**International cooperation and developments regarding submarines worldwide**

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The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the most important factors that are of relevance when we assess possibilities for international cooperation on the acquisition of new submarines. The most overarching argument is that in today’s European security environment, cross-border defence cooperation and integration is more necessary than ever. With a fall in European defence spending of approximately 12 % since 2006, and an even higher decrease in defence research of about 29 % in the same time-span, European defence cooperation is in a “state of emergency”. Just as serious, the defence cuts so far conducted has been done totally at a national level without any reference to what others have been doing. For example, when the Netherlands in 2011 decided to do away altogether with its battle tanks, it effectively turned France and Germany into the main countries left in Europe with a significant battle tank provision. In addition, there are fewer collaborative programmes on European defence industrial cooperation than there were 10 or 20 years ago, and no major multinational ones have been launched in Europe lately. As the *Report of the Group of Personalities on the Preparatory Action for CSDP-related research* underlined in its report from February 2016 (p. 46), no European country can any longer afford to meet all of its requirements from purely domestic sources. Therefore, it is a clear need for greater consolidation of demand in Europe through convergence of military and operational requirements, alignment of national procurement plans and cycles- and ultimately, the launch of new cooperative programmes.

This statement is especially true for medium-sized and smaller Nato-countries like the Netherlands and Norway. As the “Vision on the future of the Netherlands Submarine Service” points out, close cooperation with partner nations in the design, construction, maintenance and deployment of submarines will offer advantages and increase the possibilities for enhancing operational readiness levels and sustainability. Additionally, “the Vision” underlines that the Netherlands will strive for far-reaching cooperation throughout the total lifecycle of the submarines. Consequently, it will not place any fixed level on the level of cooperation with other potential partner countries.

Therefore, it becomes important to emphasise the challenges and difficulties that international defence cooperation will face and which must be taken into consideration when choosing the relevant partners to cooperate with. This is of relevance when answering the question by the Standing Committee on which countries to eventually cooperating with. The main challenge is beyond doubt differences in strategic culture. As I point out in my paper “Going Deep!” on the possibilities for Dutch-Norwegian cooperation on acquisition of new submarines, Dutch and Norwegian strategic cultures differ substantially. This difference might become an important impediment for a successful joint cooperation program. Strategic culture is often defined as the national beliefs and norms about when, how and for what ends military force can be used. Here, the Netherlands has a far more expeditionary strategic culture than Norway, which is more homeland oriented. Hence, differences in strategic culture translate into differences in requirements for the new submarines. The necessary question that needs to be asked in this regard is how two Nato countries with very different strategic cultures can come to an agreement on acquisition of new submarines. Furthermore, are there other factors than strategic cultures that are relevant when we discuss such a comprehensive cooperation program? In short, are there factors that can counterweight any differences in strategic culture? In fact, agreeing upon a joint acquisition program would have been far easier to achieve if the two countries shared compatible strategic cultures. If that was the case, it would also be far easier to agree on common requirements for the new submarines. Clearly, identical requirements and an identical design will be the best solution in all areas, also including being the most cost-effective one. If that is not possible to achieve, submarines that are different, but shares identical subsystems to the maximum extent possible, will be the next-best option.

Nevertheless, even though strategic culture is a fluid concept more susceptible to change than previously thought of, one cannot expect the Dutch or Norwegian strategic cultures to change dramatically in the years to come. Therefore, in a changing European security situation where we are witnessing a rebirth of the common defence commitments in Nato, trust and solidarity between the allies is a precondition for a viable European security order. In fact, this trust factor is the condition that might be able to counterweight differences in strategic culture. Hence, trust is important and especially so when the capabilities the two countries want to co-develop are responsible for defending home territories. However, it is important to notice that trust-building is a slow process and that the level of trust can be different at different levels from the political-strategic to the military-tactical level.

Trust is also the key difference that determines whether joint projects are successful in creating the best operational output for money, which is the overarching aim of the Dutch-Norwegian Future Submarine Capability program. Beyond doubt, the level of trust between them is high since they share a common security policy history and both are founding members of Nato. Importantly, they also share a common geography belonging to the north-western European “node” in Nato characterised by some common characteristics like interpersonal day-to-day contacts, common training and commonalities in foreign and security policy outlook.

Therefore, while differences in strategic culture clearly exist between the two countries, they both need partners to cooperate with. The Netherlands and Norway have a long history of defence material cooperation and they both will take part in the German Framework Nation Concept as well as in the British-led initiative on a Joint Expeditionary Force. Important to note is also the high degree of symmetry in the bilateral relationship between them. Strong asymmetries in the relationship would in fact have resulted in submarines with other capabilities and capacities for the weaker part in the relationship. For Norway such an outcome would have been serious due to the highly specific oceanographic conditions outside the coast of Norway. Therefore, within the north-western European ‘node’ in Nato, the Netherlands and Norway are the two countries that most certainly match each other. Other factors than just strategic culture must therefore be taken seriously into consideration. The level of trust between them is perhaps the factor that might have the possibility to counterweight differences in strategic culture. But also geographic proximities and symmetries in the relationship must also be regarded as important factors.

From a defence economic perspective it also becomes important to emphasise that economic austerity increases intra-European defence dependencies. In such a perspective, the alternative to cooperation could be a situation where small and medium-sized countries lose their ability to maintain a credible defence, and therefore lose their ability to act if attacked by another state. As “the Vision” states (p. 2), collective defence is once again demanding specific attention in today’s European security environment.

Sources:

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