

European armament cooperation: an achievable goal for Europeans thanks to OCCAR - a framework of excellence for joint programme management

In the 18th and 19th centuries, despite giving the impression of being divided, Europeans had the potential to dominate the world due to their substantial lead in fields such as science, technology, transportation and armament. Those days are now behind us. The World Wars of the 20th century, for which Europe itself was responsible, significantly weakened the continent, causing it to lose the lead it once held. Today, “continent-sized nations —established or rising global powers such as the United States, China, India, Russia and Brazil—represent a significant challenge for Europeans. It is easier for these nations to discuss or negotiate bilaterally with individual European countries, who are in a weaker position, than to face a united Europe, which is, still today, the world's leading trading force and second largest economy. On their own, our old European nations, even the most powerful ones (Germany, France, etc.), are no longer a match for these “continent-sized nations”.

As a result of this observation made at the end of the Second World War and of dedicated efforts to reconcile former European adversaries, Europe began its substantial unification project gradually. Visionary politicians, such as Robert Schumann and Jean Monnet from France, played a crucial role in encouraging this initiative, which, over the past seventy years, has ensured peace on the continent by fostering every greater solidarity among its member nations.

Despite criticisms of the imperfections or slow progress of the EU, over the past 70 years we have been building a Europe that is the envy of the entire world — a vision Victor Hugo had already advocated for in his speech at the opening of the International Peace Congress in Paris on 21 August 1849.

However, Europe initially failed to address defence matters. Despite initially proposing a European Defence Community (EDC) modelled after the ECSC¹ plan, France rejected it in August 1954.

Europeans therefore preferred to entrust their defence to NATO, which was created in April 1949 by the Washington Treaty and which allowed Germany to

¹ The European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was created in 1951 by France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

join in 1955. This still holds true today, even though progress has been made since. That progress came first through the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty² which provided for the implementation of a common foreign and security policy (Intergovernmental CFSP) and referred to “the framing of a common defence policy, which could lead to a common defence”. Then came the Treaty of Lisbon³, which provided for the creation of a Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) based on several tools that were gradually implemented over the following decade, with an acceleration from the end of 2016, i.e. after the Brexit vote⁴. Until the late 1980s, NATO served as Europe's defence against the USSR, which then dissolved in December 1991. Nowadays, Russia has taken the place of the USSR in NATO's strategy, and even more so since its aggression against Ukraine in February 2022.

As a result, from the late 1950s to the early 2000s, defence issues were only addressed by Europeans outside NATO within the framework of ad hoc bilateral or multilateral cooperation. This has been particularly the case in the field of armament – the main focus of this article.

In the field of aeronautics, notable examples include collaborations from the 1960s onward, such as the joint development of the Jaguar aircraft between France and Great Britain, the Transall C-160 transport aircraft, the Alpha Jet training aircraft, the Atlantic maritime patrol aircraft between Germany and France and the multirole Tornado⁵ combat aircraft with a sweep-wing design. From the 1980s onward, these were followed by the Franco-German Tiger⁶ combat helicopter and other multinational projects such as the Eurofighter Typhoon⁷ combat aircraft. There were also initiatives involving the NH90⁸ transport and anti-surface or anti-submarine warfare helicopter. Finally, there was the A400M⁹ military transport aircraft, marking the inaugural major programme under the new OCCAR organisation – a topic I will revisit later.

² Treaty establishing the European Union, ratified in November 1993.

³ Treaty ratified in December 2009.

⁴ Before Brexit, the UK had always opposed any measures within the EU that might have weakened or simply competed in any way with NATO.

⁵ Developed by Germany, Italy and the UK in the 1970s.

⁶ Later joined by Spain

⁷ Developed from 1988 to 1992 by Germany, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom, again without France, which preferred to launch the Rafale on its own.

⁸ Launched in 1992 by Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, and subsequently joined by 7 other countries from the 2000s onwards.

⁹ Programme launched in May 2003 by Belgium (also acting on behalf of Luxembourg), France, Germany, Spain, Turkey and the UK.

Over all these years, the level of cooperation between European countries in terms of defence investment¹⁰ has hardly ever exceeded 20%. Furthermore, most cooperative programmes, especially those launched in the 1980s and 1990s, have been negatively impacted by the “fair return” principle. This principle has proven to be poisonous, leading to unnecessary duplication and poor industrial choices, which in turn bring delays and cost overruns that reduce the benefits of cooperation. At the end of the 1990s, in order to address these problems and improve the management of joint programmes, Germany and France, joined by Italy and the UK, decided to create OCCAR (The Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation).

This multinational organisation, established independently of the European Union, operates as a highly adaptable entity grounded in a robust legal framework (the convention was signed in 1998 and ratified in January 2001, and accorded the status of a treaty). In crafting this document, the drafters endeavoured to address the shortcomings observed in cooperative programmes of preceding decades. Notably, they rejected the concept of a “fair return”, not only in terms of industrial collaboration among participating states¹¹ but also in the recruitment of its staff.¹² Subsequently, two more member states joined OCCAR: Belgium in May 2003¹³ and Spain in January 2005. Additionally, eight other states¹⁴ participate in OCCAR programmes without being member states, with equal rights to manage the programmes in which they are involved.¹⁵

Over the course of 25 years, teamwork, professionalism, competence, integrity and client commitment have allowed an organisation to be built that is widely recognised in Europe¹⁶ for its efficiency and the quality of its work in the management of cooperation programmes. This organisation has established agreements with the European Defence Agency (EDA)¹⁷, created in 2004 to identify EU Member State capacity requirements, promote cooperation to satisfy

¹⁰ The ratio between the share of defence investments made through European cooperations by EU Member States and the total amount of their defence investments.

¹¹ The OCCAR draws up an overall annual report for all the programmes it manages.

¹² The recruitment principle is “the best man or best woman for the job”, under the responsibility of the organisation's Director of Executive Administration, known as OCCAR-EA.

¹³ To mark the launch of the A400M.

¹⁴ Australia, Finland, Lithuania, Luxembourg (via Belgium for the A400M), the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden and Turkey.

¹⁵ But obviously without any rights over the overall management of the organisation.

¹⁶ Including in France by the Court of Auditors.

¹⁷ Agreement between the EDA and OCCAR signed in 2012: even though the texts regulating the two bodies overlap on some points, it is accepted that the EDA and OCCAR truly complete each other, with the EDA mainly taking action before OCCAR's mission begins. This agreement makes the transfer of projects launched within the EDA to OCCAR easier.

them, identify and, if need be, implement measures to strengthen the European DTIB¹⁸ and, more recently with the European Commission¹⁹, which launched the European Defence Fund (EDF)²⁰ in 2021 in order to reinforce the EU's strategic autonomy and particularly improve the competitiveness of its defence industry by promoting and supporting defence-focused cooperation between its members: the Commission thus decided to entrust OCCAR with managing the most important projects funded within this framework.

Today, OCCAR manages some twenty programmes (totalling almost 100 billion euros), including almost all of the cooperation programmes in the development, production or support phases that involve both Germany and France²¹. Its renowned efficiency makes it a prime structure for cooperation programme management. The agreements with the EDA and the Commission show the EU's recognition of OCCAR for this mission. However, on 1 January 2023, the OCCAR community comprised only fourteen states in total, including six Member States²² and eight Participating States²³. Thus, many EU Member States do not rely on it yet, due either to a lack of interest in cooperation, an Atlantic bias or even a lack of knowledge of OCCAR, sometimes deemed the organisation of the "big European states". On 5 July 2022, the OCCAR Member State Defence Ministers signed a declaration asking the OCCAR-EA Director to promote the organisation to all European armament directors.

Finally, it is worth noting that, despite the grand speeches on European cooperation, it remains extremely insufficient: the level remains below 20%²⁴ even though the EU Member States had set themselves a target of reaching 35% in 2007 during an EDA Ministerial Council. Thus, 20 years after the launch of the A400M, no new major cooperation programmes have been launched in Europe. This low level of cooperation is especially noticeable in terms of equipment given to Ukraine by its Western allies. Admittedly, a cooperation might involve lengthy

¹⁸ European defence technological and industrial base

¹⁹ Specific agreements for the management by OCCAR of projects funded by EDIDP (European Defence Industrial Development Programme) or by the European Defence Fund.

²⁰ Fund that was preceded from 2018 by EDIDP.

²¹ Except NH90, launched before OCCAR was created and assigned to an agency related to NATO. Future SCAFE and MGCS programmes, still in their preliminary demonstration or risks elimination phases, have not yet entered the development phase and are thus still managed by the States themselves at this point.

²² Including five EU Member States; UK is no longer an EU Member State but remains a Member State of OCCAR.

²³ Including six EU Member States: see note 14. Denmark, Greece, Norway and Czech Republic might soon join the list of these Participating States, especially through programmes funded by the European Commission in the framework of EDF.

²⁴ It even temporarily fell to 11% in 2020 according to figures published by the EDA.

negotiations, with each ally striving to obtain the best industrial benefits, and thus, sometimes displaying unrealistic needs and industrial capacities. However, the needs are there, and it is time for the cooperation to be revived.

We are therefore eagerly awaiting the development of two major cooperation projects between Germany and France that are currently in their initial stages: firstly, the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), to which Spain²⁵ is also contributing, and secondly, the future MGCS²⁶ tank project, with a more complex industrial agreement due to the manufacturers involved: two German (Krauss-Maffei Wegmann/KMW and Rheinmetall) and one French (Nexter, which already merged with KMW to form KNDS).

In both cases, these programmes are designed to be managed by OCCAR for the next development and production phases which would, furthermore, facilitate the extension of cooperation to more partners while other European States are expressing similar needs, both for the FCAS and the MGCS²⁷.

To conclude, we can applaud the creation of OCCAR in the late 1990s and the implementation of agreements between OCCAR and certain EU bodies: the European Defence Agency and the European Commission. All the tools that EU Member States need to improve their armament cooperation are now available. It is currently up to them to affirm their desire for cooperation by finding the right compromises to meet their needs. They can then take full advantage of these tools for the preparation and management of new joint projects. Greater solidarity in terms of armament would only benefit Europe's position and power in the world.

Translation by ISIT students

²⁵ The contract for a preliminary demonstration phase was signed in December 2022 by the French DG of Armament for three countries. Belgium should join the FCAS, which has a rival project in Europe, managed by the UK in cooperation with other European partners and Japan.

²⁶ MGCS: Main Ground Combat System.

²⁷ Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden showed interest in the MGCS; others, like Belgium and Spain, have reflected on a similar need.

