

## EVROPSKA VARNOST IN OBRAMBA: PREBOJ ALI NADALJNJE ŽIVOTARJENJE

### EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE: A BREAKTHROUGH OR SIMPLY MUDDLING THROUGH

**Povzetek** V članku je predstavljen razkorak med tem, o čemer smo se na področju Skupne varnostne in obrambne politike Evropske unije že dogovorili in kar smo načrtovali, pa tega še vedno nismo dosegli. Osredotočamo se na njeno strateško avtonomijo in kredibilnost evropskih vojaških sil. Postopek nastajanja Strateškega kompasa je priložnost za ponoven premislek o evropski varnostni prihodnosti in poenotenju stališč držav članic ter za več realizma pri zmanjševanju razkoraka med retoriko in dejanji. Za njeno večjo strateško avtonomijo in kredibilnost vojaških sil predlagamo izboljšave na osmih področjih.

**Ključne besede** *Skupna varnostna in obrambna politika Evropske unije, Strateški kompas, strateška avtonomija Evropske unije, evropske vojaške sile.*

**Abstract** This article presents the gap between what has already been agreed and planned in the field of the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy in the past, and what we have actually achieved. We focus on the EU's strategic autonomy and the credibility of European military forces. The process of creating the Strategic Compass is an opportunity to rethink Europe's security future, to unify the positions of the Member States, and to increase realism in bridging the gap between rhetoric and action. For greater strategic autonomy and the credibility of the military, we propose improvements in eight actions.

**Key words** *EU Common Security and Defence Policy, Strategic Compass, European military forces.*

**Introduction** »(...) *the Union must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them, and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises without prejudice to actions undertaken by NATO.*«

The quote above could be attributed to the proponents of European strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence – a topic that has raised debate and generated criticism in recent years. Yet, the statement is part of the conclusions of the German EU Presidency issued at the Cologne European Council in June 1999 (Cologne European Council). Almost the same sentence was included in the Saint-Malo Declaration of December 1998 by British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac, which paved the way for the EU to create a security and defence policy (Joint Declaration on European Defence Council Conclusions on Security and Defence, Council of the European Union, 2021). In other words, more than 22 years ago the Heads of State and the Government of the European Union had already declared that the EU should be able to act autonomously, including with military means if required, and in cases where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would not undertake any action.

More than two decades later, the EU is still struggling to realize this objective while, in the meantime, the United Kingdom has left the EU. Despite improvements in capability development, ‘credible military forces’ are lacking and, above all, the ‘readiness’ to act has proven to be slow in most cases and with limited results. Over the past twenty-plus years, the EU has launched a considerable number of civilian missions and military operations, but the latter have been mainly at the low end of the spectrum, small in size and mostly to assist and train local or regional security providers. In ‘hot’ crises (such as Libya in 2011, Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014, and Mali in 2015) it has rather been ‘coalitions of the willing’ under the leadership of France, the United Kingdom and the United States that have intervened. Perhaps the most successful EU military operation has been *Atalanta*, the anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia which is still ongoing.

The turbulence in the Middle East and Africa (in the slipstream of the emergence of ISIS), the Russian annexation of the Crimea, and Moscow’s interference in eastern Ukraine, as well as the rise of China, have woken Europe up from its strategic slumber. Instead of a world that is evolving according to Western norms and values – democracy, the rule of law, human rights, multilateralism, international regimes to control the most dangerous weapon systems – the dominating ‘world affairs’ are now global competition, power projection, confrontation and the undermining of international cooperation. Today and in the future, Washington’s biggest challenge is China, which – contrary to Russia – poses an economic challenge of the first order, providing a new opponent for the US with a much stronger base for global power competition. As a result, Europe is no longer dominating on the American radar screen, and the US will continue to press its European partners to take more responsibility for their own security. Under President Trump the tone was harsh, if not aggressive. Under President Biden transatlantic relations have become much

smoother, but although the tone is friendly, the song is the same: ‘Europe, do more for your own security and defence’. On top of this, the US expects its European partners to join Washington in opposing China – a topic that will be prominent on the agenda in the upcoming discussions on the new NATO Strategic Concept.

This article analyzes the EU’s current efforts – the development of the Strategic Compass – to close the gap between the rhetoric statements on strategic autonomy and the practical goals that need to be achieved. The author proposes steps to be taken in the short term, taking into account what is realistically possible, and even more ambitious steps for the longer term. Eight action points are listed to achieve this objective, after which the author concludes the article by proposing the way ahead.

## 1 THE STRATEGIC COMPASS SO FAR

The changing international environment, with its complex set of challenges and threats – of both a military and non-military nature – is the driving factor for developing the EU Strategic Compass. The Compass should provide direction for the EU’s role in security and defence, and it should be »ambitious and actionable«. The Compass »will define policy orientations, concrete goals and objectives for the next 5 to 10 years, in areas such as crisis management, resilience, capability development and partnerships« (Council Conclusions on Security and Defence, Council of the European Union, 2021). These four areas constitute the ‘baskets’ of the Compass and they are interlinked. Further definition of the EU’s tasks in crisis management cannot be seen in isolation from the other three areas. A higher military level of ambition for the EU will have consequences for capability development. Another example of this interlinkage is resilience: countering hybrid threats (cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and other ways of interfering in and undermining Western societies) is a matter in which the EU and NATO must act together as partners.

The process of developing the Compass consists of three phases. The first phase was concluded at the end of 2020 with the presentation of the first ever ‘threat analysis’ by the EU, based on the input of the civil and military intelligence services of the Member States (Towards a Strategic Compass, 2021). This threat analysis is classified, but one may assume that it depicts a wide array of security challenges, both military and non-military, stemming from regional contexts (Russia, the Middle East, Africa) or from further afield (China in particular). In the second phase, encompassing the first semester of 2021 (plus a bit of extra time), a ‘strategic dialogue’ (Ibid.) took place with the purpose of exploring the ground for the content of the Strategic Compass itself. This dialogue involved not only the EU bodies but also think tanks, academia and others convening a huge number of webinars and other events. In the debates the first differences of opinion between the Member States could be noted. Opposite a large group of more ambitious Member States in Western and Southern Europe, several Eastern European countries argued for a cautious approach that should mainly focus on optimizing the EU’s current level of ambition in crisis management, instead of expanding the Union’s role in security and

defence. Some Eastern European capitals fear that the latter could be detrimental to NATO and the American security commitments to Europe.

The third phase has begun (Ibid.) and will lead to the presentation of the first draft of the Strategic Compass, written by the European External Action Service (EEAS), to the Foreign Affairs Council, including Ministers of Defence, in November 2021 during the Slovenian EU Presidency. The coming months are crucial in the development of the Compass, but the same applies to the period after the November ministerial meetings when the Member States will provide their reactions to the draft. This phase will be concluded by the adoption of the final version of the Strategic Compass in March 2022 at the European Council during the French EU Presidency.

## 2 WHAT SHOULD THE EU BE ABLE TO DO?

The differences of opinion between the EU Member States will have to be bridged. There is no other option. Another element to take into account is realism. The EU has a track record of bold declarations and strong verbal statements on international crises without delivering action or results. One of the reasons for this is that political-diplomatic initiatives cannot be backed up fully by military force, as the available means are too limited and too scarce. The European Security and Defence Policy – now the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – was launched in 1999, not only to make the EU an actor with civilian and military means in crisis management, but also to end European shortfalls and improve the military capabilities of the Member States. More than two decades later and despite the activities of the European Defence Agency (EDA), the conclusion is that results are limited and that many of the shortfalls still exist, in particular in the areas of intelligence and strategic reconnaissance (ISR) and precision munitions. In addition, capabilities in the cyber realm and in space have become critical – for both civilian and military purposes (Zandee, 2019). In short, the demand (requirements) has increased but the supply side (available military means) has improved at too slow a pace and not across all domains at the same time. The limited capabilities of the EU Member States cannot be denied. Therefore, the Strategic Compass' ambition must be squared with realism; one way to do this is to make a distinction between the short and the long term (Zandee, Stoetman, Deen, 2021)<sup>1</sup>.

### 2.1 Short term

In the short term, the EU must focus on closing the gap between rhetoric and action based on the broad range of crisis management operations defined in the Implementation Plan for Security and Defence from 2016, which followed after the EU Global Strategy was published. The tasks related to CSDP crisis management are

<sup>1</sup> *The EU's Strategic Compass for Security and Defence – Squaring Ambition with Realism, Clingendael Report, May 2021. The following sections are based on this report.*

defined in Article 43 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)<sup>2</sup>. They encompass all types of operations, from the low end to the high end of the spectrum. The proposal by a large number of EU Member States for an initial-entry capability of around 5,000 military with all necessary enablers could be one of the force packages that need to be developed. As NATO will be primarily concerned about the military threat from ‘the East’, the EU, with its wider toolbox of civilian and military means, is more suited for crisis management operations in ‘the South’ (the integrated approach). In the short term, taking into account the restrictions on available forces, the geographical priority area for the EU would be the southern neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean<sup>3</sup>.

Furthermore, the EU could strengthen resilience for ensuring stable access to the ‘global commons’, which may include the protection and defence of sea lines of communication, by extending the ‘maritime presences concept’, for example. This concept is already applied in the Gulf of Guinea in response to the increasing risks of piracy (The EU launches its Coordinated Maritime Presences concept in the Gulf of Guinea, 2021)<sup>4</sup>. Military support to internal security actors is another sector that needs to be explored. If required, the military can provide important capabilities under the leadership of civil security and safety actors in civil protection and disaster response, cyber security, countering terrorism and other areas. This brings Article 42.7 (the mutual defence clause) of the TEU and Article 222 (the solidarity clause) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) into the debate. What scenarios and which situations could trigger the use of these articles? What role could the EU have if the Member States were to invoke Article 42.7, which has happened once – at the request of France after the terrorist attacks on the Bataclan theatre in 2015 – but without any follow-up in terms of developing concepts and policies for future application?

## 2.2 Long term

The military level of ambition should be considerably raised in the long term, that is by 2030 and beyond<sup>5</sup>. In essence, the EU should be able to conduct all sorts of crisis management operations across the full spectrum and in all domains (air, sea, land,

<sup>2</sup> Article 43 of the TEU outlines the following CSDP tasks: »joint disarmament operations, humanitarian and rescue tasks, military advice and assistance tasks, conflict prevention and peacekeeping tasks, tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peace-making and post-conflict stabilization. All these tasks may contribute to the fight against terrorism, including by supporting third countries in combating terrorism in their territories.«

<sup>3</sup> Author’s opinion.

<sup>4</sup> The maritime presences concept deviates from an EU military operation as it is based on coordination between the assets (ships, aircraft) of the Member States in the deployment area without a full command and control chain connecting the political and military-strategic level in Brussels with the forces in theatre. As it is not a formal EU CSDP operation, it even allows for Danish participation as it is not contradictory to Denmark’s opt-out on the military aspects of CSDP. Denmark will contribute a naval vessel to the Maritime Presences Concept in the Gulf of Guinea in the second half of 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The Strategic Compass looks ahead 5-10 years, but for capability development this time frame is too short. Particularly in capability areas with investment in new technologies, development and production cycles often take more than ten years.

cyber, space) autonomously in support of its own role as a global actor. This should imply the following:

*Air domain:* the ability to conduct all air operations up to the highest level of the spectrum including the full package of air tasks (air-to-air refuelling, reconnaissance, suppression of air defence, interdiction, close air support, etc.).

*Land domain:* the ability to conduct military crisis operations up to corps level or comparable levels (task forces), from the low end of the spectrum to the highest level of interventions with all necessary capabilities (combat power, long-range artillery, engineering, drone defence, etc.).

*Sea domain:* the ability to conduct naval operations across the full spectrum up to the level of a carrier-centred strike force or comparable naval task forces.

*Cyber domain:* the ability to protect and defend EU forces and military infrastructure against cyber-attacks and to conduct offensive cyber operations against identified opponents; military cyber commands and cyber assets should also be available to assist EU-coordinated cybersecurity activities (including under Article 42.7 TEU).

*Space domain:* the full use of the Galileo global positioning system and the Copernicus observation capacities in support of military operations; the availability of an EU capacity in space for secure governmental satellite communications (Gov/SatCom).

This EU level of ambition is not meant to create competition with NATO. On the contrary, if realized in the long term, the European capabilities would also result in much better burden-sharing between the US and the European Allies, most of whom (21 in total) are also members of the EU. For crisis management operations, the EU should extend the geographical scope worldwide, in particular to protect and defend its interests in the global commons (such as sea lanes of communication).

### 3 WHAT IS NEEDED TO GET THERE?

For a long time, the response to the question of what the EU needs most in order to be an effective actor in security and defence consisted of three words: capabilities, capabilities, capabilities. There is no doubt that the EU is facing a major problem which could already be partly solved if all Member States were to make their full military capabilities available to the EU; currently several Member States make only a part of their military forces available. But even if the EU could call on all the military capabilities of the Member States, serious shortfalls remain. However, capability development is not the only area of concern. The EU must improve its efforts by taking the following eight actions:

- **Speed up decision-making** In the EU, decision-making is very slow and not suited to quick action in crisis circumstances. Within the boundaries of the existing

Treaty – which does not allow the application of qualified majority voting for decisions on CSDP operations and missions – two tools could be used. Constructive abstentionism (not agreeing, but not blocking a decision either) could provide a way out for Member States that object to EU action but can accept that a decision is nevertheless taken. Furthermore, Article 44 TEU offers the option of entrusting the implementation of an EU operation to a smaller group of Member States. The potential of these two options should be explored as a means to speed up decision-making. It should be noted that Member States always have the option of operating as a ‘coalition of the willing’ in the event that the EU (or NATO for that matter) is unable to act. In fact, almost all interventions high in the spectrum have been coalitions of the willing under a lead nation. Several operations in the Sahel, under French leadership, may serve as examples. It is important to keep the option of such coalitions available in order to have maximum flexibility in crisis circumstances.

- **Better preparedness** The EU could reduce the time needed for preparing operations by introducing contingency planning, advance planning and exercises. Various types of operations could be elaborated in Strategic Operational Cases. As far as possible, the EU should make use of contingency plans already developed by NATO. They should be adapted to changing circumstances and take the integrated EU approach into consideration. Live exercises must be organized for all kinds of operations to train in multinational formations and to solve problems that may come to the fore during those exercises, in order to prevent delays that could occur during real operations.
- **Enlarge the MPCC** The EU’s command and control system at the military-strategic level must be stepped up from the current small-scale Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) to an enlarged version capable of planning and conducting all EU military operations. In the long term an EU Civil-Military Headquarters is required, with two co-located but separate civilian and military command and control components. There is an urgent need to install secure communications between all relevant EU actors in Brussels and with the force level command elements in theatre.
- **Streamline capability development** No new instruments need to be created for capability development, but the existing tools must be streamlined and used to their full extent by the Member States. The Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) could be optimized as the indicator of the results of capability improvement and driving collaborative project selection by the Member States. The commitments of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) could be raised and peer pressure should be increased on Member States not fulfilling their commitments. The effectiveness of the European Defence Fund<sup>6</sup> could be enhanced by creating an EU Government-to-Industries Forum in order to bring demand and industrial supply together in multinational cooperation formats as early as possible.

<sup>6</sup> *The European Defence Fund (EDF) provides financial support to consortia involving at least three EU Member States and three entities in different EU Member States for technology research and the development of military capacities.*

- **Integration into national defence planning** The EU instruments must be brought into national defence planning processes to end the habit in many Member States of considering collaborative projects as ‘something additional’. It must be turned around: collaborative solutions first, national projects second, and they should only be the preferred option when a multinational programme is absent while capability is an absolute requirement. ‘Europe Days’ could be organized regularly to increase awareness of EU defence cooperation within Ministries of Defence.
- **Connect civilian and military capability development** Civil and military capability development should be aligned to the maximum extent, particularly in the space and cyber sectors, but also generally with regard to emerging and disruptive technologies with dual-use applications. European capabilities originally developed for civilian users – such as the EU’s global positioning satellite system, Galileo, and the Copernicus earth observation programme – can be used by the military as well. The next step in the European Commission’s Action Plan to seek synergies between the civil, defence and space sectors is the development of a Technology Roadmap, to be ready in October 2021. It should help to steer investment in all three sectors in a coordinated way.
- **Step up defence industrial cooperation** Increasing collaborative programmes by Member States must go hand in hand with more cross-border defence industrial cooperation. Major European companies have embarked on such cooperation, but further steps must be taken in order to integrate and specialize defence industries and create a true European Defence Technological and Industrial Base. Special attention must be given to Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in the defence sector which are facing the most serious problems in joining procurement programmes which are carried out by the ‘integrators’ (major companies) in the larger EU Member States.
- **European specialized capability groups** A neglected but important area that should be looked at is the already ongoing process of drawing up the national capability profiles of the Member States. Germany and the Eastern European countries have ongoing programmes to increase the heavy land forces that are most suited to collective defence. Countries with overseas commitments or whose security interests are primarily determined by the instability and conflicts in areas to the South put more emphasis on naval capabilities and on more mobile, lighter forces. These national capability profiles could be the basis for discussing certain forms of specialization coordinated by groups of European countries.

Ultimately, better decision-making processes, operational planning, capability development tools and other ways of improving European defence cooperation are dependent on **political will at the highest level**. The European Council should be regularly involved in assessing results based on milestones and targets – agreed by EU Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence – in order to ensure sustained political pressure and financial investment by the EU and at the national level, which will be a key precondition for success.



## The way ahead

The Strategic Compass exercise is entering its final and crucial phase. The European External Action Service has the important task of providing a draft text to the Foreign Affairs Council with the participation of Defence Ministers on 15-16 November this year. It is expected that the EEAS will provide an ambitious proposal in line with various Council Conclusions. Following the release of the draft text, the last and most difficult steps will have to be taken with the aim of reaching consensus among all EU Member States by March 2022. Most likely, the European countries favouring a less ambitious Strategic Compass will try to water down the draft text during this period. In any case, this will be a challenging process, of course for the EEAS as the penholder, but also for the Slovenian and French EU Presidencies.

The solution to bridge the gap between ‘the East’ and ‘the rest’ in the EU may lie in the linkage with NATO. In a parallel process (to be concluded later in 2022) the Alliance is developing a new Strategic Concept, taking into consideration the changed security environment of the 2020s and beyond. With a pro-EU Biden Administration in Washington, there is now a window of opportunity to strike a new transatlantic bargain. This bargain can no longer be solely concluded within the Alliance. It must involve the EU as a strategic partner, because the EU will continue to enhance its role in security and defence in order to take more responsibility for European security. Furthermore, the broader agenda of the EU – from trade to finances and from development aid to security and defence – provides added value to the narrower but important responsibilities of NATO as an organization with a political-military focus on collective defence.

The EU should now rise to the occasion. If its ambition level in security and defence is not raised considerably, the EU will never become a global actor. Continuing business as usual is not an option. The EU must step up its efforts: it is about breaking through or simply muddling through, and with regard to a better burden-sharing with the US. At the start of the European Security and Defence Policy process, around the turn of the century, its purpose was mainly defined as ‘to act autonomously, also with military means if needed, and in cases where NATO would not undertake action’. More than 20 years later, this must be extended – due to the changed security environment and the US focus on the Indo-Pacific – to ‘the ability to act autonomously to protect and defend European interests, and to develop the required military capabilities, while strengthening NATO at the same time’. It is essential that the Strategic Compass states very clearly not only what the EU should be able to do and what is needed to realize that level of ambition, but also that the military capabilities required for this purpose will automatically lead to better burden-sharing in NATO.

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