Strategic Compass: Towards adoption

On 15 November 2021, High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) Josep Borrell presented the draft European Union (EU) 'Strategic Compass'. Amidst geopolitical competition, rising threats, accelerated technological development, climate crisis and global instability, the compass aims to facilitate a 'common sense of purpose' in Union security and defence, strengthen action, deepen partnerships, and stimulate innovation. On 30 November 2021, Parliament’s Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE) will hold an exchange of views on the state of play of the Strategic Compass.

Background

In November 2021, in a joint session of EU foreign affairs and defence ministers, the Council held an exchange on the first draft of the Strategic Compass, the product of work to streamline and boost the EU's security and defence policy, under way since the start of the German Council Presidency in July 2020. The document, intended to provide political-strategic guidance for the next 5 to 10 years, received broad support from ministers, who committed to working towards adoption of the final compass in March 2022. Key messages from the Council and the HR/VP include widespread support for the capability resilience and partnership approach reflected in the draft compass, as well as an emphasis on complementarity with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). According to the media and leaked versions of the document, the compass focuses on boosting operational capacity while outlining strategic domains – such as outer space, maritime presence, and cyberspace – to enhance EU resilience, capabilities and ties with partners. It lists concrete deliverables for the short (2022) and medium terms (2025) across the compass's four baskets (capabilities, crisis management, resilience, partnerships).

Incentivising action with flexibility

The Strategic Compass highlights that the EU needs 'more rapidity, robustness and flexibility' to undertake a full range of civilian-military actions. It proposes that an EU rapid deployment capacity is established, which would embody a 'modular force of up to 5 000 troops' by 2025. Building on the contested yet-to-be deployed EU battlegroups, the new force should be made up of land, sea and air components. By 2023, the compass envisages live exercises and additional deployment of civilian common security and defence policy (CSDP) missions, making 200 experts available within 30 days. The Military Planning and Conduct Capability (set up in 2017) would also be able to plan the EU's non-executive military missions. The draft proposes strengthened support between CSDP missions and ad hoc coalitions. European Union Naval Force Somalia (EUNAVFOR) Atalanta and EU Training Mission (EUTM) Mali would be amongst the first missions to form these operational links by 2022. It further asserts greater space for 'flexible modalities for the implementation of Art. 44 TEU' that enables the Council to entrust implementation of CSDP tasks to a group of willing Member States'. Invoking this 'flexibility mechanism' is perceived as encouraging states' involvement and expediting the speed of deployments. The use of constructive abstention (Art. 31 TEU) whereby states who neither support nor object to an action, have a 'way out' of the decision-making process without blocking the initiative, is also mentioned. During a SEDE hearing on 15 November 2021, Chair of the EU Military Committee, Claudio Graziano, clarified that the decision to deploy these forces would be taken by unanimity, and in the subsequent stages by the contributing Member States. Experts note that sustained political engagement will be crucial for delivering on these ambitions.

Capability development and resources: Investing in EU defence

The draft compass commits the EU to revising its defence capability planning, including the headline goal process, by 2023. In consultation with the European Commission and the European Defence Agency (EDA), the HR/VP will also provide the European Council with an annual progress report while the threat analysis is to be revisited at least every five years to ensure its continued relevance. 'Strategic enablers', i.e. the equipment required for conducting expeditionary operations, are a strategic priority. These include
surveillance capabilities, defence systems and space communication to preserve EU access to strategic domains. Several enablers, such as the future combat air system and the main ground combat system are already under way, albeit coordinated outside the EU structures. The HR/VP urges states to supply 'associated assets and the necessary strategic enablers' so that the compass does not remain a 'paper tiger', a concern reportedly expressed by certain Member States. The German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), a think-tank, has proposed using the interlinkages between the draft compass, and the existing initiatives (e.g. high impact capability goals and capability development plan). In addition, the draft sets 2023 as a benchmark for reassessment of the scope of common costs, while encouraging regular increases in defence budgets. While making use of the European Defence Fund, additional investment in innovation, research and technology are also envisaged. It is noted that greater investment in European innovation reduces dependencies on third parties and secures critical supply chains. However, the gradual increase in defence spending observed between 2014 and 2019 is likely to be affected by the economic impact of Covid-19, which has shifted Member States' priorities, contributing to decreased funding for defence instruments under the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework. With limited buy-in, persistent capability gaps, and pandemic-affected economies, some have argued that the 'Strategic Compass could end up as an unaffordable wish list', signalling caution to Member States.

**Partnerships**

The draft compass maintains that the transatlantic bond forms a cornerstone of EU security and defence, supporting the establishment of a dedicated EU-United States Security and Defence Dialogue by 2022 and more frequent information exchanges between the North Atlantic Council and the EU Political and Security Committee. The 2021 NATO Brussels Declaration reiterates the necessity to 'intensify further [our] consultations and cooperation' with the EU. Consequently, mutual security concerns should drive joint inclusive exercises to advance Euro-Atlantic security. Importantly, the document proposes the creation of the rapid deployment capacity and the rapid hybrid response teams, in line with NATO's standards. The overall responsiveness to challenges would be strengthened through cooperation with like-minded states, such as the United Kingdom, Canada and Norway, with the latter two already invited to participate in the military mobility project. The draft proposes collaboration with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations (UN) and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) on, for example, early warning and conflict prevention – mechanisms which also bolster resilience.

**Strategic culture**

The draft document defines strategic culture as a shared perception of threats and a common strategic vision. The joint threat analysis (to be carried out periodically) is seen as a building block for a single strategic culture, a point also made in the conclusions of the CARD 2020 report, which links the forging of a common security and defence culture to the EU's ability to address differing threat perceptions. Experts caution that the concept is largely 'elusive', albeit an essential feature of defence; they note Member States are likely to continue prioritising threats vital to their own national interests. Some proposals see the compass process as a way to create sub-groups of Member States, based on their overlapping threat perceptions.

**European Parliament position**

On 15 November 2021, the SEDE subcommittee held an exchange of views with General Claudio Graziano, Chair of the EU Military Committee, incorporating an extensive discussion of the proposed EU rapid deployment capacity. Since the summer of 2020, SEDE has held numerous hearings on the 'four baskets'. The draft annual European Parliament report on the implementation of the CSDP (rapporteur: Nathalie Loiseau, Renew, France) makes extensive reference to the Strategic Compass process and to Parliament's expectations for it to deliver.