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BLOG
— **POST**

Strategic Compass: industry or power?



One month on from the outbreak of war in Ukraine, and following stalling discussions over the last two years, the Member States of the European Union stepped up the latest negotiations. This enabled the EU Council to adopt, as a matter of urgency, the “Strategic Compass for Security and Defence” on 21 March. This is a 47-page text with a sub-heading that sums up its ambition – “For a European Union that protects its citizens, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security”.

I . The main achievements

For Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the adoption of this text recognises long-term diplomatic efforts: it was no mean feat to achieve a consensus of the 27 Member States regarding the analysis of the threats facing the EU, without addressing traditionally divisive topics such as “strategic autonomy”, the relationship between the EU and NATO, increases in defence budgets, etc. It took five different versions since the project’s launch in 2000, as the Strategic Compass shuttled back and forth between the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Member States. Neither the Commission, nor the European Parliament were stakeholders. The war launched by Vladimir Putin stepped up Europeans’ pace and determination. **Reeling from the shock of the invasion and bombing of Ukraine, the EU-27 put aside some habits and differences to get to the heart of the**

matter: to assert the EU's strategic unity and its determination to develop its collective security and defence efforts.

The document enshrines several collective decisions which complement other military decisions taken individually by some Member States: Germany's decision to increase its defence budget by €100 billion and to define a national security strategy, the decision of several Member States to use a special, off-budget mechanism (the European Peace Facility) to send weapons to Ukraine, and the almost unanimous drive to reach the 2% of GDP called upon by the USA, and Donald Trump in particular, for defence expenditure. The Compass now places these initiatives within a common operational and industrial investment programme for 2025-2030.

The Compass is comprised of five very detailed sections: an assessment of the strategic environment, or in other words the threats surrounding the EU, is followed by four key work strands: act, secure, invest and partner. Summary sheets at the end of each section bear witness to the effort taken to make the Compass accessible to the general public, a move that is somewhat rare for this type of document. A range of ideas are set down for future implementation, pending new decisions, in a relatively short timeframe, between 2022 and 2025. That said, some of the new initiatives have already been converted into decisions. These include in particular:

- The creation of a rapid deployment capacity, acting as first responders in a crisis theatre, of up to 5000 troops, in the land, air and maritime components.
- The consolidation of civilian resources: States set themselves the objective of deploying a “mission with 200 civilian experts within 30 days”.
- For greater flexibility in the decision-making process: the use of constructive abstention (which does not revoke each Member State's right of veto) and of article 44 of the Treaty of Lisbon which authorises the Council to “entrust the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task” (which does not affect the unanimity required for the decision to launch the mission itself).
- A move from virtual to live exercises for forces under Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions on land and at sea, and for cyber-security.
- The adoption in 2023 of an EU Space Strategy for Security and Defence.
- Specific expectations of the Commission regarding the “incentives” to stimulate industrial cooperation between Member States, including a potential VAT waiver.
- A regular revision clause, in the format of an annual report by the High Representative on progress made, with possible extensive revision in 2025.

II • Questions and the future of the European superpower

However, this Strategic Compass will have difficulty in convincing that Europe has just taken a qualitative leap towards the status of superpower.

Is this text the first of its kind in the history of the CSDP? Definitely not. In the past, Europeans adopted a “European Security Strategy” in 2003, under the leadership of Javier Solana, then a “Global Strategy” drafted under the aegis of Federica Mogherini in 2016. The former was a short text setting out the main principles and European vision for international security. The latter was a long document, like the current Compass, that already gave a regional analysis of perceived risks and objectives set by the European Union.

What is different about the Compass? The 2022 Compass stands out in three ways:

— “the Compass is not yet a European White Paper on defence: it sets an industrial direction, but definitely not a strategic course.”

- It goes further in its analysis of threats (ranging from cyber-risks to space, from Russia to terrorism, hybrid threats to the use of force). However, it places **almost all threats on the same footing** and therefore no priorities emerge (each Member State wishes its specific concerns to take precedence).
- **The Compass’ goal is mainly focused on capacity and industry:** above all it sets out potential avenues for European cooperation initiatives that are eligible for the European Defence Fund. Some of these objectives are limited, while stated “discoveries” are not really new. Back in 1999, the Helsinki European Council set a clear capacity target for 2003, known as Headline Goals. These set an EU objective of being able to deploy 60,000 persons abroad within sixty days for one year. In the subsequent conferences on military capacity that were held at regular intervals, Member States also drew up an initial assessment of their capacity gaps, with strategic aircraft already topping the list.
- This industrial priority leads the text to overlook the shared principles which could guide the use of military forces in a European framework: how does the EU intervene? With or without a United Nations mandate? For what purpose? Are there specific characteristics in the European use of force? Are CSDP missions always related to external operations (17 are underway in 2022)? Should European forces be formatted solely to be “first responders” in a warzone, as the rapid deployment capacity suggests? What are the rules that define this principle of a “rules-based international order”, much repeated in the text? Why use this term rather than the principle of multilateralism, which was a priority for Europeans dating back to their 2003 Strategy? Who writes or revises these rules? What about European autonomy in relation to NATO? And so on. In other words, **the Compass is not yet a European White Paper on defence: it sets an industrial direction, but definitely not a strategic course.**

Is the Compass ambitious? Yes, for the scale of the work conducted for the threat and risk analysis. The exercise itself, which took two years, was definitely important in terms of lessons learned: to oblige the EU-27 to **attempt a common approach to their secu-**

rity environment is an achievement in itself. It is also ambitious in that the text is firmly focused on action: action must be taken and therefore resources must be developed to take it together. Lastly, the text allows for the implementation of certain provisions of the Treaty of Lisbon, which are never or only rarely applied: a common analysis of threats, and flexibility in actions and decisions.

However, there is nothing spectacular about the text's operational decisions: the rapid deployment capacity of 5,000 persons does not amount to much in terms of combat strength. It is above all an overhaul of the battle groups, which were never used. The civilian capacity is much less ambitious than that decided in 2000 at the Santa Maria da Feira European Council, where States undertook to deploy more than 1,000 police officers within thirty days, as part of a total force of 5,000 persons.

Is the Compass a founding act for a European superpower? This question has become paramount following the war in Ukraine and goes beyond the text of the Strategic Compass: are Europeans rising as a credible political and military power? The answer is unquestionably positive in view of the many decisions already made, concerning national rearmament, the sending of weapons to Ukraine, collective sanctions or initiatives to support refugees: the war in Ukraine was a real shock for Europeans, a nightmare scenario, which put paid to many illusions regarding the adequacy of the pacifying virtues of trade and interdependence alone. It has pushed Europe into a stark geopolitical reality. Member States are the driving force here. This European awakening does not disrupt the way the EU operates: it confirms the conventional sharing of European governance roles, with the Commission dealing with sanctions and energy and States in charge of defence and diplomacy.

Nevertheless, even though they have just adopted this Strategic Compass, Member States are far from wanting a European superpower and implementing the EU's strategic autonomy. The extent of the threat from Russia, the unleashing of forces used against Ukraine and the first tentative steps achieved today for a common defence policy do not leave much room for the European Union but instead give maximum priority to NATO. **Therein lies the paradox of this war: it has awakened Europe, but to strengthen NATO.** It has stimulated the European desire for energy independence from Russia, but it will heighten the EU's energy reliance on the USA.

This European Atlantic reflex is both normal and reasonable against a backdrop of actual war in Europe. The more Eurosceptic will most likely see this as end of European ambitions - and French ambitions in particular - of becoming a superpower. In reality, it is a more question of inevitable sequencing: **first NATO, then Europe.** The USA needs to strengthen its western leadership against Putin and must also move as quickly as possible to their other, highest priority in Asia: China. The EU will therefore require a great amount of collective intelligence - a genuine geopolitical compass - to combine these two stages, and build a powerful Europe as a precondition of the future development of US power itself.

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