

H1: AKK Presents Priorities for Council Presidency to EU Parliament

Teaser: AKK briefed the responsible Committees of the European Parliament and afterwards answered questions from MEPs.

Intro: On July 14, Minister of Defence Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer briefed the responsible committees of the European Parliament on the priorities of Germany's Council Presidency in the area of security and defence policy.

The Minister presented the Ministry of Defence's priorities for the EU Council Presidency to the members of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE). Germany would strive to make Europe more resilient, she said, and increase its ability to act in the field of security and defence policy. Furthermore, cooperation between the EU and NATO was to be intensified.

The briefing by the Minister was followed by two question-and-answer sessions with the MEPs. Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer attended the joint meeting of AFET and SEDE in Brussels via video transmission. Generally, the heads of the various ministries present their priorities for their national Council Presidency programme to the relevant European Parliament's committees at the start of a Council Presidency.

Council Presidency in the times of the Covid-19 crisis

At the beginning of the session, the Minister stressed that the German Council Presidency in general and also in the area of security and defence policy was strongly influenced by the lessons learned during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the last few months, it had become obvious that the EU was not sufficiently prepared for hybrid threats such as pandemics. Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer therefore emphasised that "one of the major tasks of the next months will be to make Europe more resilient and to define the military contribution required to achieve that objective."

A Strategic Compass to guide the way

To make Europe more resilient, the threats faced by Europe would have to be clearly defined, the Minister said. For instance, the EU Member States had very different threat perceptions where Russia was concerned. "We therefore plan to advance work on the Strategic Compass as part of the Presidency trio with Portugal and Slovenia, so that it can be completed during the French Council Presidency in 2022", Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer explained. As a first step, the European Intelligence Service, with the support of the national intelligence

services, was to develop a common European threat analysis by the end of 2020.

On the basis of that threat analysis, the EU Member States would, in a second step, agree on concrete common goals in the area of security and defence policy, the Minister said. The Strategic Compass developed that way would then define which security policy capabilities Europe would have and pursue as a priority. “We need a strategic instrument like this to achieve a greater ability to act at the EU level” the Minister stressed. With the help of the Strategic Compass, existing European defence initiatives – from PESCO and the EU Battlegroups to bilateral cooperation – were to be united under a common strategy, she added.

EU-NATO cooperation crucial to resilience

The Minister further emphasised that a resilient Europe with the ability to act could be achieved only in close cooperation between the EU and NATO. “It is clear to me and the German Federal Government that we can achieve a stronger European ability to act only together with NATO”, the Minister said. Both organisations were essential components of the European security architecture. Ways to ensure that national, European and NATO capabilities complemented each other as effectively as possible had to be identified, she said. This was the only way to ensure the comprehensive security of European citizens, she added.

However, challenges would also emerge in the future which would affect Europe’s security interests much more than those of our transatlantic NATO Allies. With regard to European commitment in the Sahel region, for instance, the Minister stated: “The dangers created by a more unstable Sahel affect Europe first. Therefore, Europe must increase its ability to act there.” In this context, Kramp-Karrenbauer called for the EU to conduct operations with a robust mandate in the Sahel in addition to training missions.

When asked about the future of EU-NATO and transatlantic relations, the Defence Minister said: “We must bear in mind that on the whole, the EU is far away from being able to replace the capabilities of NATO and our transatlantic partners with its own forces.” NATO, for instance, had decades of experience with its command structures, which still had to be practiced in the EU Battlegroups. “This means: NATO is and will remain a cornerstone of European security”, AKK added.

Third-state participation in PESCO projects

The Minister also stressed that Germany would make every effort during its Council Presidency to include third states such as the United Kingdom in PESCO projects. While the primary function of PESCO was to improve cooperation among EU Member States, they did not have sufficient expertise in all areas, which is why it could be useful to involve third states on a case-by-case basis. This could at the same time improve cooperation between the EU and NATO, she added.

More resilience with the European Medical Command

Furthermore, cooperation between the military medical services of Europe should be expanded to increase Europe's ability to respond to crises in very practical terms, the Minister said. As part of the PESCO project "European Medical Command" (EMC) coordinated by Germany, European medical forces were to be better equipped for the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and future pandemics, she stated – for example where the procurement and storage of medical materiel and the common coordination of medical relief before and during operations were concerned.

Strengthening the budgets for the EDF and Military Mobility

During the plenary debate, the MEPs asked the Minister how she planned to deal with cuts to national defence budgets as well as to the EU budgets for the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the area of Military Mobility. On this matter, Ms Kramp-Karrenbauer stressed that "It is important that we try to keep defence budgets on the national level as high and as stable as possible and at the same time make sure that the European Defence Fund and the area of Military Mobility will be well funded during the upcoming EU budget negotiations."

These funds, she said, were needed for the Common Security and Defence Policy of the EU. Germany would therefore work to increase European budget funds for common defence initiatives. A prerequisite for that, however, was that a quick agreement would be reached on the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework from 2021 to 2028, she added.

Furthermore, the Minister stressed that EU funds could be used much more efficiently if EU Member States coordinated their military capability planning and the procurement of weapon systems better, and if they planned jointly.

Challenges: Russia, China and the Sahel

Asked by an MEP about the currently most important security policy challenges faced by the EU, the Minister of Defence named Russian and Chinese geopolitics, the conflict states of Syria and Libya as well as the unstable situation in the Sahel.

Further questions from the plenum concerned the EU Operation Irini, transatlantic relations, US foreign policy as well as the stronger involvement of women in EU missions, among other issues. As the 75-minute committee meeting was not long enough to answer all questions, the Minister promised to respond to the remaining questions in writing.

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