost, countries have to operate the same equipment. Another important precondition is that the operators should speak the same language (same mother tongue or a common language, in most cases English). Both criteria are fulfilled for the Belgian-Dutch specialisation in the support functions of naval assets in the context of Benesam, as mentioned in chapter 2. This successful model could be followed by other countries and it should go hand in hand with further consolidation in the relevant defence industrial sectors, which would help to transfer from fragmentation to standardisation. In the case of the Belgian-Dutch minehunters, France would be the first candidate country to join the two northern neighbours, in particular as the French industrial Naval Group is currently constructing the twelve new vessels for both countries.⁵⁸ For the long term, the European Patrol Corvette project offers scope for a standardised class of patrol vessels, at least for the participating countries (France, Greece, Italy, Spain).⁵⁹ Specialisation in support functions should be an integral part of the project in order to prevent duplication between the participating countries.

In the land sector examples of specialisation in support functions are rare, which is the consequence of the wide variety of army vehicles, in particular among the larger European countries. Existing life cycle cooperation formats, such as for the Boxer armoured vehicle, often focus on common logistic support such as the acquisition of spare parts.⁶⁰ Rarely does specialisation in maintenance exist as different vehicle configurations and economic/industrial interests are important factors for each nation to have its own facilities. For that reason, the focus on exploring specialisation options in training and maintenance should be directed towards new collaborative armaments programmes, such as the Main Ground Combat Systems (MGCS) project by France and Germany. Both countries and their armoured vehicle industries aim to develop a networked class of common land vehicles (tanks, manned and unmanned vehicles, connectivity with drones).⁶¹ Here, specialisation can already be planned in the design and development phases, connected to German and French defence industries focusing

58 [*Naval Group lays the keel for the first mine countermeasures vessel of the Belgian-Dutch MCM program*](#), Belgian Naval & Robotics, 30 November 2021.

59 The European Patrol Corvette (EPC) is an EU PESCO project (Permanent Structured Cooperation) and is funded by the European Defence Fund (EDF). See: Nathan Gain, [*European Patrol Corvette Could Start In Four Years*](#), Naval News, 17 March 2022.

60 [*UK joins Boxer Multi-Role Armoured Vehicle Support Partnership*](#), May 2020 News Defense Global Security army industry, 5 May 2020.

61 For further details: Danny Pronk, Dick Zandee, Adája Stoetman, [*Identity, Industry and Interoperability: The drivers of European armaments collaboration*](#), Clingendael Report, January 2022.

on particular parts of the programme. Logically, education, training and vehicle maintenance should then be arranged along comparable schemes with one of both countries having the lead effort. Several European countries, among them Italy and the Netherlands, have expressed their interest in joining the MGCS project. Once this is the case, the complexity of industrial participation by the newcomers will increase, but this should be approached from the principle of added value and technological-industrial expertise instead of *juste retour*.⁶² Perhaps countries whose defence-industrial base has limited potential to contribute to the programme can receive compensation by a specialisation function in the support area.

Traditionally, the air sector is the area of the most far-reaching military cooperation between European countries, as the acquisition of the same platforms already has a long track record. The F-16 fighter aircraft are (or have been) utilised by ten national air forces in Europe and the F-35 are to be utilised by eleven or more European countries. Seven European countries (including Turkey) have procured A400M transport aircraft. The unmanned US-made Reaper/Predator drone is in the inventory of six European countries. Germany has now taken the decision to replace its CH-53 helicopters with CH-47 Chinooks. As a result, five European countries (will) operate the same heavy-lift helicopter. For most of these platforms there are combined training and exercise programmes and in many operations countries work closely together. However, with regard to the expensive maintenance of air platforms, most countries have chosen for national solutions, duplicating with other user nations. One of the exceptions is the maintenance of F-35 engines, which will take place for all these aircraft of European nations (plus Israel) in the Netherlands or Norway.⁶³ For the A400M, savings of up to 14% could be made by applying common maintenance⁶⁴, yet most purchasing countries seem to have their own maintenance facilities.⁶⁵ The Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability (NGRC) – a multinational framework for designing, developing and procuring the next generation of medium-lift multi-role helicopters – offers scope to arrange for such specialised support at an early phase.⁶⁶ Recently, the Netherlands has joined the

62 In the past the '*juste retour*' principle was often applied in multinational armaments programmes: the procurement share of a country was mirrored in its industrial share in the programme, even if its industrial base was not fully qualified to contribute. Quite often, this resulted in delays and the rising costs of the programmes.

63 [Woensdrecht opent hypermoderne faciliteiten voor motorenonderhoud F-35](#), Nieuwsbericht Defensie, 1 October 2021.

64 Mr. Baudouin Heuninckx, [Availability Improvements in New Transport Aircraft – The Case of the A400M](#), (no date).

65 In the case of the UK at a cost of almost half a billion euros. See: [UK MOD agrees £ 410 m Atlas A400M aircraft maintenance contract](#), Airforce Technology, 5 January 2017.

66 Danny Pronk e.a., [Identity, Industry and Interoperability: The drivers of European armaments collaboration](#).

project.⁶⁷ Belgium is already exploring how it can cooperate with the UK in training, maintenance, logistic support and upgrades for the MQ-9B Reaper drone.⁶⁸ Several other European countries have procured the same MALE-UAS⁶⁹ drone, which offers scope for expanding multinational specialisation in support functions. Naturally, the same will apply to the future Eurodrone.

In other words, having the same equipment does not automatically result in multinational maintenance models, in which participating countries specialise their contributions. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that this element is taken on board in new acquisition programmes while still being in the design phase. The Future Air Combat Systems (FCAS) programme is a German-French-Spanish programme for a networked system of 'flying' systems, both manned and unmanned.⁷⁰ Most likely, it will be opened up for other European countries. Just as the MGCS programme, FCAS with its wide scope offers possibilities for specialisation, not only in the development of the various platforms but also in support functions.⁷¹

Traditional specialisation

There are almost no examples of traditional specialisation. Unfortunately, many nations have given up capabilities unilaterally, without any coordination with other countries – specialisation 'by default' (see the previous chapter). On the other hand, there are examples of 'non-specialisation' by design, such as Baltic Air Policing (BAP), as referred to in chapter 2.

Taking into account that European countries are already dependent on each other for certain capabilities, are there other options for 'traditional specialisation'? The most radical model would be a division of labour with regard to defence tasks, such as countries concentrating on either collective defence or crisis management. This can be considered as an unrealistic model as such a task specialisation would raise fundamental political problems: solidarity in collective defence efforts as well as for crisis management would be severely undermined and it might also be in violation of the basic law stating that a country has to execute both tasks (as is the case for the Netherlands). Another far-reaching option is that nations completely abandon one of their services (e.g. the army), while specialising in another (say the navy). This model

67 Brooks Tigner, [Allies sign off on NATO Next-Generation Rotorcraft concept phase](#), Jane's Defence Weekly, 16 June 2022.

68 Ed Adamczyk, [Britain, Belgium to collaborate on MQ-9B drone acquisition](#), Defense News, 19 August 2020.

69 Multi-Altitude Long-Endurance Unmanned Aerial System.

70 Danny Pronk e.a., [Identity, Industry and Interoperability: The drivers of European armaments collaboration](#).

71 Danny Pronk e.a., [Identity, Industry and Interoperability: The drivers of European armaments collaboration](#).

is also unrealistic as ‘trading services’ is a ‘no go’ both in national and multinational political terms. Thus, traditional specialisation has to be found at the levels of specific service components or weapon systems such as: artillery, engineers, air mobile forces (for the land sector); carriers, frigates, patrol vessels, submarines (for the naval sector); and fighter aircraft, unmanned systems, helicopters (for the air sector)⁷² and space assets.

Another important limitation for traditional specialisation – in particular for land forces – is geographic proximity. Relying on a partner’s capabilities will be considered more acceptable between neighbouring countries that have often been cooperating closely for decades. Trust, confidence and solidarity are key prerequisites for deeper defence cooperation⁷³, and this also applies to mutual dependencies resulting from specialisation. Thus, traditional specialisation can best be agreed upon on a bilateral or mini-lateral basis. However, countries should not act in isolation but inform and consult with all EU and NATO member states on specialisation initiatives. Both organisations should keep track of these initiatives, coordinate them and take specialisation formats into account in their capability development activities. Carried out in this way, ‘specialisation by design’ will replace ‘specialisation by default’. The NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) is still focused on ‘translating’ the collective requirements into capability ‘targets’ for individual member states. The NDPP should be rearranged to allow for targets allotted to groups of member states, taking ‘specialisation’ on board.⁷⁴ The NDPP should not replace national targets by group targets, but have the latter added to the system, also to overcome political and bureaucratic resistance in moving from ‘national’ to ‘multinational’.⁷⁵ Equally, the EU’s Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) should also incorporate assessments of multinational capability efforts in a structured manner. This will help to explore further potential for collaborative defence investment by EU member states, also through the tools of the European Commission such as the European Defence Fund.

On the basis of these parameters the following options for traditional specialisation could be explored:

- Long-range missile systems (land, air or sea-based) vs. short-range firepower (tanks, artillery).
- Heavy weaponry units vs. light/wheeled units or air mobile units (brigades, battalions).

72 Depending on the country in question, helicopters are flown by either Air Force or Army pilots.

73 Dick Zandee, Margriet Drent, Rob Hendriks, [Defence cooperation models: Lessons learned and usability](#), Clingendael Report, October 2016. p. 4.

74 Information from interviews.

75 Information from interviews.

- Heavy-lift helicopters vs. ground-based transport vehicle fleets.
- Land- and air-based special forces (commandos, paratroopers) vs. sea-based special forces (marines).
- Engineering capabilities for reconstruction vs. CBRN capabilities.
- Blue water/ocean-going naval assets (carriers, frigates, nuclear-driven submarines) vs. brown/regional water naval assets (small frigates, patrol vessels, conventional submarines).
- Maritime patrol aircraft vs. unmanned maritime reconnaissance assets.
- Ground-based missile defence systems vs. sea-based missile defence systems.
- Large and medium-sized air transport aircraft vs. small air transport aircraft.

The existing force structures, specialised capabilities and the future requirements of European countries should be the starting point for exploring specialisation options in connection with capability needs and shortfalls as defined by NATO and the EU.

4 Conclusions and options for the Netherlands

Conclusions

Specialisation in defence is still considered as controversial due to past experiences: unilateral, uncoordinated abolishment of capabilities, mainly due to budget cuts. The issue of becoming fully dependent on each other's capabilities also continues to block an open and frank discussion on the topic. On the other hand, many examples of (partial) dependencies of 'have not' countries on 'have nations' already exist, such as with regard to nuclear weapons, missile defence, long-range strike systems or military space-based capabilities. More importantly, if arranged 'by design' instead of 'by default', specialisation can strengthen the collective capabilities of European countries by strengthening capabilities across the whole spectrum, contribute to better interoperability, and enhance mutual trust and confidence.

The negative legacy of the past and the confusion about terminology have to be overcome in order to explore the scope for defence specialisation. One suggestion is to use another term, for example the more positively sounding *excelling capabilities* or *mutually agreed specialisation*. Another issue is to point to the potential benefits more explicitly. Certainly, specialisation entails risks of which dependency on other nations for providing the capability and the loss of sovereignty remain the most challenging ones. However, specialisation also offers benefits, such as optimising capabilities by the countries that specialise, increasing multinational cooperation and producing cost savings. A categorisation or a framework defining the various forms of specialisation may assist in overcoming doubts which still exist. Three distinct forms of specialisation are:

- Structured European capability groups: countries with specific capabilities (e.g. missile defence) can specialise within the group (e.g. with land- or sea-based missile defence capabilities);
- Specialisation in support functions: in particular when countries operate the same equipment, they can specialise – by mutual agreement – in offering training and maintenance facilities to each other;
- Traditional specialisation: the most far-reaching form in which countries are mutually dependent on the provision of a capability.

In practice, *structured European capability groups* are relatively easy to realise. Many already exist, for example the initial-entry Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), led by the United Kingdom, or the NATO Framework Nation Concept (FNC) of grouping heavy land forces, led by Germany. The return of regionalisation in the Alliance's conventional deterrence and defence posture offers additional scope for establishing new structured capability groups of countries for Northern, Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Enhanced Forward Presence Battlegroups need to become more standardised with a fixed war-fighting capability, also in order to build standardised brigade-size forces for a reinforced Allied military presence on the Eastern flank, as decided at the NATO Madrid Summit. Structured European capability groups could also be formed thematically, for example a European intervention group for initial entry in crisis management operations – which is envisaged in the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity – and a stabilisation group for longer-term post-conflict missions, both with specialised contributions by European countries. Such groups could also be formed for missile defence, space-based capabilities, military support for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities, and many others. While so far often constituted in a bottom-up manner – by the participating countries – it is important to involve the EU and NATO in further establishing such groups in order to structure European defence cooperation and the European contribution to NATO in a consistent and effective manner. Both organisations should further adapt their defence planning tools in order to incorporate specialisation in a multinational format in defining capability goals and targets.

The category of *specialisation in support functions* offers tremendous scope for specialisation in areas such as training and maintenance, reducing exploitation costs and increasing defence integration. Unfortunately, the potential is far from being systematically explored due to a lack of standardised equipment but also as a result of cultural, economic or industrial reasons, namely 'do it all myself'. The Belgian-Dutch Benesam model of each country specialising in having the training and maintenance facilities for minehunters and frigates respectively is a successful format that can be applied to other capabilities. The more European countries manage to move from fragmentation to standardisation in military equipment, the larger the scope for specialisation in support functions will become. New projects such as the Future Air Combat Systems (FCAS), Main Ground Combat Systems (MGCS) and the Next Generation Rotorcraft Capability (NGRC) as well as others should take the issue of specialisation in support functions on board from the design phase onwards in order to prevent nations from opting for purely national solutions later on.

Finally, the most challenging category is *traditional specialisation*: radical forms such as the specialisation of countries in either collective defence or crisis management as well as trading armies for navies are unrealistic in political and military terms, both nationally and internationally. In other words, task specialisation is not the way to go also in view of the multitude of threats that all European countries are facing. Scope lies primarily in the area of specialising weapon systems within capability areas. Examples could be: long-

range missile artillery vs short-range systems; land-based vs. sea-based special forces; blue water ocean-going naval capabilities vs. brown water naval assets; and so forth. Such far-reaching weapons specialisation will require time and patience as this form of specialisation by design requires agreement between two or more countries. Trust and confidence are key factors and, thus, traditional specialisation has the best chance for success between neighbouring states with a long tradition of close defence cooperation.

Options for the Netherlands

In the Defence White Paper 2022, the Dutch Ministry of Defence already identified ‘specialisms’ to which a significant number of investments will be directed. These include: intelligence capacity, the cyber domain, special operations forces, integrated air and missile defence (on land, at sea and in the air), long-range artillery, expanding and arming unmanned aerial systems, and reinforcing measures for countering enemy drones.⁷⁶ A further integration of the Dutch and German land forces is also mentioned and, together with its international partners and allies, The Hague will discuss stepping up efforts in moving towards specialisation in the long term. However, no concrete options for specialisation are mentioned in the White Paper.

Connecting these ambitions to the concrete options for specialisation that are proposed in this report, the Netherlands could consider the following ten options. Some of them could be introduced in the EU and NATO in the relatively short term as work on adapting the requirements for crisis management operations (implementation of the EU Strategic Compass) and for the Alliance’s deterrence and defence posture is already ongoing. All of them will contribute to increased interoperability and standardisation, in particular in cases of collaborative armaments procurement which offers optimal conditions for specialisation in areas such as training and maintenance as well as the integration of the armed forces of various countries. However, large collaborative acquisition programmes only deliver in the longer term – which nevertheless requires that opportunities for specialisation should be on their agendas from the start in particular with regard to identifying the potential for specialisation in support functions early on.

1. As a Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) participant, the Netherlands should engage in talks with the other contributors, starting with the lead nation (UK), to explore the scope for **strengthening the JEF** and making it even more effectively structured, equipped, trained and adapted to the Northern European theatre as a **structured European capability group** for operations in the context of collective defence, taking into account the future NATO membership of Finland and Sweden. The Dutch

76 The Netherlands Ministry of Defence, [Defensienota 2022](#).

Marine Corps contribution has to be strengthened, based on the reinforcement measures as announced in the Defence White Paper 2022. Adding the heavy-lift helicopter capacities of the Netherlands (CH-47 Chinooks) should be considered.

2. The Netherlands intends to contribute to the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), the first core of which will be provided by Germany in 2025 when the RDC reaches its operational status. The close cooperation between **the Dutch 11th Air Assault Brigade and the German Rapid Forces Division** offers scope for a bilateral contribution to a structured **European intervention group**. France should also contribute to this group and appropriate arrangements for participation by the UK should be explored.
3. Next to the integration of the Dutch 43rd Mechanized Brigade into the parent 1st German Armoured Division, also **the Dutch 13th Light Brigade could be integrated into a parent German division**. As the Boxer wheeled armoured vehicle is used by both countries, there is scope for **specialisation in support functions**. The same might be possible in the context of the existing integration of air mobile forces, after Germany starts to replace its current CH-53 heavy-lift helicopters with the CH-47 Chinooks already used by the Netherlands.
4. Within the NATO Framework Nation Concept (FNC) for heavy land forces, the Netherlands could explore, together with the lead nation Germany, the potential for **specialisation in long-range missile artillery**. This could be a follow-up specialisation action – including the Dutch-German specialisation in support functions – now that the Netherlands has announced (in the White Paper 2022) that it will procure long-range missile artillery. Together, the two countries could provide the core of this specialised capability to which other FNC participants could contribute.
5. Based on the existing Dutch-German cooperation in **land-based missile defence**, The Hague should investigate, preferably together with Berlin, how **a structured European integrated air and missile defence group** could be constituted as more European nations (including Poland and Sweden) are procuring the same Patriot system. **Specialisation in support functions** could be discussed in such a European missile defence group. For the longer term, based on coordination with all European countries operating missile defence systems, the Dutch might opt for **specialisation in sea-based capacities** as the number of European nations with land-based missile defence assets is expanding more than those with sea-based capabilities.
6. **Maritime surveillance in the North Sea/Norwegian Sea area** could be a capability area for constituting closer cooperation and specialisation within a regional and structured European capability group. The Netherlands could promote

such a group and, together with Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway and the UK, explore options for **specialisation in maritime surveillance assets** (maritime patrol aircraft, drones, patrol vessels, etc.) for use outside territorial waters.

7. In view of the growing effects of climate change and in line with the strengthening of military support for national civil authorities, the Netherlands could also promote the **grouping of military capabilities for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief at the European level**. In this context, The Hague could argue for specialisation, e.g. with **a Dutch contribution focusing on helicopter capabilities**.
8. The Netherlands should consider joining the **Future Air Combat Systems (FCAS) programme**, next to its stated request to participate in the Franco-German **Main Ground Combat Systems (MGCS) project**. These two programmes, both of which are in the design phase, offer wide scope for **specialisation in support functions**. The Netherlands could bring this important aspect into the programmes in order to prevent the multiplication of support facilities once these programmes reach maturity.
9. As more European countries are acquiring the American **MQ9-Reaper drone**, it is worth exploring **a European user group** as it exists for the F16 and F35 fighter aircraft. Woensdrecht Air Base could be offered as the maintenance facility to other European countries operating the system. As the larger European countries intend to replace the US-built Reapers with the Eurodrone towards the end of the 2020s, the Netherlands should consider **joining the Eurodrone programme** and explore the scope for specialisation in support functions.
10. The Hague could explore the scope for **coordinated specialisation with Belgium for host nation support**. If Belgium were to consider the acquisition of **land-based missile defence** – which is becoming more important, in particular for the protection of the Port of Antwerp against long-range strike systems – then the Dutch Patriot capability could be shared (first) and handed over (later) to Belgium as a specialisation for protecting the harbours of both countries. In return the Dutch sea-based missile defence capability could be offered to protect Belgian interests further away.