
GULF CRISIS IS TESTING A NEW GENERATION OF EUROPEAN LEADERS

- 20.08.2019

EurActiv (20 August 2019)

A new generation of EU leaders is grappling with the shipping crisis in the Arabian Gulf in a way that could determine the future military posture of individual countries, and perhaps even of the European Union, writes Faisal Al Yafai.

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The crisis in the waters of the Arabian Gulf is causing waves across the European continent. Against a background of attacks on tankers in the Gulf, the seizure by Iran of a British-flagged vessel off its own coast has sparked a debate on the best way to handle the still-escalating crisis.

The approach of the Trump administration has been to increase its military presence, inflicting what it has called maximum pressure on Iran. In Europe, opinion is split between favoring a military or diplomatic approach.

These are not only tactical questions about how to handle one particular crisis, however. The Gulf crisis highlights a much wider debate on defense within and among European countries. As Europe prepares for a shift in leadership, a new generation is grappling with this sudden shipping crisis in a way that could determine the future military posture of individual countries, and perhaps even of the European Union.

Divisions over what to do in the Gulf have emerged both among and within European countries. It was Britains former foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, who first suggested that Europe could lead a separate naval mission in the Gulf from Americas Operation Sentinel. The European concern – especially in Germany – was that a US military-led approach could drag European countries into a war of Washingtons making. A European-only force could use different tactics.

Hunts successor, Dominic Raab, later upended that separate approach, saying a Europe-only approach was not viable. In that change can be discerned a broader difference in the UKs approach post-Brexit, from Hunts approach of keeping Europe close as a partner to Raabs jettisoning of the continent to follow in the wake of the United States.

In Germany, the government is also divided. On 30 July, it was revealed that the US had formally asked Germany to join its naval mission. Whether or not to join will be determined by Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the new defense minister and Angela Merkels successor as leader of the

Christian Democratic Union (CDU), who has not ruled it out.

The CDU are in coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD), who are much cooler on the proposal. Germanys foreign minister, who is part of the SPD, has publicly said Germany does not subscribe to the USs policy of maximum pressure.

Once again, this specific disagreement highlights a wider difference on the future role of Germanys military. In the few days that she has been in office, Kramp-Karrenbauer has taken a more forceful military stance than Merkel, pledging to increase the countrys military budget to 2% of GDP, a significant increase from last years 1.23%. Heiko Maas, the foreign minister, has said he would raise the amount, but only in five years, from 2024, and not to 2%.

The differences matter because Europe is preparing for a shift in leadership as a new European parliament begins to sit, the United Kingdom prepares to leave the union, and Merkel, the dominant European politician of the past decade and a half, departs.

Raab and Kramp-Karrenbauer are still new in their positions but the actions of both will be scrutinised for hints of their respective countries political futures. Raab represents a strain of hardline Conservative party thought that, after an election, could easily govern the UK for half a decade; Kramp-Karrenbauer is often spoken of as Germanys next chancellor.

European leaders do need a new approach to the Gulf, but it is not the one indicated by Raab. That would simply mean using European military assets as part of American tactics. Nor would it help the Middle East. The US maximum pressure approach, if not backed by diplomatic means of ending the standoff, will instead destabilise Arab countries, particularly Iraq, as Iran seeks to use its leverage in those countries to pressure the United States and its allies.

Instead, Europe could look to its own northern waters to see how to tackle threats in the Gulf. Concerned by the threat of Russia in the Baltic Sea, Germany last year began beefing up its military presence in the region, staging major exercises and building a permanent military headquarters in the German port city of Rostock.

Then in May, the UK inaugurated a new defense organisation called the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), including eight European countries bordering the Baltic Sea, to patrol the region. Separate from NATO and the United States, the JEF, as a British navy official put it, fills a hole in the security architecture of northern Europe between a national force and a NATO force.

Something similar could work in the Gulf: a maritime force that complements the US but also keeps leadership of the force and its tactics within the European domain. The essence of the policy ought to be to split the military and political pressure. Separate European and US naval forces in the Gulf would maintain military pressure on Iran, but also offer a choice of political interlocutors, ensuring that European policy was not simply subordinated to Washingtons saber rattling.

Such a policy ought to find favour in London and Berlin: Kramp-Karrenbauer is keen to forge a new role for Germanys military, and the JEF was a creation of Britains Conservative party. It may also find favour in Brussels; it was the new EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, after all, who as Germanys defense minister pioneered a new northern military policy and sent warships to the Baltic Sea.

Deciding how to deal with the Gulf crisis is a chance for new European leaders to indicate how

they see their future military role. Simply steering their ships of state into the wake created by the United States would be a mistake. If Europe wants its own priorities and policies to matter, it must maintain an ability to chart its own military course.

Kaynak/Source: