

THE STRATEGIC COMPASS – A STRATEGIC BOOST OF CONFIDENCE IN EUROPEAN SECURITY –

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Issued in March 2022, the Strategic Compass is meant to create an active and, at the same time, reactive framework on the managing of EU security and defence related aspects. After several failures in the process and much criticism on EU’s inability to stand on its feet when it comes to protecting itself, the Strategic Compass comes with magic words, such as “reducing dependencies”, or the four directions – Act, Secure, Invest and Partner.

The aim of this article is to provide a critical analysis of the Strategic Compass from the perspective of the confidence bestowed in the power of the European Union to actually become a security provider “for real”. Although the likelihood of that occurring in the near future is remote, the European Union has finally reached the mindset of turning the Strategic Compass into on the ground capabilities.

Keywords: Strategic Compass; security; defence; capabilities; crisis management;

INTRODUCTION

Ever since its inception, the founding fathers of the European Communities (and later of the European Union) attempted to create a security and defence branch, that could assist the Europeans in their protection. After all, the 1950s were difficult times. The Second World War had ended, leaving the global stage dominated by two actors – the United States of America and the Soviet Union. While the former was an ocean apart from Europe, the latter was growing in strength at the European expense. Also, the Europeans bore in mind the fact that, had it not been for the Pearl Harbour attack, the USA would never have engaged in a war that was not theirs.

As a result, immediately after establishing the first European Community, decision-makers in Paris started focusing on creating another one dedicated to the defence of the European continent. However, others considered this attempt to be far-fetched – after all, one has NATO to rely on – and decided not to support and engage in such a project. The project was revised several times throughout history, going from just a plan, to a report and finally to a full-fledged strategy. The European Security Strategy of 2003 was a brave attempt to carve the security tools necessary for the Europeans to start standing on their own two feet. Security-related speaking, of course. Yet, it was an ambitious project, which proved to be too far-reaching for the Union’s capabilities at the time. Another shot was taken in 2016, with the European Union Global Strategy. A shyer attempt to create a security fundament for the Union, learning from the failed lesson of the 2003 Strategy. As the document’s name shows, security cannot be reached simply by relying on oneself, but is in fact, a result of a global approach. Even the direst of EU critics agreed that the 2016 Strategy was highly tempered and thus, more likely to succeed. To add more strength, it was followed by the 2020 European Commission Security Union Strategy and the Defence and Space Packages presented by the same European Commission in February 2022. To the EU enthusiasts, this is the story of the Union becoming strong. For its sceptics, it is a never-ending line of attempts to show its wannabe-strength.

And then, on 24 February, 2022 the war in Ukraine broke out. The following month, in March, the European Union released “*A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*” document. Although the document has been under scrutiny and discussion since November 2021, the timing of its release is pretty interesting, to say the least. Almost a month into the war in Ukraine, the European Union put together a list of four directions – Act, Secure, Invest and Partner, intended to create a framework of action that could actually turn the EU into an effective resistant power against any threat.

However, given the history of similar attempts, one is justified to ask: is this another attempt that will result in “*more talk, less action*”, or will the EU really start working on defence this time? The time is not ripe enough to provide an answer. Yet, one cannot leave aside the fact that, capability in hand, or not, the Strategic Compass could be interpreted as a veritable boost in confidence in the EU security and defence capabilities. Or maybe not?

The aim of the present article is to assess the contents of the Strategic Compass from two perspectives. One is the confidence it aims to build in the Union’s capabilities to resist and respond to crises. The other is the connection of this intended confidence-building and the context in which it manifests.

SETTING THE SCENE

The authors of the document seem to have a penchant for “*magic sets*” of words. The first few pages unravel these words very clearly: decision-makers need to be equipped with “*the mind-set, the means and the mechanisms*” to be able to defend and protect “*our Union, citizens and partners*” (Strategic Compass, 2022, p. 5). Furthermore, should one be interested in preserving “*dialogue, diplomacy and multilateralism*”, one need to “*learn the language of power*” (Ibid., p. 6). In other words, the age of diplomacy and casual talk is long gone. We now need to fight power with power. The easiest way to do that would be to invest in buying weapons and training personnel. As that is what everyone thinks of when hearing the need to put power behind any action.

But the Union’s approach is a smart powered one. Weapons, planes and personnel are highly necessary. But apart from recognizing their utility and need, the manner of accessing them is equally important. And while others would simply say “*with money*”, European decisions-makers resort to “*actions, security, investments and partnerships*”.

Although the means of conducting the war in Ukraine is taking us decades back to the Second World War, it was high time that anyone shouted out loud that preparing for conflict does not mean simply buying weapons, recruiting and training troops. It is all about identifying partners and their strength, as well as joining forces together to be able to benefit from such strengths. And these are not just mere words put on paper. The EU will intensify its efforts in the framework established by the United Nations and NATO and will cooperate with its regional partners – the OSCE, African Union and ASEAN. Consequently, what the Strategic Compass aims to do is strengthen the strategic autonomy of the European Union, in order to build a stronger EU that would become complementary to NATO.

QUICK OVERVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC COMPASS

Keeping the line of the European Union Global Strategy, the Strategic Compass sets a wide range of geographic interests (be they immediate or more far-reaching): Russia (of immediate interest, of course), China, the Western Balkans, the Eastern Neighbourhood, the Arctic, the Southern Neighbourhood, with the problematic Libya and Syria, Africa and its plethora of troublesome areas (the Sahel, Central Africa, Mali, Guinea, the Horn of Africa, and Mozambique Channel), Asia with its problematic Afghanistan and North Korea, Latin America and the exotic Indo-Pacific area.

Geographic interests are married with emergent threats and challenges: terrorism and violent extremism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, state and non-state actors that resort to hybrid and cyber threats, as well as disinformation, destructive technologies, maritime security threats, climate changes, environmental degradation, natural disasters, health crises and competition for natural resources.

There are four dimensions of looking at the Strategic Compass – crisis management, resilience, capability development and partnerships (Sweeney, 2022, p. 196), each having a correspondent in the four directions of the document – Act, Secure, Invest and Partner.

In terms of actions (Strategic Compass, p. 11), the Strategic Compass is highly determined: act promptly in an integrated manner, expand already existing facilities to make them more comprehensive, scenario-based planning, focusing on interoperability as the key action, create live exercises for civilians and military alike (an indicator that the pandemic and its adjoining crises did not go unnoticed). A novelty in that regard is the launch of the civilian missions of up to 200 people that could be deployed in 30 days, even in complex conditions.

Why have another focus on security? (Ibid., p. 12) NATO is all about security, some critics might say. However, given the crises that the EU underwent in recent years, it is a fact that its capacity of resilience was being tested with the effect of diminished security for all. Furthermore, the Europeans need to build a common strategic culture, for all member states to be able to have a coordinated management of hybrid and cyber threats, of disinformation and diplomacy altogether. In that regard, the Strategic Compass introduces the EU Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity and the EU Hybrid Toolbox, two instruments that can take the Union a step forward from the numbness in which it can be found now. There is already an EU Cyber Defence Policy, a Hybrid Fusion Cell focusing on prognosis and situational awareness, to be followed by EU Hybrid Response Teams and the EU Hybrid Toolbox, the latter focusing on prevention, cooperation, stabilization, deterrence and recovery, followed by solidarity and mutual assistance. Cyber strengthening is meant to ensure protection not just of communication, but also of space, air, soil and sea.

The section focusing on **investments** (Ibid.) highlights an issue that has been previously left aside. It is a fact that more and more organizations underline the need for a joint venture of private and public investments in all areas of interest. When it comes to the European Union, investments are necessary to fill voids as far as critical capabilities are concerned, to reduce strategic dependencies and the vulnerability of supply chains. Again, critics might say: we already have PESCO and the European Defence Fund, why bother more? It is good that one has the above-mentioned infrastructures, because they can offer the framework to create more means of investment in European security. To be more productive, the Defence Innovation Hub shall be created within the European Defence Agency.

Explaining the presence of **partnerships** (Ibid, p.13) in the Strategic Compass is not that difficult. After all, according to the European Union Global Strategy, the EU aims to become a global actor, and that can be done first and foremost by forging partnerships that work not just on paper, but in real life as well. Russia's aggression in Ukraine demonstrated once again how essential the EU-NATO Strategic Partnership is for Euro-Atlantic security. But partnerships need not be strengthened only on security issues – more consistence should be added to the EU-UN existing partnership, focusing on peace operations and crisis management for the 2022-2024 timeframe, and cooperation with OSCE should be strengthened on matters of conflict prevention in key areas such as the Western Balkans, Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia.

Another issue raised by the Strategic Compass is the need for tailoring bilateral partnerships (Ibid., p. 53) that are highly particularized and specialized to correspond to every need: with the USA, UK and Canada for defence and security aspects, with Norway for economic matters, with Turkey for participation in CSDP missions, with the Western Balkans for critical infrastructures, cyber threats, counter-terrorism and democratization, with Georgia and the Republic of Moldova on security and defence matters to increase their resilience, with the Southern neighbourhood to manage migration, with Africa, on security, assistance for stability and economic support, with the Indo-Pacific on naval cooperation, security architecture and capacity-building, and with Latin America on security and defence, cyberthreats, organized crime, climate change and maritime security.

An element of particular interest to this document is the fact that threat analysis shall be conducted every three years. This means that European decision-makers have finally understood that the evolution of threats is more rapid than that of the tools devised for their counteracting. Unlike previous strategies, the Strategic Compass is meant to be updated every three years, depending on the evolutions within the international environment. This must be done in accordance with a consistent observation of the fluidity of the international arena, and the many events populating it. The Strategic Compass shall be revised in 2025, which is a very reasonable term, given the evolution in occurring crises.

FROM TALK TO EFFICIENCY

The starting point of the Strategic Compass was in June 2020, in an effort to harmonize all 27 member states' perspectives on threats and security issues. At the time, the list of commonly identified threats consisted of: competition between great powers, instability in the immediate neighbourhood (the focus back then was the Russian Federation and its proffered threats, as well as the Middle East, which generated tensions through the excessive numbers of migrants emerging from within), transnational threats, cyber and hybrid actions (Atlamazoglou, 2022).

Leaving aside the 2020 European Commission Security Union Strategy, the Strategic Compass is coming to replace the European Union Global Strategy of 2016 and The Integrated Approach to Conflicts and Crises of 2018. A closer look in comparison highlights the supremacy, at least in theory, of the 2022 document. The Integrated Approach refers to partners on multiple levels of governance, and the EU willingness to intervene in the management of the conflict cycle,

from prevention to management and post-conflict recovery (Council of the European Union, 2018, p. 2). The Global Strategy refers to security of the European Union as depending on engaging with others abroad – “*security at home depends on peace beyond our borders*” (EUGS, 2016, p. 7). After putting one’s fate in others’ hands, the Strategic Compass removes any talk on “*multilateral governance*” or “*global governance*” and places resilience as the sole responsibility of member states. A reason for that might be the fact that the world in 2022 is more dangerous for the European Union, with a war wreaking havoc in its vicinity. Nevertheless, the Strategic Compass is not oblivious to the primacy of the Global Strategy in referring first to the “*strategic autonomy*” term. Although mentioned, it remains unclear as to what representation should this autonomy take – in terms of material or human resources.

A sign that the Strategic Compass is more “*down to earth*” than its predecessors is the enrichment of the toolboxes available to the European decision-makers to deal with threats. A step further from other more theoretical strategies, the Strategic Compass operates with several toolboxes. One of them is the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Toolbox, followed by the EU Hybrid Toolbox and the EU Cyber Diplomacy Toolbox that should be enhanced in the future. Appealing to these toolboxes is not without significance. It is a sign that the European Union has been eager to fit issues into patterns and devise appropriate means of tackling them. Before the Strategic Compass, the EU boasted with a non-military toolbox and is continuing to do so.

WHY DO WE FEEL IT IS NOT ENOUGH?

Apart from the ongoing war in Ukraine, that has shattered any theoretical perspective one had on the conflicts of the future, the coming decades show sombre perspectives: changes in population growth, redistribution of global power, shifting of the geo-economic centre of gravity. Faced with that, decision-making units need sets of documents and tools that should record such troubles and devise the appropriate strategic means of management for each of them.

However, there are voices that claim that despite its more precise approach, the Strategic Compass is in fact missing strategic foresight, and would need pairing with the new NATO Strategic Concept (Blockmans, 2022) in that regard. Others see it more as a “*wind chime*” rather than a compass in itself (Kaim, 2022), and that was months before its release.

According to the contents of the documents, at least by intention, the European Union is determined to become a power-broker (Atlamazoglou, 2022). Strikingly, the choices expressed so far turn it into a rather regional actor, and not a global one as intended. One must not forget the setting of the scene: the context in which the negotiations on the Strategic Compass began versus the ones in which it was actually issued to the public. In November 2021, the debate was focused on the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan and the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, the tensions between the EU and UK/USA on account of the signing of the AUKUS pact, fears of Russia and China, the post-pandemic world and the management of the post-Brexit situation, to name but a few. However, in March 2022, the situation was completely 180 degrees different. A war was on-going at the borders of the EU, and the rest of the above-mentioned issues fell into a distant background.

According to Sweeney, although an “*aspirational project, the Strategic Compass is part coherent and part-inconsistent in its current form*” (Sweeney, 2022, p. 193). The focus of the Strategic Compass is more on “*what threats to balance*” rather than on “*what interests to pursue*”. Should this focus be maintained like this, it will not help transform the EU into a global actor (Blockmans, 2022, p. 8).

More critical authors claimed from its very first issuing in November 2021, when the political debate was started upon the document, that it was lacking in several areas: an absence of political willingness manifested by all member states to contribute equally to security matters, that was not to be eliminated through any tool, failure in prioritization and a rather unclear manifestation of ambition, excessive institutionalization which led to the diffusion of responsibility among institutions, and uncertainty on which should come first in terms of power: strategic autonomy or reliance on partnerships (Kaim, 2022).

There are several issues that the Strategic Compass fails in addressing appropriately. One of them is the Black Sea and its relevance, not just to the EU but also to NATO. There are also the outer space and cyberspace, which are somehow neglected by the document. Outer space and its potential for weaponization by China is left unhindered. Aside from cyberthreats that have become a reality lately, there is also the dimension of intelligence cooperation that the Compass aspires to, but is not approaching thoroughly through its instruments (Paul, 2022). Furthermore, the Compass digs little into the issue of emerging and disruptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and quantum computing that could become the tools of future conflicts.

While acknowledging throughout time the need to invest in technological research and development, the European Union failed to produce practical approaches and tools that could be used to manage future threats that resort to the latest discoveries in field. As the United States of America and China attempt to introduce emerging and disruptive technologies in their armed forces, in an effort to further enhance their military response, the European Union is satisfied only with highlighting innovation in the field, with no concrete plan of integrating it (IISS, 2022).

Another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that the Strategic Compass fails to approach security from an economic point of view: it does not refer to the impact of food or energy for example. It also fails to deal with a reality pointed out by the pandemic – the break in supply chains that is likely to impact the world more than just in terms of hunger (Paul, 2022).

The Partnership section is the least developed one (Blockmans, 2022), even though the others also lack in substance. The partnership approach is mainly regional, instead of global. What is more, the alliance with the United States of America seems to be taken for granted, as the USA is vowed to remain an ally, despite any changes that might occur internally. However, should one go back to the Trump administration and its many faulty views on US international involvement and the value attached to some alliances (the no-more-funding of NATO unless European states start pitching in), eyebrows will likely be lifted by the confidence placed in such cooperation no matter what!

There are several centrepieces of the Strategic Compass that might lure one into belief at first sight. One of them is the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity. Others are the “*full spectrum capabilities*” or the “*live exercises*” to be performed. The EU Rapid Deployment Capacity is intended to have land, air and maritime capabilities that would be mobilized in a rapid response to threats. However, the issue lands into redundancy (Atlamazoglou, 2022), as NATO has an already highly operational NATO Response Force and a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, to which EU member states are contributing as well. As the Strategic Compass is vowing to help support NATO in its endeavours, the very existence of an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity places one in confusion over doubling of resources and creating obstacles in joint ventures, instead of a more fluid manner of cooperation.

Before the launch of the Strategic Compass, there were authors such as Howorth (Howorth, 2022), who argued that the strategic autonomy envisaged by

the EUGS would only be of benefit to the strengthening of the cooperation between the EU and NATO. And indeed, the Strategic Compass also refers to coordinating with the United States and NATO in multiple directions, in an integrated approach of applying existing frameworks of tackling threats on a global level. However, words on paper do not fit the reality on the ground, and there are still lacks in coordination. For instance, hybrid threats is an issue where the Strategic Compass and the NATO Strategic Concept should be harmonized (Blockmans, 2022).

It is a fact that the Strategic Compass would work better if states had a strategic culture in place. However, although a much coveted aspect, the “*security culture*” as a concept still has several steps to be performed before it becomes a fully fledged reality. This brings us back to the lacks of the European system altogether. Despite criticism on its viability in the long term, the Strategic Compass paints an accurate view of the world as it is, identifies and expands areas of threat and highlights the need for the EU to become more effectively responsible for its members, its vicinity and the world in ensemble.

CONCLUSIONS

The Strategic Compass is definitely an upgrade to European security. It is also a blue print for security and defence, but to what extent?

In a time when we are dealing with a return of the “*power politics*” (Kaim, 2022), the document attempts to establish a consensus of action in terms of providing security for the European Union in ensemble, for the member states in particular, and for citizens ultimately. According to the contents of the document, at least by intention, the European Union is determined to become a power-broker (Atlamazoglou, 2022). Strikingly, the choices expressed so far turn it into a rather regional actor, and not a global one as intended.

There is also the perspective that the defensive posture of the Strategic Compass is likely to affect the “*multi-layered*” dimension of the CSDP (Bargues, 2022). However, these might be similar excuses as the ones looked up for in the case of the lack of efficiency of the CSDP itself, which is wonderful on paper, but not self-supporting in reality.

Leaving aside the debate on whether the continent is going back to the Great Power politics, the Strategic Compass is an instrument that places the European Union among those actors very much interested in developing their own capabilities in terms of defence. Yet, despite its meticulous planning of actions, security

operations, investments and forging of partnerships, the Strategic Compass still does not provide an effective change in what the European Union can do to protect itself, its members and citizens.

What about confidence? Are the Europeans more confident in EU security because of the Strategic Compass? Not likely! After all, the document acknowledges the war in Ukraine in its early pages, but its structure and content show that it was drafted before the war broke out and the directions are not correlated with the reality of war. However, to be more accommodating, one could see the Strategic Compass as a new form of engagement and commitment of the EU to becoming autonomous in providing for its own security. It is not sufficient for the future, but is all that we have now.

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