

# Outcome of the European Council video-conference of 26 February 2021

On 26 February 2021, EU leaders met for a second video-conference session to discuss security and defence and the southern neighbourhood. They reaffirmed their commitment to implementing the 2019-2024 Strategic Agenda, by increasing the EU's ability to act autonomously and strengthening its resilience through taking 'more responsibility for its security'. They also expressed their wish to deepen the transatlantic bond with the US and through NATO. In line with past meetings dedicated to security and defence, the Secretary General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, joined the EU leaders to discuss EU-NATO cooperation.

## Video-conference of the members of the European Council

The October 2020 [Leaders' Agenda](#) had listed security and defence as well as health as items for discussion in February 2021. A discussion on the southern neighbourhood was only subsequently added to the agenda. While health was [discussed](#) on 25 February, with European Parliament President David Sassoli addressing the European Council on the same day, discussions at the 26 February 2021 video-conference of the Heads of State or Government focused on security and defence and the southern neighbourhood. The title 'special' European Council specified on the Leaders' Agenda indicates that the original intention was to organise a physical meeting in Brussels, but this had to be abandoned owing to the difficult EU-wide [epidemiological situation](#). Accordingly, the EU leaders did not adopt conclusions, but released a [statement](#), outlining medium to longer-term commitments (see Table 1).

Table 1 – New European Council commitments and requests with a specific time schedule

| Policy area          | Action   | Actor                               | Schedule     |
|----------------------|--|-------------------------------------|--------------|
| Security and defence | Keep under regular review                                  | European Council                    | 2021-2022    |
| Security and defence | Report on the implementation of the cybersecurity strategy | High Representative                 | June 2021    |
| Security and defence | Present a technology roadmap                               | European Commission                 | October 2021 |
| Security and defence | Continue work on the Strategic Compass                     | High Representative / Member States | March 2022   |

## Security and defence

The European Council returned to discussing security and defence policy, a [rolling](#) item on its agenda between 2012 and 2018, and committed to reviewing this regularly. European Council President Charles Michel [stressed](#) that the EU wanted 'to act more strategically' and to increase its 'ability to act autonomously' while continuing to deepen partnerships, including though a renewed transatlantic dialogue on security and defence with the Biden Administration.

The EU's efforts to take more responsibility for its security go hand in hand with the deepening and strengthening of existing partnerships, especially with NATO. Charles Michel [stressed](#) that the EU and NATO shared 'common strategic interests' but also common threats, such as 'cyber, hybrid and disinformation' threats, for which both organisations needed to strengthen their resilience as well as their cooperation. He spoke of a 'strong partnership which requires strong partners', while NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [affirmed](#) that EU-NATO cooperation had reached unprecedented levels in recent years, in particular on issues such as resilience and cybersecurity. However, a durable solution to [maritime boundary](#)

[delimitation](#) in the eastern Mediterranean and to the [Cyprus problem](#) would allow further normalisation of the EU-NATO [relationship](#). This is key, as the two organisations are developing a [new strategic concept](#) (NATO) on the one hand, and a [Strategic Compass](#) (the EU) on the other, making information-sharing vital. The High Representative, Josep Borrell, presented the results of the first ever EU threat analysis, conducted with input from the Member States' intelligence agencies between [June](#) and [November 2020](#). This analysis represents the first step and the foundation for the forthcoming strategic compass. The exercise is entering its second and most sensitive phase, that of developing policy orientations and setting objectives in [four areas](#), namely: i) crisis management; ii) preparedness and resilience; iii) capability development; and iv) partnerships. This second phase, which will last until mid-2021, requires a vision and guidelines from the European Council, which has tasked the High Representative with continuing the work on developing a strategic compass 'making use of the entire EU toolbox'. In this way, EU leaders would have ownership of the process, something that was missing in 2016 when the European Council '[welcomed](#)', but did not endorse, the EU's Global Strategy. The third phase of this exercise will be dedicated to developing the strategic compass document, expected by March 2022.

The European Council also recognised that 'significant steps' had already been undertaken to boost European defence cooperation, and called for it to be further deepened, not least in the area of crisis management where 'improved force generation' is needed. A set of new instruments – the coordinated annual review on defence (CARD), the European Defence Fund (EDF), permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and the European Peace Facility (EPF) – have become a reality and are about to be implemented. The European Council called for 'swift operationalisation' of the EPF and 'full use' of PESCO. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [emphasised](#) the importance of these tools in tackling existing fragmentation and the duplication of capabilities, fostering interoperability and building synergies between civilian, defence and space industries. The EU leaders also underlined the importance of countering cyber-threats and building cyber-resilience, and invited the co-legislators to act 'swiftly' and 'take work forward' on the revised directive on security of network and information systems. Addressing EU leaders, the Parliament's President, David Sassoli, [welcomed](#) 'the shift from a common defence policy to a fully fledged defence system' and the initiative to develop a strategic compass by 2022. He reiterated Parliament's view that the EU must 'improve [its] understanding of the new threats and build up our common resilience, in order to become strategically autonomous'.

### Southern neighbourhood

EU leaders discussed the 'political and strategic nature' of the partnership with the southern neighbourhood and reaffirmed their attachment to their previous [conclusions](#) from December 2020. They called on the Council to implement the [joint communication](#) from the Commission and the High Representative on a renewed and reinforced partnership with the southern neighbourhood, while taking into consideration the 'common challenges' and the 'shared opportunities'. Josep Borrell [emphasised](#) that the EU is 'closely intertwined' with its southern neighbourhood but that the 'gap between the two shores of the Mediterranean has been increasing', heightening the urgent need to deepen cooperation. Charles Michel [stressed](#) that the EU and NATO want 'more stability and more predictability' in their neighbourhood.

In his address to the European Council, EP President David Sassoli underlined that Parliament welcomed the new agenda, which confirmed 'the importance the EU attaches to its southern neighbours'. He stated that the Parliament, which holds the presidency of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Union for the Mediterranean, was determined to help strengthen inter-parliamentary dialogue on challenging issues such as fighting climate change and overcoming socio-economic disparities.

### Other items

Charles Michel [reiterated](#) the European Council's [condemnation](#) of the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny and demanded his release. He stressed that, earlier in the week, the Foreign Affairs Council had [agreed](#) to impose restrictive measures against those responsible for the 'arrest and sentencing' of Mr Navalny under the newly introduced [EU global human rights sanctions regime](#).

The European Council also condemned the attack on the World Food Programme convoy in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and expressed sympathy for the families of the victims and solidarity with Italy.