

Commentary

Why Europe needs a ‘military Schengen zone’

Karlijn Jans and Rachel Rizzo

While President Donald Trump was issuing bombastic threats toward North Korea and Venezuela earlier this month, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis quietly met with his Dutch counterpart, Defense Minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, at the Pentagon on August 15. They discussed the ongoing crises in North Korea and Venezuela and continued their talks on NATO defense spending. But, to the surprise of many, they also touched on a more esoteric topic: the idea of introducing a “military Schengen zone” on the European continent, freeing up the movement of troops and materiel between EU member states.

Under current laws, the movement of military forces throughout Europe must follow strict rules that create limits on what militaries can do during exercises. Critics of creating a new military Schengen zone say it is somewhat pointless, as changes have already been made to allow for soldiers and supplies to move quickly between countries during the event of a conflict. The problem is that credibility, interoperability and readiness are only achieved through exercises and training during peacetime.

Modeled on the passport free-travel zone for EU citizens that has been in place across Europe since 1995, the military Schengen zone would, in effect, enable military personnel and equipment to move easily within Europe’s borders without obstacles like diplomatic clearances and equipment regulatory procedures. It would be similar to its civilian counterpart, which “allows citizens to cross internal borders without being subjected to border checks.”

Today, moving personnel and equipment across Europe is still a regulatory nightmare that at times can take days or weeks to clear. A new form of European defense cooperation could remove some of those hurdles. It would also allow newer NATO members with outdated infrastructure to test, in real time, how things like old bridges and small dirt roads might slow the movement of troops and heavy equipment during an actual conflict.

The idea of allowing freer movement of troops and materiel throughout Europe is not new. US and NATO leaders, including Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, the commander of US forces in Europe, recognized the issue as early as 2015 when the US ramped up its exercises on the continent. He began referring to the need for a military Schengen zone soon after. More recently, in 2016, then-Italian Foreign Minister Paolo Gentiloni raised the idea ahead of the EU’s Bratislava Summit; Germany and France then endorsed it. Hennis-Plasschaert herself has pushed the proposal on several occasions over the past few months, most notably during the meeting of NATO defense ministers in June.

The interest of other key figures, including Mattis, is apparently beginning to peak. Serious discussions about a potential military Schengen zone come at the right time, as the European Council meeting in June focused heavily on defense cooperation and coordination. EU members agreed to the European Defense Fund, or EDF, an ambitious new defense initiative designed, in part, in response to Trump’s questioning of EU defense

spending. They also laid out the initial steps of a plan for implementing a mechanism known as “Permanent Structured Cooperation” that would allow European member states to cooperate more closely. EU states are expected to present a common list of criteria and binding commitments as well as proposals on concrete collaborative projects and initiatives, which are in line with commitments already agreed to within NATO, at the next European Council meeting in October. A military Schengen zone could be one of these initiatives.

This is not to say it would be easy to implement. First of all, not all NATO members are part of today’s Schengen Agreement. Also, despite having practical motivation and goals in mind, a military Schengen zone could be difficult politically. In an ideal scenario, military personnel and equipment would receive the equivalent of the Schengen visa that private citizens receive when travelling to the EU — but that might be tough to sell to the general public. Finally, separate agreements would have to be created with non-EU NATO members such as the United States, Turkey and Montenegro; Norway and Iceland have associate status in Schengen as part of the existing Schengen Acquis. A separate agreement would also have to be renegotiated with the United Kingdom once it leaves the EU.

The potential barriers to this initiative no doubt require careful consideration, but the benefits go beyond just political gains. And implementation may not be as difficult as people think, given what is already underway in parts of Europe. A military Schengen zone could leverage the results of increased cooperation in military transport, such as the European Air Transport Command, which was established by the Netherlands, France, Belgium and Germany in 2010 and has since added Spain, Italy and Luxembourg. This multinational command put significant parts of these countries’ air transport- and air-to-air refueling fleets under unified operational control. A permanent multinational airlift training center also recently launched in Spain, marking a major step forward in European defense collaboration.

Officials could also look to the Dutch Air-Mobile Brigade being put under the command of the German Rapid Forces Division — the most far-reaching form of military integration in Europe to date — as a blueprint for successful interoperability. Finally, although approval from the US for a European initiative is unnecessary, the EU could nonetheless use the proposal for a military Schengen zone as an opportunity to create momentum and deepen involvement with the United States. Seeing more action from Europe on this issue would be warmly welcomed in Washington. As the German Defense Minister Von der Leyen said in September last year, “That is what the Americans expect us to do.”

At the end of the day, the benefits outweigh the concerns. “Actually, I wish that we could move across Europe as quickly as migrants do,” Hodges told *Politico* earlier this month. “Of course, we should have to meet all the EU road laws, respect sovereignty, but it is a surprisingly cumbersome process in several countries to get permissions to move troops, weapons, ammunition, even just regular convoys.” NATO seems to agree. In the same article, a NATO official said “efforts in the European Union to improve the cross-border movement of forces and equipment in Europe could also benefit NATO, provided that they are inclusive and complementary to NATO’s work.”

Today, Europe and the United States face an array of potential threats that could require the quick movement of troops throughout the European continent. Although leaders on

each side of the Atlantic hope that none of these threats really emerge, it is still important to allow troops to train and move as freely as possible. A military Schengen zone would serve NATO and EU interests, maintaining the ability of both to handle whatever challenges lie ahead.

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