

The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: What Type of Ambition is the Needle Pointing to?

By [Daniel Fiott](#) | 9 March 2021

Key Issues

- Given the geopolitical challenges, there is a strategic imperative for a greater EU capacity for autonomous action in security and defence.
- The Strategic Compass offers a way forward on crisis management, resilience, capabilities and partnerships, but it will mean little without sustained political engagement by Member States.
- Ambition in EU security and defence can be achieved by investing in the Union's strategic presence, enabling willing and able states and protecting the maritime, space and digital domains.

Where should the EU and its Member States head with security and defence policy? This question is the focus of this brief. For the past twenty years, the EU has proven itself capable of autonomously deploying civilian and military operations and missions to places like the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, the Western Balkans, Iraq, Georgia, Ukraine and more. The Union has deployed over 30 civilian and military missions and operations, and so it has proven it can act alone if necessary – even if it is difficult to measure precisely the success of EU deployments. What is more, since the EU Global Strategy of 2016 the Union has steadily accoutred itself with new tools aimed to boost capability development (Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF)), synchronise defence investment plans (Coordinated Annual Review on Defence

(CARD)) and enhance its operational capacity (Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and the European Peace Facility (EPF)). Where there is political willingness on the part of the EU Member States, progress towards a common defence policy becomes a possibility.

Despite the political hyperactivity in security and defence since 2016, however, EU Member States and institutions have realised that the new tools overwhelmingly focus on defence capability development and the defence industry. As important as these two factors continue to be, they are only two legs of a tripod that must include an operational dimension – an ability to act is a hallmark of credibility and autonomy. For all of the focus on ensuring the EU's defence-technological edge or filling capability shortfalls, there has been a woeful level of attention

paid to missions and operations. This is odd given the ongoing deterioration of the EU's neighbourhood and the steadily emerging transatlantic consensus on a need for more European action in security and defence. Without concrete operational action the Union could witness the further growth of strategic vacuums on its doorstep, experience a deterioration in the transatlantic relationship and fall prey to a severe strategic downgrade at a time when geopolitical giants are on the rise.

To address this challenge, in November 2020 the EU Member States called for a Threat Analysis from the EU's intelligence and situational awareness bodies that details the threats facing the Union over the next 5-10 years. Unsurprisingly, the classified threat analysis painted a bleak future for the EU. Enter the "Strategic Compass": a document that should precisely detail what more the Union needs to do to manage crises, enhance its own resilience, develop capabilities and instruments and build strategic partnerships. This brief looks at the Strategic Compass and it advances some concrete ideas that could ensure that the EU develops its ability to act autonomously, whenever necessary.

Creativity counts

There are already many things we know about the Strategic Compass. It will be drafted and negotiated over 2021 and delivered by March 2022, all while Germany and France head towards national elections and the EU undertakes the Conference on the Future of Europe. It should be based on and responsive to the aforementioned Threat Analysis, which, as the first phase of the Compass process, articulates the threat environment facing the EU over the next 5-10 years. It will be organised into four baskets: crisis management, resilience, capabilities and partnerships. It should not generate any further paper exercises in the short-term and be focused on tangible ideas. We also know that it should not be confined to Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), but instead draw on the full range of the EU's security and defence tools. Moving beyond CSDP is important, as it allows the EU to consider what role it can play in the defence of the EU and its citizens – this can only enhance the Union's credibility given that collective defence has risen in importance since Russia's seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.

However, there is a lot we do not know about the Compass today. There is little idea about how it will be implemented after March 2022, especially in a context where the Covid-19 pandemic may ravage Europe's economies. Here, investment in defence will remain the fundamental basis for any chance of success and without adequate resources the Strategic Compass could end up as an unaffordable wish list. In this respect, we do not yet know how Member States will communicate their efforts under the Strategic Compass to citizens and parliaments. In short, we do not know if the Compass will generate real interest so as to help justify investments in defence in the eyes of the public. We also do not know if the Compass will make a sizeable and lasting impression on national defence planning, which now has to contend with an enmeshing of collective defence and external crises. Finally, we obviously do not know what the Compass' contents will be.

Of course, if the Strategic Compass is to make a real difference in EU security and defence it must avoid lowest common denominator politics. This is a risk given some Member States' aversion to the idea of strategic autonomy and the fact that they believe NATO best suits their strategic cultures and notions of sovereignty. Keep in mind that NATO will be rethinking its Strategic Concept in parallel to EU efforts during 2021. Claiming that strategic autonomy is simply a throw-away French concept would be a cheap way to side-step the fact that Europe has to do more for its defence – in the EU and NATO. Accordingly, while many may dispute the term 'strategic autonomy' there is a growing realisation that the EU must have a capacity to act and to do so without undue dependences in terms of capabilities, technologies and political decision-making. In other words, a genuinely meaningful Strategic Compass will not be able to please each and every Member State: as the saying goes, one needs to break eggs to make an omelette.

Yet this is not a time to get caught up in theological debates, not least because they can too often serve as a smokescreen to justify inaction. This should be a period for creativity, especially given that the EU is presently stuck with a 20-year inheritance of schemes that have not, for one reason or another, led to much progress. One can think of the EU

Battlegroups, which perhaps best embody all of the contradictions of common EU defence: a bold idea permanently on standby for lack of political ambition. Fortunately, PESCO and EDF already support projects that address crisis management, capacity building and collective defence. Building on this momentum, and beyond capabilities, there are some ideas that could be further exploited to ensure that the Union is better able to secure their citizens – both inside and outside the EU – through action.

The need for operational readiness and the role of exercises

The EU and its Member States need to be bolder when it comes to joint civil-military exercises for crisis management, capacity building and the protection of the EU. It is true that EU Member States already conduct live exercises together as part of the EU Battlegroup certification process, and, although only “table top” exercises, the Union regularly

plan for the EU’s integrated approach to crises. Second, live exercises would enhance contingency planning and strategic foresight and boost operational preparedness. Third, live exercises would give the MPCC and Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability (CPCC) an opportunity to fine tune their approaches and to stress test physical logistics nodes and networks for external operations and missions. Fourth, live exercises could help demonstrate new capabilities developed under PESCO and/or the EDF and how they contribute to Europe’s collective defence. Finally, exercises could contribute to the EU’s strategic communication on security and defence to partners and foes alike.

Giving life to ready and able defence groupings

While there is no real hope of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) being introduced in security and defence, there remains an important consideration: why do EU Member States still favour rapid military



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conducts hybrid and parallel exercises with NATO in order to test the EU’s political and operational mechanisms. The EU’s Exercise Policy also allows for live exercises related to crisis management, disasters, critical infrastructure attacks and asymmetric threats resulting from the use of cyber weapons, chemical weapons or weapons of mass destruction. Despite these efforts, however, there remains a taboo about planning for and undertaking EU live exercises.

Live civil-military exercises could enhance the EU’s preparedness and readiness in multiple ways. First, joint civil-military exercises would give all Member States, regardless of strategic culture and constitutional constraints, an opportunity to better

action outside of the framework of the Union and CSDP? Clearly, the prospects of a veto or sluggish political decision-making forces certain governments to look beyond the EU. Sometimes, in order to bring onboard Denmark (with its opt-out from military CSDP) and non-EU Member States such as the United Kingdom, Norway or Canada, looking beyond the EU can be justified. More often than not, however, it is a painful reminder that decision-making under the CSDP is too cumbersome and that EU Member States cannot agree on what strategic issues – not least sensitive ones – should be dealt with in an EU context.

In this regard, it is worth exploring the potential for the Council of the EU to entrust a group of Member

States – rather than all 27 – to conduct certain military tasks within the framework of the CSDP (this is expressly permitted under Article 44 of the Treaty on European Union). Although it is true that the Council cannot exercise Article 44 without a unanimous decision first, and while veto wielding states may argue that a smaller group bearing the EU flag still impinges upon their political sensitivities or even neutrality, there is an opportunity to unblock operational action at the EU level short of introducing QMV across CFSP. Interestingly, Article 44 was last appraised in 2015 – thus, before the EU Global Strategy and recent geopolitical events. There is thus a logic to re-thinking the applicability of Article 44 today under the Strategic Compass and it could pave the way for the creation of naval task forces or even special forces groups within an EU framework.

Maritime, space and digital domains

The EU must become better at dealing with the security and defence of the global commons: in particular, this means focusing on maritime nodes and networks, air spaces, outer space and the digital sphere. It also means being able to deal with the security and defence effects of climate change. CSDP must evolve from a largely land-based enterprise into one that can better support the Union's broader resilience on the oceans and seas, in the heavens and in the virtual world. The reality is that maritime, air, space and digital domains will become increasingly contested as rising powers such as China increase their military capabilities to protect trade routes and economic interests. To meet such challenges and protect its own interests, the EU is already experimenting with new tools and ideas such as the PESCO project on naval co-basing, the EDF-related project on ballistic missile defence and early warning, the future investments in EU space and defence capacities or the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) pilot project for maritime surveillance in the Gulf of Guinea. Let us also not forget that Operation Atalanta, which has been successfully deployed off the Horn of Africa to deal with piracy since 2009, now also enjoys an expanded

mandate to counter illegal drugs and weapons flows and ensure freedom of navigation and trade.

However, there is scope to be bolder when it comes to contested spaces in the global commons. For example, the Union could decide to develop a 'military digital cloud', prepare an 'EU Space Defence Strategy', develop counter anti-satellite weapons and/or create 'EU Naval Groups' that are supported by subsea remotely piloted systems. More specifically in the maritime domain, the EU could develop defence partnership agreements based on a comprehensive security approach that ties together trade, investment, security of supply and technology. With third state participation rules now set, future maritime defence partnerships could for example benefit from joint PESCO projects and defence technologies and capabilities developed under the EDF could be acquired by close maritime partners. Such ideas would contribute to the protection of the EU and its citizens, who depend on global networks and nodes for their economic prosperity and security, while also enhancing the Union's industrial competitiveness.

Spinning the needle

Volunteering ideas will be the order of play for the next few months and this will contribute to whether the Compass can deliver a truly ambitious agenda when it is delivered in March 2022. When juggling new ideas and initiatives, the EU and its Member States will have to consider how they enhance the complementarity of existing mechanisms such as PESCO, the EDF and CARD. They will also have the task of pulling together the full range of policy and financial tools that are scattered across the EU's institutional landscape. It is a daunting, but necessary and doable task. Ultimately, however, much depends on the political will and resources of the Member States – governments can still too easily pour cold water over new ideas. To borrow from an earlier analogy: let's see how many eggs governments are willing to break over the next year.



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