



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# The participation of the UK in the EU military mobility project is fully justified



Until just a year ago, one of the more serious objections to the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) military mobility project was the absence of a clear purpose. In this context, it would not be alone among various other EU projects for which the question is legitimately raised: what is their practical purpose?

This EU-invention, in fact a Dutch initiative from 2017, proved to be quite far sighted and far from being forgotten by Brussels administrators. It had a very clear purpose with the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In addition, it contributed to the rapid and unique response of the West to the beginning of the Russian invasion, which was one of the biggest strategic disappointments for the Kremlin.

The British request for participation in this EU programme was accepted in Brussels at the end of October, and since then it has included 28 countries: 24 EU members, the USA, Canada and Norway, and recently also the UK. Three of the non-EU states, America, Canada and Norway, joined the project a year ago, which the Dutch government welcomed with the assessment that "this development is a positive and concrete step towards better collaboration between the EU and NATO".

In short, the military mobility project, as one of 60 projects within PESCO, provides an easing of bureaucratic procedures that slow troop deployments considerably, whether by land, sea or air. It is also designed to improve the exchange of information and cut red tape at borders, including harmonising customs rules to allow for swift deployments and easier transport of military equipment.

"Russia's war against Ukraine has further demonstrated that being able to move troops and military equipment swiftly across Europe and beyond is essential for our security. Sharing information and experiences with key partners is crucial. The PESCO project "Military Mobility" provides the right platform in this regard", said Josep Borrell, High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, on the occasion of the

UK's entry into this project.

**The Russian aggression against Ukraine gave a clear purpose to the military mobility project and fully justified the entry of the UK into this EU initiative**

Indeed, the Russian aggression against Ukraine gave a clear purpose to the military mobility project and fully justified the entry of the UK into this EU initiative. It is, after all, the first post-Brexit formal engagement between the UK and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy. In the UK, there was opposition to entry into this EU project, mainly through political arguments, claiming that it undermines the decision to leave the EU. "This is very serious and we must be very careful.

The issue around PESCO is that the structures are permanent. We must not sign up to anything which undermines our sovereignty and where we do not have a veto", warned former defence minister Sir Gerald Howarth, a leading Brexiteer who has led the campaign to resist joining PESCO for many years. However, even if there had been no Russian aggression against Ukraine, the UK would have very pragmatic reasons to join the EU initiative, as it is in line with the UK government's policy on post-Brexit cooperation with the Union in the field of security, when they are complementary to the activities of NATO.

The aggression against Ukraine only removed the reasons for UK's reservations to join the PESCO military mobility programme.

**There is high pragmatic value in the UK wanting to improve the speed at which its troops and kit can be deployed across Europe**

"The UK's plans to join PESCO's military mobility are strictly related to the war in Ukraine and motivated by the need to send military kit to Ukraine faster and more easily,

as well as equipment and troops to other vulnerable countries in Europe. There is high pragmatic value in the UK wanting to improve the speed at which its troops and kit can be deployed across Europe, and attempts to deduce an underlying, long-term political agenda are misplaced”, concluded Isabella Antinozzi, RUSI's research analyst.

Britain's accession to the PESCO mobility programme is fully justified, if merely one point of UK military engagement in Europe, that of Estonia, were taken into account. Since 2017, the UK has led a multinational battlegroup in that EU member state. The UK has regularly deployed an armoured infantry battlegroup, equipped with Challenger 2 tanks and Warrior infantry fighting vehicles, on a six-month rotation, numbering around 900 personnel. In February 2022, as a response to the build-up of Russian forces around Ukraine, the UK doubled personnel members deployed to Estonia to approximately 1,700, followed by the deployment of an additional task force on a bilateral basis.

The deployment, transport and logistics of such a complex operation will definitely be facilitated and accelerated by British participation in the EU military mobility programme. Regardless of political criticism, this is a pragmatic decision by the UK government, which demonstrated its leadership in supporting Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression. The arrangement with the EU is permanent and will be valid even after the end of the Russian aggression, but that should not end UK's interests to remain part of the project. Ukraine's experience obliges it to do so.