

Finding direction with a Strategic Compass?

Reflections on the future of EU security and defence



EVENT REPORT

On 11 For four years the EU moved at breakneck speed to create new tools for its security and defence, but, beyond the documents and mechanisms produced, two fundamental questions remain: what should EU security and defence look like today? What objectives should it help the Union pursue? No one doubts today that the EU finds itself in a strategically precarious position, yet there continues to be an impression that the Union is incapable of really learning the language of power. Building on the vision and energy of the past few years, there is a need to project a vision of a capable Union that is willing and able to confront geopolitical challenges, especially in its neighbourhood, but also to secure its global interests.

The Strategic Compass offers the EU and its Member States a window of opportunity to reflect on its security and defence, even though in reality threats will not wait for the Union to get its act together. Looking ahead to 2021, there is a need for the EU to show clarity in and ambition for its security and defence. This is also an opportunity for the EU to signal to the world in general and to its partners in particular that the Union has the ability and willingness to adapt to and thrive in a geopolitically contested environment.

With the development of the Strategic Compass come difficult but unavoidable questions about the nature of the EU's global ambitions. This is not just a question of what capabilities or resources the Union needs, but rather a deeper reflection on whether the Union can forge a common strategic culture over time and whether it has the wherewithal to deal with a post-Covid world, strengthen multilateralism and partnerships, check the rise of authoritarian regimes, manage rapid and uncertain technological shifts, deal with strategic competitors and the added stresses caused by climate change.

To tackle these questions, the EU Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union co-organised a high-level conference on 19 February 2021. The event welcomed around 300 participants from governments, EU institutions, academia and think tanks. This report outlines the main conclusions of the conference.

Towards a Strategic Compass

The main objective of the Strategic Compass is to provide political direction for the EU's security and defence and improve the Union's operational effectiveness, resilience, capabilities and cooperation with partners. Following the Threat Analysis prepared by the EU's Intelligence and Situation Centre (IntCen) in November 2020, and the February 2021 Scoping Paper by the European External Action Service (EEAS), **EU Member States are, during the first semester of 2021, engaged in a strategic dialogue where they will share their concrete input and ideas for the Strategic Compass.**

EU Member States have stated they are eager to engage with new ideas and concrete projects under the Strategic Compass. At this phase in the process, therefore, **no topic or suggestion should be treated as taboo by EU Member States.** We need to think outside the box if we want to be effective in dealing with rapid multidimensional change in the global geostrategic landscape. For it to be useful we need to ensure that the Compass does not simply reflect the lowest common denominator in security and defence. **EU Member States have welcomed the Scoping Paper and a number of non-papers and planned events have already been volunteered by national capitals.** There is a need to involve multiple stakeholders during the reflection process including experts, partners, industry and even parliaments. The **current level of enthusiasm for the Compass needs to be maintained throughout the whole process** leading to March 2022. A key challenge will also be ensuring adequate resources to meet the ambitions of the Strategic Compass post-March 2022, especially within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis.

A core point that requires more in-depth discussion in the coming months is the issue of Member State ownership of the Strategic Compass. **There is a need to ensure that the Compass is eventually embedded in national defence processes and defence strategies.** National ownership of the Strategic Compass is also a constructive method of developing a European strategic culture for security and defence. In this regard, there is a need to acknowledge that EU Member States start with different strategic cultures and distinct historical perspectives. Despite these differences, however, there is a need to find common ground on the most pressing threats facing the Union if we want to be effective in responding to them. A bold Strategic Compass may not please all Member States, but inclusivity must be balanced with ambition.

The process after early 2022 will also be very important and working with the next Presidency trio of France, Czechia and Sweden (2022-2023) will be vital to ensure effective implementation of the Strategic Compass. In this respect, ensuring that the Compass can help better align and ensure the consolidation of existing tools such as the Capability Development Plan (CDP), Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) is important. Additionally, **the Strategic Compass could be revised every 5 years and the Threat Analysis could be updated more**

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frequently to ensure that it remains relevant and is the basis for regular strategic planning that can deal with new and significant global developments. What is clear is that there should be no follow-on process in the form of an Action Plan after the Strategic Compass – the document should immediately lead to implementation with concrete forward-looking measures.

Crisis management

There is a continued need to ensure that the EU is a credible and effective crisis manager. The Union's ability to develop robust command and control systems, advanced planning, force generation and more flexible Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) mission and operation mandates are key to these efforts. On mandates, the examples of the expanded and more flexible mandates for EU Training Mission Mali and EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta are encouraging models for the future. A central task for the Strategic Compass will be giving concrete strategic direction for the type of missions and operations the Union should be able to conduct in the future. The EU needs to **rethink the way it incentivises force generation and operational engagement**, which are key to any hope of ensuring that the EU has an autonomous capacity to act. In this respect, scenario-driven forward-looking planning for possible future crisis could also facilitate a more rapid and robust response.

The European Peace Facility (EPF), which will be operational from July 2021 onwards, is also a step in the right direction as it will reinforce the impact of CSDP missions and operations on the ground. This new instrument will allow the EU to provide military support and equipment to the armed forces of partner countries. In addition to this new tool, there is a need to intensify the implementation of the civilian CSDP Compact adopted in November 2018. In terms of military CSDP, there is scope to enhance the EU's responsiveness under the Strategic Compass but this entails **adequately staffing the European Union Military Staff (EUMS) and the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC)**.

Resilience

The pandemic has underlined the need to enhance the EU's resilience and address strategic vulnerabilities. Resilience can mean many things, including the protection of critical infrastructure and dealing with disinformation. However, resilience also implies an ability to address any hostile action that may fall below the levels of conventional warfare, including with military means if necessary. In this regard, hybrid threats remain a key challenge for the EU and the Strategic Compass has the task of further bringing together all of the Union's applicable resources and tools. More is needed, however. There is scope to ensure that the EU is better prepared to deal with transnational crises by **developing a joint civil-military doctrine for complex emergencies**. What is more, the Union should conduct **regular joint civil-military exercises** in order to streamline procedures to ensure that, for example, the EU can rapidly respond with military and civil capabilities to civil emergencies.

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The EU can do much more to secure European access to the global commons and this means investing in the security of **maritime, space and cyber** domains. The EU is already taking steps in this direction with the first pilot case of the Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP) in the Gulf of Guinea. In time, such a concept could be expanded. There is certainly a need to ensure that the EU can **protect critical maritime infrastructure such as undersea cables** and pipelines. An important factor here would be how the EU can enhance maritime and air operations, while also utilising existing space-based assets.

Capabilities

The Strategic Compass has to deal with the persistent capability gaps facing the EU, while also charting a way forward to fully exploit new disruptive technologies. **Developing a full spectrum package of high-end capabilities remains the ambition.** In the context of the pandemic crisis, it is important to underline that the European defence industry can make a contribution to economic recovery. Strengthening the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) should be a substantial element of the Union's post-pandemic recovery contributing to a more dynamic, innovative and technology-driven European economy. A key task for the Strategic Compass will be to ensure complementarity between the suite of tools developed by the EU since 2016. The Compass should lead to better temporal alignment between the EU's strategic objectives and capabilities, while continuing to ensure complementarity between EU and NATO defence planning processes.

Although the Strategic Compass is not designed to replace existing capability development processes under the EDF or PESCO, it can inform future capability development discussions. By 2025, **the EU is already expecting to enjoy the fruits of completed PESCO projects** in areas such as cyber defence, medical support and advanced land systems. Yet, now is the time to think about possible future capability projects including the **development of an EU cyber defence unit** and investing in **Big Data and Artificial Intelligence** to enhance the EU's early warning and situational awareness capacities, as well as helping to manage the Union's strategic reserves and critical supplies.

Partnerships

The Strategic Compass offers an opportunity to rethink the EU's partnerships with third states and organisations. There is certainly a need to reinforce the EU's partnerships with the African Union (AU), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other sub-regional organisations in Africa, Latin America and the Indo-Pacific. Obviously, there is also a need to ensure a deeper partnership with the United Nations (UN), especially given that most CSDP missions and operations are deployed alongside UN missions. Here, there is a need to **enhance the way the EU and UN plan for and deploy missions and operations.**

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a crucial partnership for the EU and cooperation on military mobility, countering hybrid

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threats and dealing with the security dimensions of climate change should continue and be intensified. It will be important to ensure as much coordination as possible between the EU and NATO over the next few months, especially given the parallel processes of the Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept in 2021. EU-NATO cooperation will be central to reinforcing security on both sides of the transatlantic, and stronger EU security and defence is a welcome contribution to this aim. Beyond the already successful staff-to-staff level cooperation, one idea to boost the partnership is to have **permanent liaison officers** based in the EU and NATO respectively or to organise more **frequent ministerial meetings**.

With regard to partnerships with third states, there appears to be an **appetite to create the necessary mechanisms that would facilitate stronger partnerships** with Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States. New opportunities should also be explored with like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific and in the Atlantic (Latin America and Africa). Challenges such as countering hybrid threats, the rapid development of disruptive technologies and geopolitical competition can be better managed through partnerships. In this respect, the idea of establishing an **annual EU-US dialogue on security and defence** is a potentially effective way of building transatlantic trust.